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THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH.

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IN any attempt to understand the nature of the Christian Church, and to give clearness to one's thoughts on the subject, the desirable thing seems to be to go back to the time of its origins, and to realize the thought of our Lord and of His earliest followers about it.

Throughout the long course of subsequent history the idea of the "Church" has become greatly changed, greatly modified by various other influences, ecclesiastical, social and political. The treasure has been contained in earthen vessels and has been affected by the vessels which have contained it.

It may, then, help our deliberations at this conference, if we attempt, at the beginning, to rediscover the earliest characteristics of those who came out of the contemporary Jewish or heathen world to be joined together in fellowship as disciples of Jesus Christ. Our word "Church"—as you will recall—represents the Greek word "ecclesia"; a word which had associations both for Jews and Greeks. To the Jew it recalled the assembly of Israel convened by the blowing of silver trumpets. To the Greek it meant the assembly of the people as a whole—not of any committee or council of it.

When, in response to the confession of St. Peter, Jesus said: "Upon this rock I will build my Church," the word "ecclesia" implied that it had been the congregation of Jehovah; and the word "My" implied that, without losing its continuity with the past, it was to become the congregation of Jesus Christ.

The first Christians did not regard themselves as being a new Society, but simply as God's ancient people; that is, as the particular part of the Church of the Patriarchs and Prophets which had not, by rejecting the Messiah, cut itself off from "the promises of God."

They were, in fact, the "remnant" spoken of by the prophets, who by recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, showed that they, and they alone, had understood the prophets aright.

From this conception of Christians as the "new Israel," the "remnant," continuing from the ancient people, and, like the ancient people, scattered abroad amongst the peoples of the world, we can see that they would, in the first instance, be drawn together naturally, without the aid of any external form of organization. As the Jews of the Dispersion clung together in their synagogues, so would the earliest Christians in their assemblies. In fact, the precise method of organization would be comparatively unimportant. As Canon Streeter puts it: "Membership of the Ecclesia, the 'congregation of Israel,' was the important thing; and all who were baptized

in the name of the Lord were *ipso facto* members of the 'remnant,' however it might locally be organized." ¹

The actual word "ecclesia" has its real home in the Pauline and Lucan writings. The word occurs 110 times in the New Testament writings, and of these 86, *i.e.*, 78 per cent of the whole, are to be found in the Pauline Epistles and in the Acts of the Apostles.

As we survey these instances, and try to take in what they convey to us, we see that certain clear characteristics emerge.

It is a fellowship with Jesus Christ. That is the Divine element in it. The rock on which the Ecclesia was to be built was a "human person acknowledging our Lord's Divine Sonship." It was a man in whom long companionship with Jesus, and the revelation from the Father, had created a personal trust in His Messianic mission.

"In virtue of this personal faith in Christ, vivifying their discipleship, the Apostles became themselves the first little ecclesia, constituting a living rock upon which a far larger, and ever enlarging ecclesia should very shortly be built slowly up, living stone by living stone, as each new faithful convert was added to the Society." ²

I need hardly remind you how St. Paul rings the changes on this thought of fellowship with Jesus which constitutes the Church. The Churches to which he writes are described as "in Christ Jesus." Yet he is always careful to impress on believers the personal relationship in which they stand to their Lord, even when he is addressing the Church as a whole.

The individual believer is never lost in the Society; and yet, he is never regarded as alone and separated from it. The bond of union between Christians is not an external framework impressed from without; it is a sense of fellowship springing from within.

While Jesus lived on earth this fellowship with Him was the external mark that distinguished His followers from all others. They were His disciples, His *μαθηται*, sharing in His teaching, drinking in His words of wisdom, united by a common hope and a common future. It was through their relation to Him that they were to share in the coming Kingdom. After His departure from the earth, it was the other aspect of fellowship that became prominent—their fellowship with one another through their fellowship with their common Lord. They had, as St. John puts it, "fellowship one with another." ³ And this thought of fellowship was the ruling idea in all Christian organization. "Visible fellowship with each other, the outcome of their hidden fellowship with Jesus, was to be at once the leading characteristic of all Christians, and the bond which united them to each other, and separated them from the world outside." ⁴

And how, after our Lord's ascension, was the distinctiveness

¹ *The Primitive Church*, p. 48.

² Hort, *Christian Ecclesia*, p. 17.

³ I John i. 7.

⁴ Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry*, p. 9.

of His Church indicated? It was by the possession of the Holy Spirit.

It is not easy for us, in these later days, to recapture that earlier atmosphere and to recall the vivid reality of those earlier experiences. For there was something intensely real, intensely distinctive, in this outpouring of the Spirit.

Its effect on the Church as a whole is portrayed by St. Luke in the second chapter of Acts. And it not only affected the Society as a whole; it affected the individual Christian. To quote Canon Streeter's very graphic words: "The reception of the Spirit was something as definite and observable as, for example, an attack of influenza."¹

It was something which had been consciously experienced, and to which appeal could be made. "Received ye the Spirit," says St. Paul to the Galatians, "by the works of the Law, or by the hearing of faith?"² "You know you have received the Spirit. From what source did you receive it?" The very form of the question suggests something of the meaning indicated. The Spirit was pre-eminently a Spirit of power, of supernatural power, bestowed upon men to enable them with a strength coming upon them, coming into them, to live in communion with Christ and to be active members of His Church.

The disciples had been taught, in the language of Old Testament prophecy, to expect that the Messianic age would be marked by a special visitation of God's Spirit. And the extraordinary ferment of spiritual power and enthusiasm which prevailed amongst the Christians of the early Apostolic age was associated with that outpouring of the Spirit which was believed to usher in the Messianic age.

And as the Gospel spread and the Church grew, the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church was its distinguishing mark. It was the distinguishing mark of the Church as a whole, as well as of individual members of it. "No man," says St. Paul, "can say that Jesus is Lord, but in the Holy Spirit";³ *i.e.*, any true confession of the Lordship of Jesus is inspired by the Spirit. Again, St. Paul says: "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him."⁴

It is apart from the purpose of this paper to enter on any theological discussion of the place of the Holy Spirit in the Divine Trinity. But it is to be observed that St. Paul's language fluctuates in harmony with the manifold greatness of the Spirit. Just before speaking of Him as "the Spirit of Christ"⁵ he speaks of Him as "the Spirit of God, dwelling in you,"⁶ and he also speaks of Him as "the Spirit of Him that raised Jesus from the dead."⁷

He conceives this Holy Spirit of God as entering into a man, dwelling in him, taking up his abode in him, transforming his character, overcoming evil in him, strengthening and developing the good in him. And, conversely, he can speak of Christians as being

¹ *The Primitive Church*, p. 69.

² Gal. iii. 2.

³ 1 Cor. xii. 3.

⁴ Rom. viii. 9.

⁵ Rom. viii. 9.

⁶ Rom. viii. 9.

⁷ Rom. viii. 11.

“in the Spirit.” The Spirit is the environment in which their life is lived, the very atmosphere they breathe, and—let us recall again, it was visibly perceptible to the world around.

You will remember that the actual presence of God's Spirit in the Church revealed itself in a variety of ways. There were “spiritual gifts” of prophecy, tongues, and so forth; some more excellent and useful to the corporate life of the brotherhood, others, rather more spectacular and emotional and less permanently useful. The “gift of tongues,” for example, did not contribute so much to the welfare of the Church as the “gift” of prophecy. It gave more occasion for what might seem to be individual display.

And it is here that we are able to realize the simply overwhelming service rendered by St. Paul to the early Church. While admitting freely that all the “gifts” were exhibitions of the presence and the power of the Spirit, he insisted that they must be graded, that some were preferable and more to be sought after than others, and that they *were* preferable just in proportion as they were helpful, as they contributed to the illumination and fortification of the whole Church.

In this he was, not improbably, rather rowing against the stream, going contrary to generally accepted views. But it was he who brought the whole Christian life within the sphere of the operation of the Spirit. In his teaching the Spirit became the creator and sustainer of the new life of peace with God and of holiness which constitutes the Christian and is the essence of his life. As Gunkel says: “The early community regarded as spiritual, the extraordinary in the Christian life; St. Paul, the usual. They, what was characteristic of individuals; he, what was common to all. They, the impulsive; he, the permanent. They, isolated elements in the Christian life; he, the life itself.”¹

I have permitted myself to dwell at some length on this characteristic of the life of the earliest Church—the conscious possession of the Holy Spirit—because it seems to me to reach to the innermost essence of it. It was the ground of their abounding joy; it was the secret “of their *παρησια*—their glad, courageous self-expression.”² It was not only within them, but without. “When they had prayed, the place was shaken wherein they were gathered together; and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost.”³

The early Christian Church, then, seems to have regarded itself as God's Israel, God's chosen people continuing on earth, recognizing Jesus as the Messiah, saved by Him, a fellowship happy in the enjoyment of the Spirit.

To say so much in no way exhausts the subject, and one might add other distinguishing marks, as, for example, that the Church had authority over those who were its members; and that it was a priestly body. It is the ideal Israel and, as such, does the work which Israel, of old, was appointed to do. But the former limitations have now disappeared. God can be approached at all times, and in every place, and by everyone amongst His people. “There

¹ *die wirkungen des Heiligen Geistes*, p. 75.

² Kennedy, *The Theology of the Epistles*, p. 112.

³ Acts iv. 3.

is one Mediator only, and all, men, women and children, have the promise of immediate entrance to the presence of God, and are priests." ¹

So we have the new Israel, a fellowship spiritual, authoritative, priestly in its corporate character. This whole conception is summarized by St. Paul in his well-known figure of "the Body of Christ."

The fundamental thing for him, let me repeat, was the union of the believer with Christ personally and individually. Obviously those who are joined to Christ by the Spirit are joined to one another by the same Spirit. The one Spirit, as the real life principle of the Society, suggests the correlative idea of the one Body, the living organism which gives expression to the life of the Spirit. So the Christian community is designated by St. Paul as the Body of Christ, and those who belong to it are His members. "We, though many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another." ²

Now, it would seem that in a body so conceived there must be something of order, something that would give it perpetuity, something that would act as connecting link between past, present and future, something, as we should say, in virtue of which the Society could carry on and prolong its life.

So we might think ; but there was one feature in the life of the early Church that seriously modifies this conclusion. As Canon Streeter puts it : "the hammer of the world's clock was raised to strike the last hour." ³ They were looking for the more or less immediate return of their Lord.

"To understand the history of early Christianity we must begin by eliminating from our minds the traditional picture of the Twelve Apostles, sitting at Jerusalem, like a College of Cardinals, systematizing the doctrine, and superintending the organization, of the Primitive Church. They had a more urgent work to do. The Day of Judgment was at hand ; their duty was to call men to repent before it was too late. When the Lord might any day return in glory, it was unprofitable to build up an organization, about which the one thing certain was, that it was never meant to last." ⁴

It is probably to be connected with this, that there is such a singular lack of reference in St. Paul's extant Epistles to any details of Church organization. Yet he was not oblivious to the need for order. He refers to Apostles, Prophets, Teachers. But these terms appear to indicate, not officials, but men who had special endowments of the Spirit which they placed at the service of the community. This brings us to a really fundamental difference of opinion, with reference to which we must take our stand on one side or the other.

The more extreme "High Anglican" view of the ministry holds that the Episcopate, as the essential mark of the Church's unity, *must* have been there from the first ; that it has the sanction of our Lord's own ordinance.

This argument is largely *a priori*. In view of the sanctity

¹ Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry*, p. 35.

³ *The Primitive Church*, p. 69.

² Rom. xii. 5.

⁴ *ib.*, p. 38.

and importance of the Episcopal commission, it *must* have been authorized by Christ.

And yet, when we turn from what "must have been" to what was, and carefully scrutinize the New Testament writings, we find that the ministries of which St. Paul speaks are, primarily, spiritual; that there seems to be no hint of formal official organization, though we can trace out the gradual emergence of a local official ministry, with a monarchical Episcopate, by the early years of the second century A.D. We have the gradually accumulating evidence in St. Paul's address to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, in the salutation of the Epistle to the Philippians and in the 2nd and 3rd Epistles of St. John. But the earlier evidence points to what is spiritual and occasional, the service of particular men to meet the particular need, the spiritual ministry of spiritual men.

"Much informality must have existed, side by side with what would have been regarded as the obvious practice to follow, wherever possible. We cannot find sufficient indications to justify any theory which would assert that the Apostolic Churches considered the ministerial grace to flow in a stream, of which the Twelve and the Twelve alone were the sources; or that all Church officials were universally and indispensably bound to receive a commission from existing officials, as an essential condition of valid office."¹

In this conclusion there is nothing new. It has long been held by scholars of ability and eminence. It has, as it seems to me, been strongly reinforced by Canon Streeter's recent book on *The Primitive Church*, in which he claims—and, as I think, claims successfully—to have established the point that:

"In the Primitive Church there was no single system of Church Order laid down by the Apostles. During the first hundred years of Christianity, the Church was an organism alive and growing—changing the organization to meet changing needs. Clearly in Asia, in Syria, and Rome, during that century the system of Government varied from Church to Church, and in the same Church at different times. Uniformity was a later development; and for those times it was perhaps a necessary development."²

"Perhaps a necessary development." The early Apostolic Church, with its variety, its spontaneousness, its absence of fixed formal organization, was ultimately transformed into the Catholic Episcopal Church. As Sohm says: "With her Episcopal constitution the Church put on the armour which gave her power to withstand the storms of the coming ages."³ Humanly speaking, it is not easy to see how she could have lived through the clash and conflict of those ages, unprotected by that armour.

But if we read aright the story of her early years, I think we seem to see her living her life in the power of the Spirit, and gradually feeling her way by experience and by experiment, towards a uniformity of constitution. It was reached afterwards, but it was not there at the beginning. And it seems therefore questionable

¹ Blunt, *Studies in Apostolic Christianity*, p. 101.

² *The Primitive Church*, p. 261.

³ *Outlines of Church History*, Sohm, p. 42.

whether the form of Church Government finally attained should be insisted on as of primary, essential, determining importance.

May I, in conclusion, put the issue in what seem to me to be very wise words, penned by Mr. Barry, the Vicar of St. Mary's, Oxford.

"If it be true," he says, "that God's eternal purpose is so far irrevocably committed to one form of ministry and government that no other can be instrumental to it, then, of course, there is nothing more to say. If it be true, as Dr. Gore declares in the *Church Overseas*, that 'the principle of succession in the ministry from the Apostles is as essential a part of the Divine plan as the Creed or the Scriptures'—why, then, the proposals for Union in South India can hardly be defended.

"But there are many who are not satisfied by that line of argument. At a time when every year and every week, God is giving to men new disclosures of His unsearchable power and glory, we cannot believe, without further question, that the whole content of the Divine purpose is expressed by any institutions of past history, however glorious and however strong. . . . But the story, after all, is not yet ended. Christianity is still in its infancy; it is just emerging from its pupa stage in which it has been cocooned in the West, spreading its wings to take the rising sun, as a truly world-wide, universal religion. New Christian nations are being born in Asia, Africa and the islands of the sea. It seems to us impossible to argue that what has been the safeguard and the Sacrament of Catholic unity in those countries which have sprung from the Græco-Roman inheritance is necessarily the only or the final form in which the living Spirit of the Church can find expression in the coming time. . . . If the Spirit is alive within the Church, He must be leading us to richer meanings in all that has been called Catholicism, corresponding to those wider visions of Divine activity in the Universe, which the Spirit of Truth is giving us in other ways. . . . We may be fighting against God if we are not ready to anticipate such new developments or adaptations as may make the structure of the Christian Church more responsive to its vital function, better able to interpret and express the glory of God and His will to redemptive unity in the changing conditions of an 'emergent' world."¹

These are brave words, and true words. May I add to them, and in adding bring this paper to an end, some words of Bishop Welldon.

"The Church of England," he says, "as believing that 'where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty,' may well accord these national Churches the opportunity of ordering their corporate lives in such a way as to allow the full satisfaction of their Christian aspirations. For it is impossible that the Christianity of the Far East, not of India alone, but of China, Japan and Persia, should be in all external aspects the same as the Christianity of England to-day."

But, may I add, if that Christianity should recall the picture of the Church as God's Israel, the assembly of those redeemed by Christ, a spiritual fellowship, kings and priests unto God, animated by the Spirit of Christ and ministered to by those in whom is the Spirit of Christ—it will, at any rate, be in harmony with the Church of the Apostles and their first followers.

¹ *Guardian*, July 12, 1929.