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The Gathered Community

AMONG Baptists, "the gathered community" is a classic description of the Christian Church. The concept is indeed a Scriptural one, though of course it is only one amongst many other equally Scriptural designations. The thesis of this paper, however, is that incalculably unfortunate consequences follow from the mistaken way in which we apply the term. True, the Church is a community of persons called out of the world, as the Greek word *ekklesia* explicitly connotes. It is indeed God Who does the gathering. But what He gathers is the whole people of God, not a myriad of separate, independent and isolated congregations. Our faulty doctrine at this point completely vitiates our understanding of what the Church is, and of why God gathers it together. Every individual congregation does in a sense mirror the whole Church; it is more than a part (capable of mathematical calculation) of the whole Church, for it is meant to be the local manifestation and embodiment of the total reality signified by the word "Church." Nevertheless, this is so only because the whole Church is already there, and comes first; the local congregation is to be understood in terms of the total community gathered in Christ, and not vice versa. The fulfilment of Christ's promise that "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst" is the glorious fact which enables us to say that where Christ is, there the Church is. Yet this does not mean that Christ gathers thousands and thousands of different communities, all separate from one another—for their unity in Him is fundamental to their very nature. St. John describes the work of Christ as being "to gather into one all the scattered children of God" (John 11: 52), His aim as being that there should be "one flock and one shepherd" (10: 16), and His prayer as being that all those who were to believe in Him should be visibly one, so that the world should believe (17: 20-21). There is only one Body of Christ, one temple built and indwelt by the Spirit, one royal priesthood and holy nation, one people of God—for there is but "one Lord, one faith, one baptism" (I Peter 2: 9, Eph. 4: 5).

What are the distortions which follow from the misapprehension of each local congregation as being a separately and independently gathered community of believers? One far-reaching consequence is that this makes possible a wholly individualistic approach to what Christianity is all about; God is concerned with saving individuals as such—and these individuals are then brought together for mutual support and encouragement. They are "brands plucked from the

burning," the rest of mankind being consigned to perdition. Looking down the annals of history, one could thus give a clear answer to the question "Lord, are there few that be saved?", obviously, taking all times and nations into account, only a small minority have entered the "ark of salvation"—or rather, the many, many separate arks.

When salvation is conceived as a wholly individual matter, a natural though not inevitable corollary is to think of it in terms of the saving of "souls." The issue becomes simply man's destiny in the hereafter beyond death. The Gospel is then understood in religious, not in secular, terms. Yet any open-minded reading of the Bible will reveal that what God offers to man is a richness of salvation that requires a whole range of metaphors to describe it, and undoubtedly belongs to the here and now, as well as to the hereafter. Long before Karl Barth, the Old Testament prophets heard the word of God as effecting the abolition of "religion," in the interests of bringing the word of God, and man's communion with Him, directly to bear upon everyday life in this world.

Thirdly, on the basis of this false understanding of Christianity and of the Church, faith becomes a kind of merit—those who are not saved don't deserve it, because they haven't believed. This really turns it, by a remarkable paradox, into what St. Paul meant by "works." But the good news freely and universally preached in the Gospel is not an offer of something conditional upon a deserving attitude or deserving behaviour. It is the report that something vitally important has happened—whether we believe it or not! If, having heard and understood, we reject it, then of course we miss its benefit—as could happen with any other good news. The good news of the Gospel demands only an appropriating, receiving attitude. If it doesn't make us rethink our whole attitude to God and to life, in wondering penitence for what we have been and thought, then we haven't in fact "got the message." But if we have got it, we accept it as objectively true, knowing that it comes to us, as to all, through no merit of our own.

History has little significance for those who understand Christianity in an atomistic way. A leap is made over all the intervening years, direct from the individual believer and his local church to the New Testament and to what is believed to have been the Early Church. Nothing is learned, or needs to be learned, from these intervening centuries, nor is any recognition given to all the intermediate stages through which alone the believer has the Bible in his hand, or the local church its hymnbook. This is a strange situation for Christianity, which essentially depends upon God's action in history as the whole basis of its message. The saving action is both achieved and given within the unfolding drama of God's purposes to save the fallen human race. The Gospel is not a philosophy or a teaching; it is the good news of something which has happened—the effects of which are mediated through history, as well as by the Holy Spirit in the human heart.

Fifthly, though scarcely finally, this understanding of the church not unnaturally results in indifference, if not hostility, to the Ecumenical Movement. Co-operation or union with other churches becomes an optional extra, a question of merely human concern or preference. All that matters is getting a soul saved, and keeping its possessor safe from the temptations of the world. Each local church is self-sufficient. Co-operation or union will therefore be upon its own terms, if at all. This attitude can be adequately illustrated by the following quotations from two recent letters to the *Baptist Times*:

"If the ecumenical movement does no more than help each Christian become sure of why he must remain divorced from his fellows, it will have achieved much." [5.6.69.]

"I am proud of being a Baptist, but wonder how much longer I am going to be able to take pride in this and how widely shared is such pride . . . I am a Baptist and have no desire to be an Anglican or a Methodist or a Congregationalist, etc., or a member of a world Church that will be a miscellaneous hotch-potch of them all." [29.5.69.]

The writers seems to be more proud of being Baptist than Christian, and indicate no thought of what might be God's intention for the Church.

Let us now look at these five points the other way round, in the perspective of the gathering of the whole people of God. As I read the Bible, I find that it sets forth the drama of God's dealings with mankind—the story of His plan and actions to win back a fallen race. The whole point of St. Paul's argument that "as the issue of one misdeed was condemnation for all men, so the issue of one just act is acquittal and life for all men" (Rom. 5:18) was that "God's act of grace is out of all proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many, its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God" (v. 15). The Gospel is as big as that, comprehending mankind as a whole, though of course we do not deny that individuals can and do refuse the grace of God. The Old and New Testaments tell one continuous story. The God who chose Abraham, that in him "*all nations should find blessing*" was "in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself." It is worth noting that though the Gospel has always to be addressed to individuals, it is addressed to individuals-in-society. The task of witness is "to preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15), and "to disciple all the nations" (Matt. 28:19, cp. Luke 24:47).

In this perspective, God is concerned, and we should be concerned, with the world, not simply as a congeries of the individuals who are in it, but as the sphere of the whole life of humanity, in all its varied and legitimate tasks and occupations and its natural cultural groupings. God's will relates to all aspects of human life here and now, not only to man's ultimate destiny. Had man not fallen, so to speak, there would still have been art, science, economics, politics, and all the rest—and in all of these the Creator and Lord of Life is lovingly and

providentially interested. And all are the sphere of redemption. Though the Church is "in the world, but not of the world," yet in another sense it is of course part of the world—that part of it which responds to God in grateful obedience and trust. As I see it, it is truer to say that the Church exists for the world, than to say that the world exists for the Church—but both exist for God. The Church is the "first-fruits," the *pars pro toto*, the priestly community which offers to God, on behalf of all, the worship and service which all men owe. Nor is it only the Church which will be saved. The Church is the bearer of God's message of salvation, and one of His instrumentalities in its achievement. No one but God knows who or how many will be saved, but those who have seen Him in Jesus Christ must know that He will act in justice, mercy and love towards those adherents of other religions, or of no religion at all, who have had no real opportunity of deciding for or against Christ. St. Paul's description of the Gospel, as we have seen, was "life for all men"—which echoes our Lord's own words "I have come that men may have life, and may have it in all its fullness" (John 10: 10). The scope of salvation has both a this-worldly and an eschatological perspective.

Whether they realise it or not, *some* of the results of the Incarnation are blessings even for men without faith. The world is, of course, a different place because in it Christ lived, died, and rose again. And the Resurrection on this earth keeps the action of this drama from being lost to sight in the beyond. When we pray "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," do we pray in faith—or in unbelief? Is the dénouement of God's dealings with mankind to be worked out on this terrestrial globe, or only in the hereafter? If the latter, then why pray that prayer? But if the former, we should realise that part of God's triumph will be the coming on earth of His Kingdom, and that this means more, far more, than a question of membership in the Church. Faith means, not an assent to the right set of doctrines, but a glorious confidence, undergirding all one's life, that God's love will not fail of its ultimate objectives. His reign means bringing back into the joy of His creative intention every sphere of man's existence. Granted, the full benefits of redemption can be known only by those who hear and receive this blessed word of a victory won over the world and sin and death. For them, however, it is no matter of secret or overt human pride, but an entirely unself-regarding recognition of God as God, and of the invincibility of the wisdom and love He has revealed through Jesus Christ.

To deny all this would be to deny the reality of human history, and therefore significance for life as a whole, yet it is really God who makes history, and not man. The real meaning of any individual human life is to be seen in the context of God's dealings with all mankind. Just as the local congregation cannot be properly understood except in terms of the whole Church, so God's saving of this or that individual requires to be understood in the setting of the

whole story from Genesis to Revelation. Only in the liturgy of the Church does the Christian discover *who* he really is, that he has Abraham for his father as well as Christ for his Saviour. And the ongoing community of which he is a member has a history that not only stretches far back into the past, but also reaches forward to a promised future—and therefore awaits the Coming from heaven of that same Saviour. It is a fine thing to have roots; it is an even finer thing to have a future—one which is excitingly open-ended and yet, paradoxically, basically assured. Only the historical facts of what God did in Christ could guarantee this meaningful development, and only the Christian who understands himself within this stream of human yet universal history grasps what life is all about.

It is as maker of the Church's history, and giver of the Kingdom to those who will receive it, that God is the gatherer of the community which bears Christ's name. In other words, it does not collect itself together, in accordance with its own whim or likings. We cannot choose our Christian brethren; they are given to us. Nor can we choose our sister church. It is not a question of our pride in being Baptists, but a question of our understanding and obedience as regards the purpose of God. Does *He* want one community, or many different ones? The number of the Twelve Apostles signified their mission to the twelve tribes which constituted Israel. By analogy, only as a cross-section of the whole of mankind, of every nation, tongue and race, can the Church fulfil and visibly signify the meaning of its existence. It requires a community whose own experience and nature witness to the reconciling power of Christ to preach convincingly the message of a Gospel of reconciliation. Only a universal community can be a sign of God's purpose to save the world. The unity of the Church is thus an essential part of its testimony. As was well said years ago, "Division in the Church contradicts its nature, frustrates its purpose, and distorts its witness."

Baptists pride themselves on independence. Independence of the State, fine. But independence of one another or of Christians in other communions? There could be no attitude more unchristian. The essential characteristics of members of the Body of Christ (as St. Paul so convincingly argued long ago—Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 1:10-13, 12:4-30) are variety of gift and function, but complete interdependence in one Spirit. Christian virtues are required for the nurture of *this* kind of a universal community. And conversely, it is in a closely-knit and interdependent community that the fruit of the Spirit grows best. The true mark of a community gathered in Christ's name was stated by Jesus Himself, "This is how all men will know that you are my disciples, because you have such love [i.e. *my* kind of love] for one another" (John 13:35). This applies not only to the local congregation, but also to the whole "household of God." The last thing which this implies is uniformity. This is no more desirable in the Church than in any family. It does require, as St. Paul constantly reminded those to whom he wrote, mutual acceptance and respect,

tolerance and forbearance, humility and patience, and frank speaking in love. Only a community with these characteristics could witness to God's purpose to create "a single new humanity in Christ."

In contrast, when separate "churches" present themselves as more proud of their own name and heritage than conscious of the "whole purpose of God," when they become relatively closed communities preaching primarily to those who are already Christian, the real mission of the Church is lost. For the Church has been gathered out of all the nations to bear corporate witness to what God has done, what He is doing, and what He will do. And its inner life and outgoing service should make that message more credible, not less. Every congregation exists to testify in word and deed to the universality of the Gospel, as being good news not only for all men, but also for the whole range of human life. To narrow down this universality is to fail to perceive and adore the magnitude and reality of God's love. This is a very different thing from the doctrine of Universalism, which fails to take human freedom and responsibility with sufficient seriousness. It is not possible for any local church to demonstrate within its fellowship a whole cross-section of mankind or the relevance of the Gospel to every dimension of human existence. It can therefore testify to "the whole Gospel," instead of a partial Gospel, only in so far as it does reflect, in consciousness and intention, the reality of the whole Church which God is gathering, of which it is simply the local manifestation.

VICTOR E. W. HAYWARD

Summer School, July 2-4, 1970

It has been decided to include a number of ten-minute papers in the programme of the society's second Summer School. Members who would like by this means to introduce some aspect of research in which they are engaged are invited to get in touch with Rev. E. F. Clipsham. The school is to be held at Bristol Baptist College. Bookings can now be taken for the school and members are advised to apply promptly in order to avoid disappointment. Applications should be sent to Rev. E. F. Clipsham, Baptist Church House, 4, Southampton Row, London, W.C.1.