

Desiderius Erasmus. That is to say the general editor needs to be a scholar and a journalist, a writer of distinction and a wit, trained in theology and with a knowledge of the classics, above all a student of the Bible, with a reporter's touch of the cynic, and a Churchman's faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ, a man of eirenic temperament and of ecumenical outlook, an observer of nature and of his fellow-men, prone to friendship, and equally at home at All Souls' College or in Wembley stadium. He must be a man filled with a sense of the Church's authority and continuity and convinced of the need to restate the faith radically and in contemporary terms. To choose an editor from the past is a pastime; to find his modern counterpart is a difficulty and a hazard. Success in this would go far to solving the problem of launching a truly Church newspaper or periodical.

The Church of the Gospels

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AN unfortunate misunderstanding seems to hamper New Testament studies: it is assumed quite uncritically that Christ built only a very small church, comprising a mere handful of fishermen and women. There are repeated indications to the contrary in our documents; references to great multitudes of disciples, to 70 evangelists, to 500 "brethren—witnesses" of the Resurrection and so on; but these are quietly ignored, or at best ascribed to the author's love of exaggeration, so that not even professed conservatives really take them seriously. The purpose of this article is to register the conviction that Christ built during His earthly lifetime a church of considerable dimensions, and Himself organized and trained that church for its world mission. We shall trace in detail the growth of the Gospel Church, beginning with a brief background study, and later examining the Gospels.

We have all reasoned hitherto that the Jews were divided into Pharisees, Sadducees, and common people: the first two groups were hostile to Jesus; the third were amiable peasants who yelled "Hosanna" or "Crucify" according to the mood of the moment. Hence there was no large supply of human material available to Jesus for building a church, and He had to be content with leading twelve rather fractious disciples on a camping tour of the Holy Land, and training them as the embryo of a church which would take definite shape after Pentecost. Recent research work on our Jewish background to the N.T. has modified this naïve conception, by revealing the existence of several heterodox groups like the Zealots, the Essenes, the Minim, the Therapeutæ, the Covenanters of Damascus, the Samaritan heretical Gnostic groups, and the followers of John the Baptist. Research further reveals that not only did these groups share with the Nazarenes a common antipathy to the Pharisees and Sadducees, but that many of their teachings and practices bear striking

resemblance to those of the Early Church. In other words had Jesus wanted to build a powerful church, there lay ready to hand in Jewish Heterodoxy an abundance of sympathetic human material.

We must naturally substantiate this assertion ; and at present this task is easiest in the case of the Essenes, whose teaching has been so ably demonstrated by Prof. A. Dupont-Sommer in his research on the Dead Sea Scrolls. These remarkable warrior saints of Qumran are first mentioned by Josephus in Jonathan's High-Priesthood in 146 B.C., and by the time of Christ their monastery settlement contained some 4,000 initiates. Qumran was only the parent house of the order however, and both Josephus and Philo tell us " Many of them dwell in every city ". Now the curious thing about the Essenes is not so much that they often met Jesus in Palestine, but that when they did meet Him they had so very much religious practice in common. They practised baptism as He did ; they emphasized purity of heart in baptism and prayed for the gift of the Spirit in the water ; they held a common meal called the " Banquet of the Many " in which the firstfruits of bread and wine were blessed and Messiah was thought to be really present ; they taught a very spiritual doctrine of justification by faith. They not only advocated the common purse as Jesus did, but had very successfully worked a total communism in goods and property for over 150 years. They also had a ruling council of twelve, which ruled their assembly in the most enlightened democratic manner, and sometimes resorted to " casting of lots ". Their council administered sound church discipline, excommunicating those who broke community, rather as Ananias is rebuked in Acts v. They called themselves the " Party of the New Covenant ", and revered a very godly Teacher of Righteousness, who had been slain in the time of Pompey in 63 B.C. These Essenes in fact were very near to Jesus in spirit. Speaking the same language, grounded in the same ideals, they could hardly avoid recognizing the revelation of God in Christ when they met Him. Beholding them He would see a field white unto harvest.

As research gathers momentum we shall probably find other heretical groups who approach even nearer to the Nazarene position. The " Treatise on the Three Natures " in the Jung Codex says :—" The Jews have founded numerous heresies ; some say God is one ; others say His action is twofold, and the origin of both good and evil ". One such body of heretics is referred to in the Talmud, the group in the 1st Century called the Minim. Philo mentions another group called Therapeutæ. Although based on Alexandria, these people spread into many lands, and like the Nazarenes admitted women to their common meals on equal terms with men. In the North lived the Covenanters of Damascus, who like Jesus had broken with official Judaism and rejected the Jerusalem Temple, much as He is accused of doing at the Trial. In Galilee lived the Zealots, who probably provided Jesus with such followers as Simon the Zealot, and the " Sons of Thunder ". Dating back to Hezekiah's rebellion in the early days of Herod the Great, they were re-organized by Judas of Galilee and proclaimed the uncompromising doctrine of :—" The sword and not sparingly : no king but Jehovah ". Many rather impatiently followed Jesus, hoping He

would liberate them from the Romans, and demanding :—" Lord wilt thou at this time restore the Kingdom to Israel ? "

Lastly, some very curious groups lived in Samaria. Justin Martyr, who knew Samaria, links Simon Magus and the origin of Jewish Gnosis with these groups. The Jung Codex tells us that they distinguished between the transcendent God and Little Jahweh or Jaebel, who was a mediator of God's revelation and Lord of the angels. Another belief peculiar to the Samaritans, and often erroneously attributed to the Jews, was the doctrine that a " Taheb " would appear, a " Prophet like unto Moses ", who would restore all things. Both the Fourth Gospel and Acts show awareness of the rich harvest waiting to be reaped in Samaria.

Those who trouble to investigate the evidence about the heterodox groups in Palestine will probably be ready by now, to admit that the human material was there to hand all right, if Jesus had wanted to build a powerful church. After all, God had been preparing Israel for centuries for Messiah's coming, and does not St. Paul himself say :—" When the fulness of time was come, God sent forth His Son ". But they argue Jesus made no attempt to build a church out of these prospective converts. He had neither the time nor the inclination to build a church. He desired only to train the Twelve, and to fulfil the Messianic rôle of Suffering Servant. Hence He left the whole work of church-building to His Spirit-filled Apostles after Pentecost, and while the Baptist and the Essenes were baptizing thousands of adherents respectively, Jesus Himself, during three years of ministry covering all Palestine, collected only a mere handful of followers, a pathetic 120 ; He built not a church, but a half-empty dissenting chapel, whose members could all be accommodated in a large upper room. The only way to answer this assumption is to trace the growth of the Church in the Gospels patiently and honestly. In attempting this we crave only a modest respect for the historicity of our New Testament documents. When the information gleaned from these documents coincides exactly with the facts established by recent research into the Jewish background, it would seem quite unscientific to despise that information on the ground that its authority is the " M " source or the Fourth Gospel. Let us trust our documents, provided they offer a feasible account of the development of the Nazarene movement.

All our Gospels agree that the Nazarene movement really began when something convinced John the Baptist that Jesus was Messiah. Now that research has bidden us look upon John as a quasi-Essene baptizer, operating from the Qumran wilderness, the nature of John's conviction has become tolerably clear. The Essenes emphasized very sincerely the gift of the Spirit in the water as the heart of true baptism ; and John in conferring an Essene-type baptism on Jesus, witnessed an awe-inspiring manifestation of that Holy Spirit of God of whom his ascetic companions had so often spoken. His transparently honest testimony in John i. 32 :—" I saw the Spirit descending and abiding upon Him ", is packed with meaning on the lips of an Essene ; and his dramatic experience bears fruit in the conduct of a large group of his followers, so that with their master's tacit approval Andrew and

an un-named disciple come over to Jesus, and persuade a great mass of Judaeans to accept Nazarene baptism. That the influx of Judaeans converts proved to be very great is indicated by the following statements in John iii. 26 and iv. 1 :—" The same baptizeth and all men come to Him ". " Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John." That Jesus was less thorough than the very strict Essenes in preparing disciples for baptism few will be inclined to argue. In fact all told this Judaeans mission with its mass of baptisms adds up to something so significant as to dwarf all minor quibbling about whether Jesus or His disciples actually did the baptizing. A movement larger than the mass movement of the Baptist has begun ; a movement which is strong enough to challenge the authority of the ruling priesthood at the central shrine of national worship, when the staggering attempt is made to cleanse the Temple in John ii.

Let it be said at once that we are perfectly aware of the serious doubts entertained by many scholars as to the historicity of this Johannine account, and in particular of the " antedated " cleansing of the Temple. We fully appreciate the integrity of these honest sceptics. We only ask them to bear in mind two considerations : first, the Judaeans mass movement is precisely the kind of baptism cult that two centuries of Essene preaching might be expected to inspire in South Palestine, given a prophet of Christ's stature : second, the original Judaeans movement solves a problem which has long bewildered scholars ; the problem of why the Apostolic Church in Acts is centred in Jerusalem and not Galilee : it is centred there because it began there.

According to John the next stage in the growth of the Church takes place in Sychar of Samaria, where a prophet claiming kinship with Moses, especially if he gave himself out to be God's Son, or Little Jaol, could be sure of a devoted following. Jesus gets rid of the Zealot anti-Samaritan hotheads in His entourage by sending them shopping, and then makes disciples of the Samaritan woman and a large group of her friends. Surveying these white harvest fields of Samaria, He pays striking tribute to the work of His heterodox forerunners :—" Others have laboured, and ye are entered into their labour ". Indeed He makes such an impression on Samaria that Philip and the Apostles received a tumultuous welcome on their visit to the Samaritan Church in Acts viii. But for some mysterious reason this work is abandoned in favour of Galilee, just as it gets under way so that later the " M " source represents Jesus as saying :—" Go not into any way of the Gentiles, and enter not into any city of the Samaritans : but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel ". In face of this confusing evidence it would be dishonest to exaggerate the number of Samaritan converts.

No one need be tempted to exaggerate when we reach Galilee, for the Gospels vie with one another in describing the enormous crowds surging round Jesus. Mark says to us in effect : " Please note that Jesus drew groups of adherents from every corner of Palestine, and from lands beyond her borders as well ; and using your imagination consider how they would afterwards return to their native places to become *ipso facto* pockets of Nazarene heresy, embryo churches, crying

out for missionaries, instruction, and literature". What other interpretation can a thoughtful reader possibly put on Mark iii. 7? "A great multitude from Galilee followed, and from Judaea, and from Jerusalem, and from Idumaea, and beyond Jordan, and about Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude."

And now we find ourselves confronted with a grave crisis in the Nazarene movement, no less than the murder of the Baptist, Mark vi. 27. This renders a great mass of John's followers leaderless, "As sheep not having a shepherd", as the Gospel so vividly puts it. They pour into the already swollen and unwieldy Nazarene organization, and the Twelve are at their wits end what to do with so vast a throng. There are actually 5,000 of them, not counting women and children, milling about for days in the hill country above the Lake. And to grasp the significance of this number, we must remember that of the four and a half million Jews in the 1st Century world, only some 700,000 lived in Palestine. Set in relation to the total population, a force of 5,000 men assembled in Galilee, a hotbed of insurrection, constituted at the best of times a political menace; and this particular group were in a very ugly mood indeed:—"They were determined to take Jesus by force and make Him a King" (John vi. 15). Such was the menacing magnitude of this Nazarene movement, which we fondly imagine was a quiet picnic where everyone brought sandwiches! Fortunately Jesus had no illusions about the crisis. He deliberately diverted the crowd's attention from the violent programme of the Zealots, by having recourse to the mysticism of the Essenes. There and then He held a miraculous Essene-type "Banquet of the Many", the crowd sitting Essene style in orderly ranks of fifties and hundreds; and He substituted for the Essene wine the peculiar Nazarene symbol of the fish, later found so constantly in Christian art. He followed up the Banquet with involved "Essene—sacramental" teaching, which so completely cooled the ardour of the Zealot hotheads that many departed and walked no more with Him.

Unfortunately these words in John vi. 66, have been taken to imply that all Christ's baptized followers melted away overnight, and that we are now back to twelve disciples and a few women again. This is improbable in the last degree; for while the Banquet would alienate the Zealots, it would greatly encourage the devout Essenes, Therapeutæ, and other peace-loving sects. And as if to confirm the logic of this reasoning, our Markan source, normally regarded as early and historical, follows the first banquet up with a second where 4,000 are again fed Essene-style in the wilderness. Moreover, after this second banquet Jesus asks the disciples most pointedly, "Has neither banquet convinced you? Do you not yet realize that I am deliberately rejecting the Zealot programme for that of the Essenes?"

Up to this moment Jesus has still not embarked seriously on the work of building and organizing a Church. The "M" source tells us this task was begun in earnest after Peter's confession:—"Thou art Peter, and on this rock will I build my Church". It seems only logical to accept the evidence of the "M" source at this point, because once the vast multitudes have returned home after the banquets, some kind of "follow up" system is essential to bind them in a fellowship. The

evidence of Acts would suggest that Jesus retained many Essene features which had proved their value over two centuries, such as baptism, the common meal, poverty, communal living, excommunication, and the ruling council of Twelve. But three very important new developments should be associated with this period, if the church building is to make sense. First the doctrine of the Suffering and Rising Son of Man is enunciated as the bed-rock of faith, or basic creed. Second the system of travelling evangelists is introduced; third a kind of Nazarene Manual of Discipline, containing the Lord's Prayer, the Law of Christ, and a collection of His favourite Logia is drawn up for the edification of far-flung Nazarene communities. Our evidence for the second of these developments comes from Luke x, which describes the appointment of an additional 70 labourers, who are sent to every city Christ has so far visited, and who report on their return a very encouraging harvest. While the number 70 may well be reminiscent of Exodus xxiv, 1, it seems very unscientific to regard these evangelists as a pure figment of Luke's imagination, prompted by his interest in the Gentile mission. Luke has probably recollected his promise to set down everything accurately and in order, and is presenting the true picture of this massive and powerful Nazarene Church, which can put 70 trained workers in the field, like a well ordered missionary society. The third development is admittedly hypothetical. Yet seeing that missionary work always creates a demand for instruction and literature, what is more natural in meeting this situation than that Matthew should be asked to write down the Logia and the new Law of Christ; in short that embryo sources like "M" and "Q" begin to take shape, and are used by the 70 evangelists in their mission preaching?

Patient constructive pastoral work never receives much publicity, and Christ's systematic organization of His Nazarene Church is no exception to this rule. A great deal can happen in a year, let alone three years, and the work of church-building covered a long uneventful period in all probability. We are shown only the fruit of this labour in the form of ever increasing multitudes thronging Christ as He makes the final journey to Jerusalem. The following are typical:

Mark x. 1. "The multitudes came together to Him again."

Luke xii. 1. "When many thousands of the multitude were gathered together insomuch that they trode one upon another."

Luke xiii. 22. "He went His way through cities and villages, teaching and journeying on to Jerusalem."

Ultimately He confronts the authorities with the nation-wide Church which has come into being, and makes the decisive bid to gain control of Israel's religious life on Palm Sunday. The Nazarenes on Palm Sunday must have argued something like this: "Last time we tried to cleanse the Temple and gain control we were rejected by the Sadducees, and the whole thing was a fiasco; but we were not organized in those days; our only real strength was in Judaea. This time we argue from strength, and the outcome will be quite different. We have massive support in every city and province; we have powerful efficient organization. Sheer weight of numbers is bound to win the day and compel the priests to hand over religious control to Jesus." Surveying

their prospects in the light of what is already accomplished their confidence knows no bounds :— “ The whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God for all the mighty works which they had seen ”. And indeed they had every reason to be pleased with their chances. Jesus not only cleanses the Temple this time ; for five days He sets up Headquarters in the Temple ; He teaches daily in the Temple ; all the people hang upon Him listening, and the chief priests can do nothing against Him (Luke xix. 47). Even His enemies feel obliged to pay tribute to the competent genius of a master builder :— “ He stirreth up the people, teaching throughout all Judaea and beginning from Galilee, even unto this place ”. Their concern was more than justified ; even without the Resurrection the vast militant Church of Jesus nearly proved too strong for them ; once it was given the explosive inspiration of Easter morning it swept all before it.

We find in Acts and the Epistles a Church of exactly the same massive dimensions as our study of the Gospels has led us to expect. Admittedly the number of disciples in the centre of Jerusalem has touched a record “ low ”, a mere 120 souls (Acts i. 14). But no sane Nazarene who valued his life would choose to live at the centre of Jerusalem so soon after the Crucifixion. The congregation there has shrunk to an absolute minimum rather as African congregations shrink in places where Mau Mau atrocities break out. A far more reliable indication of the Church’s numerical strength at the time of the Resurrection is found in 1 Cor. xv. 6, which states :— “ He appeared unto about 500 brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain unto this day ”. Paul uses this term brethren (ἀδελφοί) in this letter in a technical sense to denote mature baptized Christians, as opposed to “ babes ”. So we must not insult the holy brethren by calling them chance spectators ; they are true members of a far flung Nazarene Church ; and that Church is so numerous that she can put 500 representatives in the field to witness a single sudden Appearance. Moreover, we can double check their identity ; for 2 Corinthians, which registers so many criticisms of Pauline statements made in 1 Corinthians, drops not a hint of any challenge to their existence. The Corinthians knew all about the 500 brethren.

But the best way to estimate the strength of the Church before Pentecost is to relate it to the number of converts baptized at Pentecost and shortly afterwards—3,000 converts in Acts ii, and 5,000 men, excluding women and children in Acts iv. 4. We normally reckon to allocate one counsellor to one enquirer in such mission work to-day. Work out the sum to your own satisfaction and estimate how many Nazarenes came up from the provinces at Pentecost as mission workers ; and bear in mind also that Peter has a ready made Essene-type communist system laid on complete with excommunication and seven supervisors for the Hellenists. The explanation of this large scale activity is not far to seek. The Jerusalem Church displays immense power and resource in Acts ii because its roots spread far and wide throughout Palestine ; because it had been accumulating members and officers for years before the Resurrection ; because it had been soundly built and superbly organized by the master hand of Jesus Himself.

We trust by now that the conviction that Jesus built a large church appears rather less fanciful than did it hitherto; and that it represents a possible interpretation of the evidence at our disposal. This evidence is constantly increasing, and it is all too easy to play the fool with it and err exceedingly. We conclude very diffidently by enumerating a few of the blessings this new concept of the Church might bring in its train.

1. In our preaching it would enable us to portray the historical Jesus far more reverently. Instead of dwelling so much on the ability of people like Luther and Wesley as church-builders, and implying by contrast that Jesus was only an incapable idealist mooning about with a few silly fishermen, we should reverently portray Him as the master Church-builder, who bears a perfect relation to the Ascended Christ, the Head of the Church.

2. With all the joy of rediscovery we should undertake an exhaustive study of the Gospel Church. We should welcome the great flood of Scrolls which God is sending us through his servants the archæologists; and they would throw such light on baptism, the common meal, church discipline, the ministry, and communal living that our whole church life would be re-vitalized.

3. We should reshape Form Criticism to make it serve a constructive purpose. That is to say we should classify our units of tradition according to their relevance to the church situation at some specific point in Christ's historic ministry; for example the logion to Nicodemus about being born of water and the spirit would be seen to apply the vital test of an Essene-type baptism, so crucial for a Pharisee, and the tradition would be pronounced early and reliable.

4. We should rather diffidently push back Source Criticism to the period 27-30 A.D., making some attempt to discover just how much Jesus Himself caused to be written down for the travelling evangelists, and endeavouring to reconstruct the Nazarene "Manual of Discipline".

5. The resounding testimony of 500 good solid flesh and blood churchmen to the truth of the Resurrection would do much to rehabilitate this keystone doctrine, which falls so very flat every Easter Sunday.

Meanwhile, if you have found some of the wilder speculations in this article rather shocking, try not to reject out of hand the basic contention that Jesus built a large church. The myth of the microscopic Gospel Church has never really helped any of us; it has too long prevented any real forward march in Gospel studies. Tuck this alternative theory away in some convenient recess of your mind, where it will be handy to fall back on, when the conventional theory leaves you baffled and frustrated. You will be amazed to find how it comes to your rescue and throws light on the obscurest passages. In any case truth is self-evidencing and self-revealing; and this theory if true, can be relied upon to communicate itself to us all in God's good time, if only we have the moral capacity to receive it.