

The Church in Paul

M. J. JOSEPH*

Introduction

A scientific enquiry into Paul's concept of the Church should seriously take into account Paul's understanding of his mission in the economy of salvation. According to Romans 15:14-21, Paul's concept of mission is integral to his understanding of christology and pneumatology and subsequently to ecclesiology, because he believes that the preaching of the "Gospel of Christ" brings about the formation of a community which he calls "an offering" sanctified by the Spirit. The community comes into existence through the "naming of Christ" (Rom. 15:20). The "obedience of the Gentiles"¹ results in the formation of the "body of Christ" and the community so formed is accountable to God (cf. *pros ton theon*—Rom. 15:17.) In Col. 1:24-25, missiology is linked up with christology and ecclesiology and cannot be separated from the overall plan of salvation. The plan of salvation as an "ecclesial mystery"² finds new dimensions in the calling of Paul as the "apostle of Christ to the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13). As a *leitourgos*³ of Jesus Christ, "in the priestly service of the Gospel of God" (Rom. 15:16), Paul believes that the preaching of "the Gospel of Christ" contributes to the evolution of a new humanity which breaks down racial, social and cultural barriers (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). In our investigation of Pauline ecclesiology, we have to bear in mind the overlapping of the theological boundaries. In any attempt to outline a systematic analysis of Paul's concept of the "Church," we have to give expression to two basic issues:⁴ (i) Paul believes that the progressive accomplishment of his mission brings the divine plan of salvation which was inaugurated in Christ into the stage of realiza-

* Dr Joseph teaches New Testament at the Mar Thoma Theological Seminary, Kottayam.

¹ The phrase "obedience of the Gentiles" means the Gentiles' obedience to the will of God as expressed in the Gospel.

² Paul speaks of the divine plan to save men as a "mystery" (Rom. 15:25-26; 1 Cor. 2:7-10; Col. 1:26-27; Eph. 1:8-10; 3:10).

³ Paul also uses similar expressions to designate his relationship either to God or to Christ or to the community. For example: "apostle of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:1); "servant of Christ" (Rom. 1:1); "fellow-worker with God" (1 Cor. 3:1); "steward of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1); "*diakonos* of God" (2 Cor. 6:4).

⁴ In my doctoral dissertation entitled "Paul's understanding of his mission" submitted to the Senate of Serampore College (1975), I have discussed in detail the component elements in Paul's comprehension of his role as the "apostle of Christ to the Gentiles."

tion, particularly with regard to the Gentiles. (ii) The missionary strategy of Paul involves moving from Jerusalem into areas where the Gospel has not yet been preached (Rom. 15:20-21). The above two convictions of Paul make it clear that the "whole Christ" is to be revealed in the historical existence of humanity through the ministry of the Word. Thus Paul takes over the "eschatological conceptuality of Salvation History."⁵ The freedom which God offered to the world in and through Christ is a gift of grace which belongs to the realm of the Spirit. Thus the horizons of ecclesiology comprehend the area of pneumatology. In this paper we shall examine the interlinking of various concepts in Paul's concept of the Church.

Ekklesia in the Pauline Writings

The New Testament use of *ekklesia* has a double background, a Greek background and a Hebrew background. In the Hebrew sense, it means a congregation called by God "to listen to and to act for God." Paul's concept of *ekklesia* is related to the Hebrew idea of *qahal* in its missionary purpose. Paul's use of Church as the "Israel of God" in Gal. 6:16 (cf. Gal. 3:7, 9, 29) confirms this view (cf. *hagioi* in Rom. 1:7; *kletoi hagioi* in 1 Cor. 1:2).

The term *ekklesia* occurs fifty-eight times in the Pauline writings (excluding the Pastorals): Rom. (5); 1 Cor. (21); 2 Cor. (9); Gal. (3); Eph. (9); Phil. (2); Col. (4); 1 Thess. (2); 2 Thess. (2); Phlm. (1). It has different shades of meaning:

(a) A Church meeting (1 Cor. 11:18; 14:18, 19, 28, 35).

(b) The congregation as the totality of Christians living in one place (1 Cor. 4:17; Phil. 4:15). There are several specific examples of this usage:

(i) The Church (singular) at Cenchreae: Rom. 16:1; the Church at Corinth: 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1.

(ii) The Church at Thessalonica: 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; the Church at Colossae: Phlm.

(iii) The Churches (plural) of Christ in Judea: Gal. 1:22; the Churches of God in Christ Jesus which are in Judea: 1 Thess. 2:14.

(iv) The Churches of Galatia: Gal. 1:2; 1 Cor. 16:1; the Churches of Asia: 1 Cor. 16:19; the Churches of Macedonia: 2 Cor. 8:1.

(c) House Churches: of Prisca and Aquila (Rom. 16:5); of Aquila and Prisca (1 Cor. 16:19); of Nympha (Col. 4:15); of Archippus (Phlm. 2).

(d) The Church universal to which all believers belong: 1 Cor. 6:4; 12:29; Eph. 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23, 27, 29, 32.

⁵ Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*, 1969, p. 254.

This analysis helps us to draw the following conclusions: (i) The Church comes into being through the ministry of the Word. (ii) Response to the challenge of the Word results in the formation of communities which are subjected to the vicissitudes of history. The community is called to reflect a historical and geographical sense in its life-style. (iii) The Christian family has a role to play in the building up of the Church in a given locality. (iv) The individual Christian community should be viewed through the corporate identity of the Church. The corporate identity of the Church is a gift from God which makes the community flexible in its relation to the world and challenges the Church to open herself to the divine possibility.

Images

There are several images which express the bond between Jesus Christ and his community.⁶ These include: God's field (1 Cor. 3:9); Fellow-workers (1 Cor. 3:9); The olive tree (Rom. 11:24); Household of God (cf. Rom. 8:23); Stewards, servants (1 Cor. 4:1-2); Slaves, free men (Rom. 6:22; 1 Cor. 7:20-24); Saints (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:2); Lights (1 Thess. 5:5); Bridegroom and bride (Eph. 5:21-33); Fellowship (1 Cor. 1:9; Phil. 2:1); Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27); Temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:21). All these images show the nature of the Church with reference to its mission, unity and continued dependence upon the living Lord.

Church of God

There are frequent references to the term "Church of God" in Paul. The following may be noted: 1 Cor. 1:2: "To the church of God which is at Corinth"; cf. 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Cor. 10:32: "Give no offence . . . to the church of God"; 11:16, 22: "The churches of God" (v. 16); "The church of God" (v. 22); 15:9. "I persecuted the church of God"; cf. Gal. 1:13; 1 Thess. 1:1: "To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"; cf. 2 Thess. 1:4; 2:14: " . . . became imitators of the churches of God."

Of the above texts 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; 1 Thess. 1:1 and 2 Thess. 1:4 belong to the salutation of Paul to various communities. Although the Church is a human organization which can be located in a given place, its existence belongs to God. The phrase "Gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1; 2 Cor. 11:7; 1 Thess. 2:2, 8,9) is analogous to the title "Church of God." It is the "Gospel of God" which brings about the formation of the "Church of God." Paul wants to give credit to Christ (Rom. 15:17). Theologically speaking the title "Church of God" implies two things: (i) The Church is a body constituted by

⁶ Cf. Paul S. Minear, *Jesus and His People*, 1957, pp. 94-95.

⁷ Cf. "Church of Christ" in Gal. 1:22; 1 Thess. 1:1; Rom. 16:16. The genitive *tu theou* is added both to the singular (1 Cor. 1:2; 10:32; 11:22; 15:9; Gal. 1:13; cf. 1 Tim. 3:5, 15) and to the plural (1 Cor. 11:16; 1 Thess. 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:4).

God,⁸ through the message of the Gospel; (ii) the community so constituted is under the control of the Spirit of God and *charismata* are given to the community "for the common good" (1 Cor. 12:7).

Church of God and the Kingdom of God

One of the defective understandings of mission is to equate the Church with the Kingdom of God.⁹ The problem is partly posed by the sources of the New Testament. According to the Synoptics, the Kingdom of God is the central theme in the teaching of Jesus. The concept of the Church is the leading category in the Pauline Epistles. Did Paul identify the Church with the Kingdom?¹⁰ The term *basileia* occurs 12 times in the Pauline letters: 1 Thess. 2:12: "God calls you into his kingdom"; 2 Thess. 1:5: "... that you may be made worthy of the kingdom of God"; Gal. 5:21: "... shall not inherit the kingdom of God"; 1 Cor. 4:20: "... For the kingdom of God does not consist in word but in power"; 1 Cor. 6:9: "... unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God"; 1 Cor. 15:24: "... when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father"; 1 Cor. 15:50: "... flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God"; Rom. 14:17; "For the kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit"; Col. 1:13: "He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son"; Eph. 5:5: "Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure man, or one who is covetous (that is, an idolator), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God"; Col. 4:11: "My fellow-workers for the kingdom of God."

In 1 Thess. 2:12 Paul makes it clear that the demand of the Gospel of God is ultimately an invitation to accept the divine sovereignty and in 2 Thess. 1:5 the respondents are required to regulate their lives according to the character of the one who invites. The ultimate purpose of God is to make the believer worthy of the Gospel. The ethical norm for the life-style of the community is set within the context of the just demands of the Kingdom (Gal. 5:21; 1 Cor. 6:9; 15:50; Rom. 14:7; Eph. 5:5). In Rom. 14:17, the materialistic concept of the Kingdom is ruled out. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God because the realm of the Kingdom belongs

⁸ For Paul, the One who is at work in and with the *ekklesia* is always God. Cf. 1 Cor. 12:28: "And God has appointed in the Church first apostles ..." K. L. Schmidt has correctly remarked the significance of *tou theou* as follows: "The fact that Paul can sometimes speak of the *ekklesia* (*tou theou*) as gathering (s) *en Christo Iesou* or *Christou* is perhaps aimed against the tendency of the first disciples to concentrate on persons or places. The words *he petra de en ho Christos* in 1 Cor. 10:4 may well contain a similar polemic." See "*ekklesia*," TDNT, Vol. III, p. 509.

⁹ J. G. Davies in his book, *Worship and Mission*, 1966, discusses in detail "defective concepts of mission" (pp. 35-69). Any attempt to define *missio Dei* in terms of Church will "turn ecclesiology into ecclesiolatry" (p. 49).

¹⁰ Cf. Alexander Balmain Bruce, *St. Paul's Conception of Christianity*, 1896, pp. 362-63.

to the Gospel of God. In 1 Cor. 15:24 and Col. 1:13, the Kingdom is interpreted as a divine possibility in history; but its dimension is beyond history. Thus the Kingdom has a transcendental character. The two are not equated. The Church is the ideal of the Kingdom realized. The two attributes of the Kingdom, transcendence and futurity, are recognized in Gal. 5:21, 1 Cor. 6:10 and 1 Cor. 15:50. The transcendental character hangs on in 1 Cor. 4:20 and Rom. 14:17.

From the above group of texts, it can be concluded that Paul does not equate the Church with the Kingdom. The tendency in past ecclesiology has been to equate the Kingdom on earth with the Church. Any attempt to absolutize the Church by its identification with the Kingdom distorts the mind of Paul. For Paul, the Church is an instrument of the Kingdom. So the Kingdom idea finds a place in ethics and eschatology. The dynamic witness of the community is related to the ongoing activity of the Spirit in the overall plan of salvation. The Church is open to the realm of the Kingdom through the activity of the Spirit in the community.¹¹ It is precisely at this point that the ministry of the Church finds significance.

Christological and Pneumatological Perspectives

"From the christological aspect the Church is static, built upon an unshakable foundation (Eph. 2:20); from the pneumatological the Church is dynamic, stretching out to its final destiny."¹² The double polarity of the Church is to be borne in mind when we speak about the ultimate plan of God "to unite all things in Christ" (Eph. 1:10; Phil. 2:10, 11).

There is no independent doctrine of the Church in Paul without reference to Christ and Spirit. The dynamic element in Paul's ecclesiology is to be sought in his concept of the Spirit as the agent of mission. So it is imperative for us to look at Paul's concept of the Spirit. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruah* which means "a movement of air or wind." Of the 378 examples in the Old Testament, 94 occur in the expression "the Spirit of God." In all the speaking about the Spirit of God, the accent falls on the power which creates life wherever it acts. With H.W. Robinson¹³ we affirm that the Spirit in the Bible is one of the distinctively biblical means of expressing the ongoing activity of God. Paul's distinctive phrase "the Spirit of God" (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 2:11; 2:16; 2 Cor. 3:3) shows that he had learned from Judaism about the function of the Spirit of Yahweh. The activity of Christ conceived as "the last

¹¹ Speaking about the Kingdom of God, C. K. Barrett writes: "In the work of the Spirit, the kingdom of God may be said to be proleptically present though it remains essentially future": *From First Adam to Last*, 1962, p. 100.

¹² J. G. Davies and Alan Richardson (ed.), "Church," *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 1969, p. 65.

¹³ *The Christian Doctrine of Man*, 1934.

Adam" (1 Cor. 15: 45), described in terms of the life-giving Spirit, makes a link between christology and pneumatology. This link is extended to the realm of ecclesiology where the dynamic power of the Spirit is conceived in terms of creating, redeeming, reconciling and sanctifying work. This is related to the constitutive and progressive element of the saving work of God in Christ.¹⁴ Paul conceives of the act of God in Christ as a constitutive action by which a Christian enters into an adoptive relationship with God. This adoptive relationship is a happening in the body of Christ. We read in 1 Cor. 6:11:

And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

The other side of the act of God is called "the progress dimension" by which the same action is continued and deepened until the final reunion with Christ is achieved. This progressive dimension is related to the energizing power of the Spirit. Christians who are a temple in 1 Cor. 3:16 must grow into a holy temple in Eph. 2:21. In the Church the fulness of God's grace is offered to all humanity. This is stated in Col. 1:24 where we find that Christ is completed by his body, the Church. The body is not yet complete, it is growing and expanding, and its ultimate goal is the very fulness of God himself (Eph. 1:23). In Eph. 2:20 Paul uses the verb *epoikodomethentes* (having been built) to express the constitutive element and in 2:22 he uses *sunoikodomeisthe* (were built) to express the "not yet" dimension of the Kingdom and the *ekklesia*. As R. J. McKelvey¹⁵ remarks, "The conception of the Church as a building under construction with no suggestion of when the work will be completed, and at the same time as a temple in which God is actually dwelling and worship is being offered looks like a contradiction. What we have here, however, is a paradox which is basic to much New Testament thinking, the paradox of present possession and future hope . . . Recognition of this fact preserves the Church from the twin evils of complacency and despair." The tension between the "constitutive" and the "progressive" element in Pauline thought can be summed up in the words of J. G. Davies:

The Church is the Temple of the Presence; it is the Body of Christ; it is the Bride of Christ; yet the Temple has still to be built together, the Body has still to be built up, the Bride has still to become wholly one with her Bridegroom.¹⁶

¹⁴ See the idea of "constitutive and progressive dimension" in Paul's thought in George Montage, "Paul's teaching on Being and Becoming in Christ," *Contemporary New Testament Studies*, ed. Sister M. Rosalie Ryan, 1965, pp. 378-84.

¹⁵ *The Temple: The Church in the New Testament* 1969, pp. 182-83.

¹⁶ "Church," *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*, p. 65.

The Church as Koinonia Created by the Holy Spirit

G. Aulen¹⁷ has said correctly: "The Church is a creation through the act of God in Christ, and at the same time a fellowship created by the Holy Spirit." It is the "communion of the Holy Spirit" that makes the life of the community dynamic and creative.¹⁸ *Koinonia* is to be understood "as fellowship which is created by the Holy Spirit and fellowship as participation in the Holy Spirit." Paul's use of *oikodomeo* (1 Cor. 14:4, 5, 12, 33) makes it abundantly clear that the edification of the Church is an activity of the Spirit. In 1 Cor. 13:14 Paul speaks about the "communion of the Spirit" as integral to the "grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" and the love of God which is the sustaining factor in the growth of the community. The communion of the Spirit creates a new status and a new dignity in the body of Christ. This is clearly stated in Rom. 8:15-17:

... but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

This adoptive relationship is an invitation to the fellowship of Christ (1 Cor. 1:9). It is the Holy Spirit that deepens the fellowship of the believers with Christ which results in "liturgical response" as found in 1 Cor. 12:3 (and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit). Paul, thus, speaks of the "*koinonia* of the Spirit" as a sharing in the reciprocal relationship which exists in the body of Christ between Christians and Christ and between Christians and the Holy Spirit. This means that the reality of the Spirit makes the common life in the body of Christ alive and it creates a "tension" in the struggle of the community for the evolution of "mature manhood" (Eph. 4:13). The metaphor "the body of Christ"¹⁹ is at the

¹⁷ *The Faith of the Christian Church*, 1954.

¹⁸ See L. S. Thornton, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ*, 1950, pp. 66-95.

¹⁹ For a discussion of the phrase "the body of Christ," see Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, 1961², pp. 254-56. See also J. A. T. Robinson, *The Body*, 1952, pp. 55-58. Hans Conzelmann, *An Outline of the Theology of the New Testament*, pp. 260-65. Speaking about "unity and multiplicity" in the New Testament doctrine of the Church, Ernst Käsemann writes: "The rule of Christ is the realm in which God shatters all carefully cultivated piety and acts as the one who raises the dead and as creator *ex nihilo*. It is by these very means that he makes us the instruments of grace in Christian brotherhood, common humanity and world-wide mission. The Church as the Body of Christ is the sphere of operation of this grace, extending as it does throughout all space and time and thus, out of its rich store of *charismata*, leaving no time and no place without its promise and without its challenge": *New Testament Questions of Today*, 1969, p. 254.

heart of Paul's concept of the Church because it expresses the "unity" and "mission" of the Church.

Body of Christ

Much has been written on the origin²⁰ of Paul's concept of the Church as the "body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27). We maintain that Paul took the idea from sacramental theology.²¹ Having referred to the participation of the community in the Eucharist of the Lord (1 Cor. 10:16, 17; 11:23-32), Paul speaks about the Church as the "body of Christ" (12:27). Paul's mind moves within the framework of an authentic community in which the link between worship and mission is recognized. For Paul, the concept is not a static one. The term *soma* refers to the "whole Christ" whose mission is carried out by the community in word and deed. In the body of Christ, all worldly distinctions are done away (1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27f.; Col. 3:11). This is a divine possibility and is a gift from God. This gift is always under pressure from hostile powers like sin, law and death. The unity given in the "body of Christ" forms the basis of appeal for acting with "full accord" (Phil. 2:2). Thus the sacramental significance of common life is expressed in the phrase "body of Christ." This leads us to look at the cosmic significance of the Church.

The Cosmic Significance of the Church

The Church has cosmic significance because of its relationship with Christ. To quote Col. 1:18:

He is the head (*kephale*) of the body, the church; he is the beginning (*arche*), the first-born from the dead (*prototokos ek ton nekron*), that in everything he might be pre-eminent.

By virtue of Christ's resurrection, Christ is thought of as the "originating power" (Lightfoot) with regard to the Church.²² The three predicates (v. 18) *kephale*, *arche* and *prototokos* have cosmic significance. When they are applied to Christ in respect of his relation to the Church—a community constituted through the "Risen-Christ-in-Power"—the Church also has "cosmic significance as the nucleus of a redeemed universe."²³ The risen and exalted Christ becomes the centre of the redeemed humanity and he shares his "life-giving Spirit" not only with the Church, but also with the whole universe (cf. Phil. 2:11). Paul thus gives expression to the christological

²⁰ Cf. Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament*, p. 255.

²¹ Cf. A. E. J. Rawlinson, "Corpus Christi," *Mysterium Christi*, eds. G. K. A. Bell and A. Deissmann, 1930, p. 228.

²² D. M. Stanley, *Christ's Resurrection in Pauline Soteriology*, 1961, p. 205.

²³ *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. XI, p. 169.

significance of Christ as the "representative man" (1 Cor. 15:45). Thus Christ's role is vitally linked up with the finality of the divine plan of salvation.²⁴ In Ephesians the above idea finds a new significance. As C. H. Dodd remarks: "The theme of Ephesians is the glory of the Church as the society which embodies in history the eternal purpose of God revealed in Christ."²⁵ God's eternal purpose consists in subduing all opposing powers, human and superhuman, to His will, to create a great unity. God's purpose is embodied in Christ's person and work which is concerned with the reconciliation of all created things. The glory of the Church is to be revealed to the world through its reconciling mission. This ministry must go on till all are reconciled to God.

Summary

Paul's concept of the Church is dynamic in its very nature and is related to christology, pneumatology and to missiology. The nature and mission of the Church remain God-given. For Paul "the real Church is first and foremost . . . an historical event." Paul's use of the term *ekklesia* confirms this view. The Church as a "mobile unit" of God's Kingdom on earth is well stated in the images. The phrase "Church of God" signifies the self-understanding of the Church as a missionary community. "The Church is part of created humanity *and* called, as the chosen people, to keep the praise of God going in the world. It bears the marks of sinful humanity *and* proclaims and represents Christ as the suffering and triumphant servant, thus reminding the world of the renewal and fulfilment which God will grant."²⁶ The relation between the Kingdom and the Church makes it clear that the Church has only a provisional role to play in the economy of salvation. The provisional role is well rooted in the christological and pneumatological perspectives and challenges the community of believers with new forms of ministry in every age. The missiological significance of the Church bears witness to the relation between "unity and mission" in Paul's overall plan of salvation. The ultimate plan of God is to unite all things in Christ. The Church is an instrument for God to achieve His eternal will. Thus the cosmic significance of the Church has two dimensions of missionary purpose: as the sign of God's purpose *in* history and as the unifier of God's ultimate will *for* all humanity. The creative tension between the two roles makes the Church a bearer of the triumphant grace of God in and beyond history.

²⁴ In Col. 1:16-18, the work of our Lord "in creation" and his work "for the Church" are spoken of together.

²⁵ *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, p. 1222.

²⁶ Cited from the Report of a consultation held in Geneva, December, 1976.