

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Theological Students Fellowship* (TSF) *Bulletin* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_tsfbulletin_01.php

title. As a result Farmer's case is made even more untenable.

20. Students of Pauline Christology and ecclesiology have to tease out the apostle's meaning when they confront some problem texts. The merit of R. Yates' extended note on one such text ('A Re-examination of Ephesians 1: 23', *ExpT* 83. 5, pp. 146-151) is that he covers and considers all the viable possibilities before stating his verdict. Thus the reader has a conspectus of the field before him, before weighing the plausibility of the author's preference. That preference is for J. Armitage Robinson's rendering, 'the body of Christ, the fulness of Him who all in all is being fulfilled', but with modifications taken from the doctrine of inclusive personality and Paul's teaching on the corporate nature of Christ's body and of reconciliation. This leads him to the expanded paraphrase: 'Christ is the head of the Body, the fulness (that which completes) of him (Christ) who all

in all (completely) is being fulfilled (*i.e.* made complete as men and women are being reconciled to God through Christ's work, and incorporated into him through his Body, the Church'). This is suggestive, but we have reserve about the final phrases and a suspicion that the *auctor ad Ephesios* (given a polemical situation which occasioned his publication) could hardly envisage the notion of an incomplete Christ.

Abbreviations

| | |
|-------------|---|
| <i>BJRL</i> | <i>Bulletin of the John Rylands Library</i> |
| <i>CBQ</i> | <i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i> |
| <i>ExpT</i> | <i>The Expository Times</i> |
| <i>JBL</i> | <i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i> |
| <i>NTS</i> | <i>New Testament Studies</i> |
| <i>NovT</i> | <i>Novum Testamentum</i> |
| <i>SJT</i> | <i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i> |
| <i>TB</i> | <i>Tyndale Bulletin</i> |

Unity and Schism: Determinative Biblical Principles 1

A Skevington Wood

The subject of unity and schism in the church has seemed likely at times to cause schism among evangelicals! Dr Wood has his own views on the subject, which may not necessarily be shared by all our readers, but in the present article his aim is to set forth the biblical principles regarding the doctrine of the church which should form the basis for our thinking about the problem in the contemporary church. This article will appear in two parts. Dr Wood has previously contributed 'Evangelicalism: A Historical Perspective' to this Bulletin (60, Summer 1971, pp. 11-20).

In a reference which appears to be autobiographical, Dr Frederic Greeves recollects the experience of a young theological student in the 1920s.¹ He noted and never forgot a lecturer's comment that the whole of the Bible was about two subjects — God and the church. At that time such an assertion sounded almost incongruous. It seemed altogether odd to speak of the church in connection with the Old Testament, and whereas it was recognized that the New Testament contained relevant material, it was felt nevertheless that its essential message concerned the kingdom rather than the church.

That such ideas nowadays seem so remote is an

indication of how much water has flowed under the theological bridge in the last fifty years. We are no longer surprised to be told that the Bible is a book about God and the church. We trace the story of God's dealings with his people from the Old Testament to the New and recognize the continuity between the two dispensations. We have no difficulty in realizing that the church is one of the major themes of Scripture.

We may go further, however. Not only is the doctrine of the church seen to be central in Scripture. It is also integrally related to the gospel itself. We are accustomed to the conception that the church is the guardian and exponent of the gospel. But a deeper biblical understanding has enabled us to accept the church as the creation of the gospel and, even more daringly, in a sense itself part of the gospel. It was through the atoning death of Christ on the cross, so Paul reminds the Ephesians, that Jew and Gentile were reconciled to God in one body — that is the church — thus bringing the age-old hostility to an end. To the world of the New Testament, the very existence of the church proclaimed the good news of reconciliation in Christ.

Our Lord himself had spoken of his death as the power which would bring the church into being. The intercessory prayer of John 17 makes it clear that the purpose of the cross in one of its aspects was to inaugurate the church. The book of the Revelation also

¹ Dow Kirkpatrick (ed.), *The Doctrine of the Church* (Epworth Press, London, 1964), p. 184.

gives prominence to the fact that Christ died in order to create one church 'from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation' (Rev. 5: 9). Samuel John Stone has expressed this biblical insight in familiar lines.

'The Church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ, her Lord;
She is His new creation
By water and the Word:
From heaven He came and sought her
To be His holy Bride,
With His own blood He bought her,
And for her life He died.'

Today we are realizing afresh the theological implications of this relationship between the church and the gospel. In the New Testament, the setting of ecclesiology is evangelical and the context of salvation is corporate. We must therefore beware of so individualizing the gospel that it is divorced from the ongoing Christian community, and of so institutionalizing the church that it is isolated from its proper habitat in the redemptive mission of our Lord.

Our renewed understanding of biblical teaching about the church has arisen primarily from linguistic research. We must therefore indicate some of the results of such enquiries into the meaning of the word *ekklēsia* before we proceed to consider four relevant issues, namely, unity, continuity, schism and heresy.

We would hardly think of starting a study in the New Testament doctrine of the church by referring to Acts 19 and its report on Paul's mission at Ephesus. The church does not appear to be mentioned as such. But this affords a useful starting-point, since here we meet the term *ekklēsia* in its natural form, so to speak. It occurs in its basic non-religious signification. It is found three times in Acts 19 — in verses 32, 39 and 41. It describes the crowd who gathered in the theatre after Demetrius the silversmith had roused his fellow-craftsmen and warned them that their livelihood was endangered by the Christian missionaries. Luke may perhaps have had his tongue in his cheek when he called this confused rabble an *ekklēsia*. Certainly the Town Clerk did not regard it as an authentic assembly. In terms of local government, the *ekklēsia* was simply the electorate of a Greek city-state officially summoned in its legislative capacity. It represented democracy in action.

The Ephesian assembly was obviously unauthorized on this occasion. It had not been called out: it had called itself out, and hence lacked any real authority. The town clerk's advice to the crowd was that the citizens should resort to the assizes, but if they were still not satisfied the matter could be 'settled in the regular assembly' (v. 39). This was the genuine civic *ekklēsia* which according to John Chrysostom met three times a month.

We must not lay too much stress, as Deissmann did, on the *ek* in *ekklēsia*. The citizens were not called out other than in the sense that they were notified by

the herald as he went from street to street. The *ekklēsia* was not a select group of the élite called out from amongst the rest. It was a public assembly which included every citizen. As Bishop Stephen Neill points out, 'the doctrine that the church is "the called out body" is, of course, perfectly correct; but it cannot be based on what turns out to be a philological misunderstanding'.²

The verb *ekkaleō*, from which *ekklēsia* is derived, involves an element of purposiveness. It is not just a matter of calling out, but calling out with a view. The gathering in itself tells us nothing. It is why men are gathered that matters. When applied to the people of God, it is the fact that they belong to him and have been convened by him to fulfil his plan that is determinative.

Ekklēsia is used in the Septuagint to render the Hebrew *qahal* and in particular *qahal Yahweh*, the assembly of God's people. *Qahal* is the company brought together by the call of a voice (*qōl*). In itself it carries no religious overtones. It gains its significance theologically only from its association with God himself. We must, however, beware of oversimplification in the matter of vocabulary. The translators of the LXX did not invariably render *qahal* as *ekklēsia*. On occasion they used *sunagōgē*. Moreover, the other Hebrew word for meeting (*'edah*), normally translated as *sunagōgē*, is also translated sometimes as *ekklēsia*. So there is no rigid consistency of usage and too much must not be made of the equation *qahal* = *ekklēsia*.

However, it is clear that the primitive church, taught by Jesus himself (assuming the genuineness of Mt. 16: 18 and 18: 17), opted for *ekklēsia* rather than *sunagōgē* as the name of their fellowship. K. L. Schmidt believes that the usage arose amongst Greek-speaking Jewish Christians and their Gentile adherents, who formed congregations resembling the Hellenistic synagogues before Paul's time.³ 'As Jews, these Hellenistic Christians were brought up on the LXX. They no longer called themselves *sunagōgē*, but *ekklēsia*. As Christians, they seized upon the expression which was falling into disuse among the Jews, who were tending more and more to depart from the LXX usage and confine *sunagōgē* to its local meaning.'⁴

Bishop Neill adds a human touch to the learned discussion about the original employment of *ekklēsia* by citing the distinction in his boyhood between 'church' and 'chapel'.⁵ 'Church' meant Anglican and 'chapel' meant Non-conformist. Those who were not 'church' were willy nilly 'chapel'. 'Chapel' was a designation used to distinguish from 'church'. Something like that happened in the first century. *Sunagōgē* was the term the Jews preferred

² Stephen Neill, 'The Church: An Ecumenical Perspective', *Interpretation* XIX (1965), p. 132.

³ Karl Ludwig Schmidt, *The Church* (ET A. and C. Black, London, 1950), p. 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Neill, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

and if they insisted on it, then it was inevitable that *ekklēsia* should be used by Christians. 'This is exactly the kind of thing that happens with language,' adds Neill: 'after all, the name Christians by which we are known had its origins in the rough jests of the lower section of the population of Antioch.'⁶ We must not forget, of course, that the believers had the sanction of Jesus himself for the use of *ekklēsia*. Professor George Johnston has drawn attention to the fact that a single word in Aramaic lies behind both sets of expression in Hebrew and Greek (*i.e.* *Qahal* — *ekklēsia*; 'edah — *sunagōgē*).⁷ *Kenishta* (or *K'nushta*) is the congregation of God. It may be that here is the link between the sayings of Jesus which refer to the *ekklēsia* and the adoption of the designation by the primitive Christian community. Johnston traces the probable sequence like this. (1) The disciples of the risen Christ believed themselves to be the true people of God — the Messianic congregation. (We should want to insert here that they came to this conviction on the basis of our Lord's own teaching.) This could be expressed by the Aramaic term *Kenishta*. But in Greek (apart from *sunagōgē*, which was now virtually monopolized by the Jews), *ekklēsia* was the only word capable of receiving the content of the Christian claim. (2) It was not so distinctively Jewish as to be unsuitable for a society which quickly accepted Gentiles into membership on the profession of their faith in Christ as Lord. (3) In particular, *ekklēsia* had Scriptural authority and was familiar to all.⁸

Ekklēsia is a word which contained within itself the elements both of continuity and universality which were to figure so prominently in the developed New Testament doctrine of the church. 'As employed by Christianity the word *ekklēsia* embodied a new conception for which the world was ready,' declared Bishop Headlam, 'which was the spiritual fulfilment of principles innate in Judaism, and awaiting development; which only came into being in the new life and revelation through Jesus Christ.'⁹

Before we turn to the specific theme of our enquiry — unity and schism — it may be useful to distinguish three ways in which the term *ekklēsia* is employed in the New Testament.¹⁰ Failure to identify these variations often leads to confusion.

1. Sometimes *ekklēsia* refers to the *local church*. Indeed this is much the commonest meaning. The *ekklēsia* is the company of Christians in any one place. The line of demarcation is purely geographical. Paul's letters are invariably addressed to the collective body of Christians in a given locality — Thessa-

lonica, Corinth, Colossae, Philippi, Rome. The members of these local societies are variously denominated as 'the saints' (Col 1: 2; Eph 1: 1); those who are 'called to be saints' (1 Cor. 1: 2; Rom. 1: 7); those who are 'sanctified in Christ Jesus' (1 Cor. 1: 2); 'God's beloved' (Rom. 1: 7); or the 'faithful brethren' (Col. 1: 2). The local church in the New Testament is a free, autonomous group. Each body is a unit, but its unity is not secured by an office. The church is constituted by the Spirit in the fulfilment of ministries and the exercise of gifts. The local church in the epistles is in line with what we read of it in Acts. There it is 'all who believed' (Acts 2: 44); 'the company of those who believed' (Acts 4: 32; cf. 19: 18); or 'the body of the disciples' (Acts 6: 2).

2. Sometimes *ekklēsia* refers to the *universal church*. The church is initially a local group. But each local group is aware of its relationship to other local groups arising from a prior relationship to Christ who is the one Head of the whole body. We can trace this development within the New Testament period. At first the church in Jerusalem stood alone. It represented 'the whole church' (Acts 5: 11). Even after the dispersion precipitated by persecution, the scattered Jerusalem community was still regarded as 'the church' (Acts 8: 1, 3). But once the Gentile church appeared, any attempt to envisage the entire body of Christians as simply an extension of the Jerusalem community was set aside and the universal church was seen to include both Jews and non-Jews in its reconciling fellowship. It is in this sense that Paul speaks in Ephesians about the church which is Christ's body, 'the fulness of him who fills all in all' (Eph. 1: 23; cf. Col. 1: 18). It is this universal church which manifests God's now open secret of reconciliation so that through it his manifold wisdom may be made known (Eph. 3: 10). A totally new social category has emerged: the world is no longer divided ambivalently into Jews and Gentiles: the church of God is the third and reconciling force (1 Cor. 10: 32). Each local church is seen as a microcosm of the universal church; or to put it the other way round, the universal church finds its local manifestation in each individual *ekklēsia*.

3. Sometimes *ekklēsia* refers to the *ideal church*. This is a characteristic of the later epistles. It is, as Principal A. M. Fairbairn explained, 'the symbol of the completed work of Christ'.¹¹ This ideal church is not yet realized, yet it is constantly on the way to being realized. She is the bride of Christ whom he loved and for whom he gave himself up, 'that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that the church might be presented before him in splendour without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish' (Eph. 5: 26, 27). This is what the church is always on the way to becoming and what it will be at the end, when the number of the elect is made up and the bridegroom appears to

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ George Johnston, *The Doctrine of the Church in the New Testament* (Cambridge University Press, 1943), p. 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

⁹ Arthur Cayley Headlam, *The Doctrine of the Church and Christian Reunion* (Murray, London, 1920), p. 16.

¹⁰ Andrew Martin Fairbairn, *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology*³ (Hodder and Stoughton, London 1893), pp. 520-527.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

claim his bride. This eschatological perspective of the ideal church is designed to alleviate our frustration with the actual church in every preceding age. Like the Christian, the church is always on pilgrimage, in the way, in the process of being sanctified, but it has never 'arrived', it is never fully perfect until the parousia.

Now let us look at the four issues which are our more immediate concern in this paper — unity, continuity, schism and heresy. These are highly relevant topics at the moment as we face the twentieth-century situation.

Unity

In the New Testament there is only one church. It is the church of God. It is the church founded by Christ and on Christ. It is the church which is his Body and of which he is the Head. It is the one body filled with the Holy Spirit into which all Christians are baptized and incorporated.

The unity of the church is an expression of and a witness to the oneness of God himself. That is the astonishing implication of our Lord's high priestly prayer in John 17. 'That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me . . . that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me' (Jn. 17: 21-23). That is why in Ephesians 4 Paul climaxes his catalogue of unities with 'one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all' (Eph. 4: 6). 'The unity of the Church, on which our faith and hope rest,' declared Archbishop William Temple at the Edinburgh Faith and Order Conference in 1937, 'is grounded in the unity of God and the uniqueness of His redeeming act in Jesus Christ. The "one body and one spirit" correspond to the "one God and Father of all"'. The unity of the Church of God is a perpetual fact; our task is not to create it but to exhibit it.¹²

The unity of the church in the New Testament is essentially a oneness in Christ. He is its focus. Believers are 'all one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3: 28). There can ultimately be no other unity than unity in Christ. It is he who makes Christians one, since they are already one in him. 'If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another' (1 Jn. 1: 7). It is impossible to be in communion with Christ and out of communion with any other believer. To be in fellowship with Christ demands that we should be in fellowship with one another.

Dr Edwyn Bevan has illustrated this in a striking fashion. He asked his readers to imagine the spiritual

connection between the risen Christ and the members of his body as seen by a spectator looking on from the unseen world.¹³ Such a spectator would see as it were invisible filaments going out from the person of Christ in heaven to countless believers here on earth. Not all men and women would be so connected to Christ, but only those into whom his new life has come. That represents the Christians' oneness with Christ. But, Dr Bevan added, Christ and all these members attached to him form one single spiritual organism throughout the world and including the unseen beyond. The common connection with Christ he claimed, constitutes an extraordinary fellowship between one member of the body and another. This is how the New Testament conceives the unity of the church. It is a consequence of our mutual communion with Christ.

In Ephesians 4: 4-6 'one Lord' is central. The Christian life is a life in Christ and Christian unity is unity in Christ. To recognize the Lordship of Christ is to recognize the oneness of Christians. To fall out of fellowship with another believer is to deny the Lordship of Christ. Unity and the expression of unity is as fundamental as that. There is only one Christ and there can only be one body of Christ. 'There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved' (Acts 4: 12). In its unity the church testifies that Christ is the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2: 5) who offered himself once for all (Heb. 7: 27). His is the one name above every other and those who name that one name must themselves be one (Phil. 2: 9).

The oneness of God, the uniqueness of Christ, and the unity of Christians are all bound up together. So complete is this integration that we should altogether fail to grasp what Paul meant in Ephesians 4 if we were to think that he was merely listing a series of separate items which could readily exist apart from each other. On the contrary, he is emphasizing that all these unities are part of a single unity — the unity of Christ and his church. The one body, the one Spirit, the one hope, the one Lord, the one faith, the one baptism, the one God — all are aspects of the same oneness. The one church is animated by the one Holy Spirit, looks to the one hope of the Lord's return to sum up everything in himself, acknowledges one Lord and Master as Saviour and Head, confesses one faith as revealed in the Scriptures, receives by one sacrament of the new covenant those who now belong to its family, and worships one God as the final and supreme unity.

The clear implications of this teaching about the church's unity are spelt out elsewhere in the New Testament. Since there is only one Christ, there can only be one body of Christ (1 Cor. 12: 12). Since all were made to drink of the one Spirit who baptizes

¹² Leonard Hodgson (ed.), *The Second World Conference on Faith and Order, Edinburgh, 1937* (SCM Press, London, 1937), p. 15.

¹³ Walter Robert Matthews (ed.), *The Christian Faith: Essays in Explanation and Defence* (Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1936), pp. 244-245.

into the one body, that body cannot be divided (1 Cor. 12: 13; cf. 1 Cor. 1: 13). There is one Christ, not a number of Christs. There is one body, not a number of bodies. There is one church, not a number of churches. It is noticeable that the New Testament only uses *ekklēsia* in the plural to denote a group of local churches in a particular region, like Judaea (1 Thes. 2: 14; Gal. 1: 22), Galatia (1 Cor. 16: 1; Gal. 1: 2), Macedonia (2 Cor. 8: 1), or proconsular Asia (1 Cor. 16: 19; Rev. 1: 4); or the totality of all individual *ekklēsiai* regarded together as the universal church (1 Cor. 7: 17; 14: 33; 2 Cor. 8: 18, 24; 11: 28; 2 Thes. 1: 4). There are many local churches but only one church. The New Testament knows nothing of a regional or a denominational group of *ekklēsiai* which could be called a church. The only terms the New Testament could appropriately apply would be schisms and heresies. Dean Richardson of York rather sardonically comments that if we used words in their biblical meaning only, we would have to speak not of the World Council of Churches but of the World Council of Schisms and Heresies.¹⁴

The unity of the church in the New Testament, then, is not mathematical. The universal church is not merely the sum of the local congregations nor is it a circle composed of separate segments suitably placed in position. The one church is not created by adding together the individual *ekklēsiai* nor by bringing together various distinct groupings into a federation. Any idea of such federal union is altogether foreign to the New Testament. The unity of the church is organic and not contrived. It arises directly from the union of each Christian with Christ, as we have already seen. Christ is present even where only two or three are met in his name (Mt. 18: 20) and it is this that constitutes the church and ensures its unity. As Paul concedes when writing to the Ephesians, this union between Christ and his church is a profound mystery (Eph. 5: 32), of which marriage is a symbol. It is not to be supposed, however, that the New Testament regards the unity of the church as purely spiritual and invisible. There is no warrant in Scripture for what Richardson calls a kind of Christian Science view of the wounds in the body of Christ, treating them (unlike Paul) as if they were only figments of the imagination.¹⁵ Unity if real will be seen and if seen will be real.

Continuity

According to Professor W. M. Horton, 'an Old Testament theology of Israel is indispensable to a New Testament theology of the Church.'¹⁶ One of the most valuable gains of recent biblical scholarship has been a new appreciation of the unity of Scripture. It is no

longer possible to visualize a great gulf between the Old Testament and the New. The story of God's dealings with his people is a serial. It is carried over from one dispensation to another.

It is in the light of this insight that we are compelled to regard the church not only as a new creation in Christ but also as in another sense the continuation of the divine community to which the Old Testament bears witness. The disciples of Jesus were called to form the nucleus of the new Israel. It was indeed new — new enough to supersede the old, new enough to inaugurate a new age. But the church was the new *Israel* — claiming to fulfil the prophetic Scriptures and to be the true Israel in its fullest and most authentic expression. It is no accident that the apostles were twelve in number. They represented the inner circle of the newly constituted twelve tribes. As Professor John W. Bowman argued in his book on *The Intention of Jesus*, it appears likely that the other disciples of Jesus were also organized on a twelvefold plan.¹⁷ The members of the original Jerusalem congregation totalled 'about a hundred and twenty' (Acts 1: 15) — twelve times the minimum number needed to form a Jewish synagogue.

In what respects was the mother church at Jerusalem conscious of its continuity with the Jewish past? Certainly it saw itself inheriting the promises of God made to Abraham and the commission laid on the chosen people to be his witnesses to the nations of the world. This is plainly evidenced in Peter's sermons as recorded in Acts. It accepted the definitive insistence of Jesus that he had come not to demolish the law and the prophets but to fulfil all that they implied (Mt. 5: 17). It did not abandon Jewish worship but participated in it. We are told that after Pentecost the disciples daily attended the temple together (Acts 2: 46). Peter and John, the leaders of the Twelve, are seen at the opening of Acts 3 'going up to the temple at the hour of prayer — the ninth hour' (Acts 3: 1). Three o'clock was the time of the evening oblation.

On the other hand, of course, the infant church in Jerusalem was aware of its distinctness. It was a new community, constituted by the death, resurrection and glorification of Christ and by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The factors of novelty far outweighed any sense of continuity with the past. And yet the newness of the church was not a newness which broke away from history. It was a newness which raced ahead along the line already suggested by the prophets. It was, moreover, not a newness which the old Israel could never have known. It was a newness which it deliberately rejected. That was why the Jews put Jesus to death. They refused to accept his new conception of what God's people should be. The ultimate reason for the persecution of the primitive church was that it embodied what Israel should have been but failed to be. The most enlightened Jews

¹⁴ Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (SCM Press, London, 1958), p. 286.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁶ Walter Marshall Horton, 'The Christian Community: Its Lord and Its Fellowship', *Interpretation* IV (1950), p. 387.

¹⁷ John Wick Bowman, *The Intention of Jesus* (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1943), p. 186.

realized this themselves and became Christians accordingly.

This consciousness of continuity on the part of the first church stems directly from the teaching of Jesus himself. It was he who had encouraged his disciples to see themselves as the saving remnant of a new Israel. It is true that our Lord never actually spelled this out in so many words. But, as Dr Newton Flew insisted, the whole of his ministry bears out this contention. 'In one sense, for Him, as for all the New Testament writers, the Church was already in existence before He came. The Jewish Church was the people of God. His main mission was to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But His actions indicate His conviction that the old Israel was to be purged and reconstituted in view of the nearness of the Kingdom of God.'¹⁸

The last age had now begun with the coming of Christ. He was the Messiah who would usher in the kingdom. It was he who would transform and renew Israel. Those who saw him for what he was would constitute the remnant out of which the new Israel was to grow. As Gloege has claimed, 'every word and action of Jesus as Christ indicated Him openly before His contemporaries as the founder of the new people of God, as the gatherer of His Church'.¹⁹ The process begins with the baptism of our Lord and can be traced through the call of the Twelve and the confession at Caesarea Philippi to the last supper and the crucifixion.

During the earthly ministry of Jesus the founding of the church as the new Israel still lay in the future. As Johnston puts it, the little flock of Luke 12: 32 represents 'the Messianic community prefigured not fulfilled'.²⁰ Without the cross and resurrection there can be no church. It is the risen Lord who gathers the redeemed into the new community. It is significant that *ekklesia* is only used after Pentecost, other than proleptically in Matthew 16: 18. In the memorable definition of John Oman, 'the Church is the fellowship of the glorified Christ'.²¹

Here then is the origin of the new Israel. Although the precise phrase does not occur in the New Testament, the concept is sufficiently well established. In concluding his letter to the Galatians Paul invokes peace and mercy 'upon the Israel of God' (Gal. 6: 16). In 3: 7 he has argued that 'it is men of faith who are the sons of Abraham' (cf. v. 9); in verse 29 he declares: 'And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.' 'For we are the true circumcision,' he tells the Christians in Philippi, 'who worship God in spirit, and glory in Christ Jesus, and put no confidence in

the flesh' (Phil. 3: 3). There are numerous metaphors for the church in the New Testament — the body, the bride, the building — but this is not one of them. Israel is used quite factually. The church is indeed the new people of God.

The Roman authorities mistook the church for a Jewish sect. The Jews at first did the same (Acts 24: 5, 14; 28: 22). 'But that was not the view of the original disciples,' affirmed Dr Newton Flew. 'A sect is a party or school within Israel. But the disciples were Israel. They were the Church or People of God. They did not separate from Israel. They could not. It was the rebellious sons of Israel who forfeited their covenant by rejecting Christ.'²² Even when the church was finally driven out of the synagogue and compelled to lead a separate existence, its spokesmen still reaffirmed the claim to be the true people of God. When eventually Jews and Gentiles were brought together to form one new man in the body of Christ (Eph. 2: 15) the mission of Israel to the nations, foreshadowed by the prophets of universal grace, was seen to be astonishingly realized. The attitude of the first Christians to the religious community to which they were attached was to colour the reaction of the church to any hint of separation on the part of malcontents and to divisive elements which threatened the unity of the Spirit.

We have mentioned the New Testament metaphors which refer to the church of Christ. The fact that the church is literally the new Israel is confirmed by these symbolical descriptions. Most of them have an Old Testament background and were originally applied to God's people under the former dispensation. Nothing more convincingly demonstrates the continuity between the new Israel and the old than this. Consider some of the designations. The first is quite literal, like the new Israel itself. The church is the people of God — a people for his possession (1 Pet. 2: 9). 'I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people' (Lev. 26: 12). That divine assurance was basic to Israel's self-understanding and the Old Testament writers repeatedly echoed its language (cf. Is. 43: 21; Ezk. 37: 27; Ho. 2: 23; Zc. 8: 8). Numerous collateral references fall within this general classification. The church is the church of the new covenant (Gal. 4: 24; Heb. 8: 6; cf. Heb. 10: 16). It is the righteous remnant (Rom. 11: 5). It is a chosen race, a holy nation, a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2: 9).

The church is depicted as the flock. Jesus the Good Shepherd saw his followers as his sheep (Jn. 10: 11-18). They represented the little flock to whom the Father in his good pleasure would make over the kingdom (Lk. 12: 32). Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to keep watch over all the flock (Acts 20: 28) and Peter likewise urged the elders of the dispersion to tend the flock of God and to set an example (1 Pet. 5: 2, 3). In the Old Testament the Lord is revealed as a Shepherd (Ps. 23: 1; 80: 1; Ezk. 34: 12),

¹⁸ Robert Newton Flew, *Jesus and His Church: A Study of the Idea of the Ecclesia in the New Testament* (Epworth Press, London, 1938), p. 50.

¹⁹ Gerhard Gloege, *Reich Gottes und Kirche im Neuen Testament* (Gütersloh, 1929), p. 226.

²⁰ Johnston, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

²¹ John Wood Oman, *The Church and the Divine Order* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1911), p. 11.

²² Flew, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

and Israel is his flock (Ps. 77: 20; Je. 23: 3; Ezk. 34: 17).

The church is described as God's field (1 Cor. 3: 9). From an early date Israel was regarded as the planting of God. Isaiah speaks of the vineyard of the Lord of hosts which is the house of Israel (Is. 5: 7; cf. 27: 2). The Psalmist recalls how God brought a vine out of Egypt and planted it in the promised land so that it took deep root and flourished (Ps. 80: 8, 9). Jesus saw himself as the real vine and his disciples as the branches (Jn. 15: 1). What the old Israel was meant to be but fell short of was realized in the church.

The church is the bride of Christ (Eph. 4: 25-29; Rev. 21: 2, 9; 22: 17). In the Old Testament Israel is the spouse of Yahweh, often faithless but still his own (Ezk. 16). 'For your Maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name' (Is. 54: 5). Nowhere is the love of God for his fickle bride more movingly portrayed than in the prophecy of Hosea, seen as it is through the lens of the prophet's own tragic experience.

So we might go on, for our survey has not been exhaustive. But enough instances have been quoted to leave the question of continuity beyond the reach of doubt. The church is clearly the new Israel. It carries on the purpose of God for his people to which the Old Testament bears witness. Having said this — for we need reminding of it — we must immediately add that further metaphors are employed to describe the church which do not occur in the Old Testament. The church is a new creation. And even the old symbols are given a fresh interpretation so

that we are not allowed to think of the church simply as the old Israel touched up. When the New Testament applies the former names to the church it does so by way of fulfilment and sometimes of contrast and transposition. The church is the vine no longer wild but fruitful (Je. 2: 21; Jn. 15: 1-8). The church is the flock not to be collected and then dispersed (Je. 23: 3; Zc. 13: 7) but to belong to the Shepherd for ever (Jn. 10: 27-29). The church is the faithful bride, no longer the adulterous spouse (Je. 2, 3; Ezk. 16). The church is the new temple, not made with hands but the body of Christ himself (Mk. 14: 58; Jn. 2: 21, 22; 2 Cor. 6: 16; Eph. 2: 21).

This dual strain of continuity and yet of transformation supplies the key to the somewhat enigmatic relationship between the church of Christ and the people of Israel. The practical bearing of this factor on the issues confronting us in the twentieth century is that, however pressing may be the need for transformation within the church itself today, it must never lead to such a break with the past as would obscure the divinely ordered continuity of God's people. That is why Martin Luther was careful to insist that the Protestants (or Evangelicals as he called them) were not trying to conjure up some altogether novel organization, but regarded themselves as 'the true old Church, one body with the entire holy Christian Church, and one community of Saints'.²³

²³ J. F. K. Knaake et al. (eds.), *D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883 -), Bd. 51, p. 487.

The Possibility of a Biblical Ethic

Oliver M T O'Donovan

Mr O'Donovan, a recently appointed tutor at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, has already given us a sample of his scholarship in these pages with a carefully argued discussion of 'Style and Genre in Ephesians' (TSF Bulletin 64, Autumn 1972, pp. 12-16). But his main interests are theological and philosophical; in the present article, to which he promises a sequel sub conditione Jacobaea, he takes up a subject of considerable practical importance.

Says St Augustine, 'The man who fears God seeks with diligence his will in the Holy Scriptures.' I intend to support this proposal against the widespread belief that it is indefensible.¹

¹ The positions discussed in this paper are to be found

expressed in the following books and articles: C. F. D. Moule, 'The New Testament and Moral Decisions', *Expository Times* (1963), pp. 370-373; Hugh Montefiore, 'Jesus on Divorce and Remarriage', J. W. Bowker, 'The Correlation of Theological and Empirical Meaning', both appendices to *Marriage, Divorce and the Church* (SPCK, 1971), pp. 79-112; J. L. Houlden, *Ethics and the New Testament* (Penguin, 1973), especially pp. 115-125; Barnabas Lindars, 'The Bible and Christian Ethics', *Theology* (1973), pp. 180-189. A more balanced view is found in Edward LeRoy Long Jr., *A Survey of Christian Ethics* (OUP, 1967), pp. 73-88. Many writers on Christian ethics pass the subject by in silence, but Otto Piper's brief discussion seems to have in mind some such programme as is put forward here, *Christian Ethics* (Nelson, 1970), pp. 123-125.

I have been considerably assisted in clarifying my views by discussions with the Rev. Keith Ward, who is not responsible for any of the opinions here expressed.