The Origin and Nature of the Church

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Introduction

The church is a paradox. It appears enfeebled and defective, yet God works in it.¹ On one hand the church in all ages has been an arena where countless persons have been saved and transformed, where dedicated men and women have devoted their lives to unselfish service to God and humanity, and where the highest ideals of human history have been enshrined and cherished. On the other hand the church in every age has been the scene of obscene cruelty and viciousness, of self-serving power struggles and corruption, of hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness.² As the bride of Christ³ the church at times has been an unfaithful wife.

The reason for this paradox, of course, is that the church has both a divine and human aspect: It was raised up by God, but it consists of human beings. Therefore, the performance of the church can be both disappointing and inspiring, just like the performance of individual Christians—like the one who is writing or reading this chapter!

One way to understand any institution, such as the church, is to go back to its origins in an attempt to discover the original intention for it. The church began in Bible times, so our principle source will be the Bible,⁴ to which we will need to address a number of questions. How was the church, as founded

² Even the Apostolic Age cannot be exempted from this indictment, as any open-eyed reading of Paul's Corinthian correspondence will confirm. Cf. Ellen White, The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan (Mountain View, CA, 1888, rev. ed. 1911), 43: "Even in her best estate the church was not composed wholly of the true, pure, and sincere."
⁴ Unless otherwise noted, the English translation cited will be the Revised Standard Version.
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in the NT age, related to God’s people in the OT, to Judaism, and to the kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed? How did the church begin, and what were its antecedents? How was it constituted, and who belonged to it? What was its nature and self-understanding?

God’s People in the Old Testament

Almost from the beginning of mankind God has successively called out people from the disobedient, larger masses of humanity: Seth, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Out of Egypt He called Israel, His “son” (Hos 11:1), and He made a special covenant with them.

The people of Israel fell into apostasy and broke the covenant. Even so, God counted them as His people, for the sake of the promises He had made to their ancestors. But they split into two kingdoms, of which the northern one fell to the Assyrians and virtually disappeared, and most of the people in the southern one eventually went into Babylonian captivity. Of these a remnant returned to the land of Israel.

There were always faithful believers, and their prophets foretold a time when

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5 In connection with this question it is necessary to explain clearly how the word “church” is used in this article, since there are those who wish to apply it to God’s people in the OT. The latter view is obviously an anachronism, as is plain from Matt 16:18, where Jesus spoke in the future tense: “On this rock I will build [ostédomôsê] my church.” It is true that the term ekklêsia, as noted below, is equivalent to the Hebrew qôhêl, the assembly of God’s people in OT times, thus giving expression to the church’s understanding of itself as being in continuity with old Israel. It is also true that the apostle Paul and others could see the ancient people of God in Scripture as a metaphorical prefiguration of the church. (On this see Richard B. Hays, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul [New Haven, 1990].) But while we must acknowledge that God has had a people in every age, and that one can speak metaphorically of Israel as “the church” and even as proleptic “Christians” before the Incarnation, it only creates anachronistic confusion so to speak in an article of this kind, where such language is in danger of being understood in an ontological and literal sense. Let the reader keep this point firmly fixed in mind as he reads this chapter.

6 The answers to such questions cannot always be simple and straightforward, because the shape of the church was different in different times and different places. The reader should be aware, therefore, that this survey cannot avoid being selective and often overly simple. Method is another problem. Some NT theologies follow a strictly topical outline, while others examine the teachings of each NT author or corpus, thus avoiding the danger of homogenizing something which is really diverse, and making more visible chronological development. But if the latter approach is taken, further questions surface. The oldest writings in the NT are probably those of the apostle Paul. But the Gospels and Acts, though themselves written later, report events and teachings which preceded the ministry of Paul. To further complicate the picture, when the Gospel writers record the works and teachings of Jesus, they have selected them (cf. John 21:25) and presented them in such a way as to meet the spiritual needs of the church in the time in which they wrote. This article will compromise between the topical and the book-chronological approach. It will be organized around the key issues, but under each issue an attempt will be made to distinguish between the various NT writers when it is necessary to do so.

God would again reign through His Anointed One, the Son of David. One prophet spoke of a new covenant God would make with His people, under which all would be forgiven and receive instruction directly from the Lord (Jer 31:31-34).

Ultimately, the mantle of the chosen remnant came to rest on one Person, God’s real Son (Matt 2:15, citing Hos 11:1), as we shall see. It is at this point that the Christian church of the NT enters the picture.

**Terminology**

**Hebrew Words**

In the OT the usual Hebrew words to designate a gathering of God’s people were ‘ened and qahal.9 ‘Edah could refer to the people even when they were not assembled (as in Num 31:16), but qahal usually designated an assembly (as in Deuteronomy 5:22). Expressions like “the congregation of the Lord” or “the assembly of Israel,” as Jay succinctly summarizes, designated “a people called into being by God, who from time to time are gathered together for such solemn religious occasions as the receiving of the law (Deut 5:22), the dedication of Solomon’s Temple (1 Kings 8:14ff.), and the reading of the book of the Law by Ezra (Nehemiah 8:2).”10

**Greek Words**

When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek (the Septuagint version), ‘ened was everywhere translated by the word sunagoge, but qahal was sometimes translated by sunagöō (in Genesis through Numbers and the prophets) and sometimes by ekklesia (in Deuteronomy, the historical books, and Psalms).

Both of these Greek words were available for use as the self-designation of the Christian church, but sunagoge is used for a Christian assembly only once in the NT (Jas 2:2).11 It was also so used by the early second century Christian writer Ignatius.12 The word which came to be the term of choice in the Christian church was ekklesia.13

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8 Ibid.
10 Jay, 6.
11 Some scholars think the term in Rev 2:9 and 3:9, “synagogue of Satan,” refers to Christian heretics, but this is quite uncertain.
12 Ignatius, *To Polycarp* 4.2.
13 The English word “church” (and the German Kirche, Dutch kerk) actually derives from yet another
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There may have been several reasons for this choice. Apparently Christians wanted to distinguish their meetings from those of the Jews, who consistently used the word *sunagogē* for their assemblies and meeting houses. But another reason might have been that the ever more numerous Gentile believers were well acquainted with the term *ekklēsia*. It was used in Greek cities like Athens for an officially summoned body of citizens, called out and called together to conduct official business.¹⁴

**New Testament use of *ekklēsia***. The word *ekklēsia* is used in the NT in several senses.¹⁵ Paul employs it with three levels of meaning:

1. He could designate as a church the Christians assembled in a particular place, a local congregation (as in the house churches mentioned in Philemon 2 and Col 4:15).
2. He could refer to all the Christians in a city, such as the church of the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:1). He sometimes used the plural to include all the churches in a region (1 Thess 2:14, Gal 1:2).
3. He could use the singular to refer to all Christians everywhere (Gal 1:13).

While it was true that the total world church (*ekklēsia*) was made up of many local congregations (*ekklēsiai*), it was also true that the whole *ekklēsia* (singular) was found represented in each place.¹⁶ These shades of meaning are also found elsewhere. The universal church seems to be meant in Matthew 16:18 and the local church in Matthew 18:17.

**Other expressions.** *Ekklēsia* was not the only expression which the church used to refer to itself. The NT is replete with metaphors and phrases such as the “saints” (1 Cor 1:2), “the believers” (Acts 2:44, NIV), “servants [of the Lord]” (Acts 4:29), “the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16), “the household of God” (1 Pet 4:17), the “body” (Rom 12:4-5), “God’s temple” (1 Cor 3:10-17), “the flock of God” (1 Pet 5:2), and dozens of others.¹⁷

¹⁴ Too much has been made of the etymology of the word, placing theological significance on the fact that it derives from *ekkaleō*, to call out. Obviously the pagan Greeks who invented the word never intended a theological content. The word simply means “an assembly,” called out to meet, not called out from the world.

¹⁵ See Jay, 7-9; Schmidt, *TDNT*, s.v. “*ekklēsia*”; etc.

¹⁶ See the argument in Schmidt, 504-5.

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The word *ekklesia* is used only three times in the Gospels (Matt 16:18; 18:17), but about 60 times by Paul and 23 times in Acts, as well as elsewhere in the NT. From this it has been argued that Jesus had no interest in founding a church, and that it was inaugurated by early Christians later, after the Resurrection. However, basing such conclusions on the distribution of one word would be wrong, for we must also take into account other words and expressions which are virtual synonyms. Such a word is *mathetes*, "disciple," and its plural, which occurs 234 times in the four Gospels (73 times in Matthew, 46 in Mark, 37 in Luke, 78 in John)—but not at all in Paul! Even more striking, as collective technical descriptions of what became the nucleus of the church, are such expressions as "those who were about him with the twelve" (*hoi peri auton sun tois dodeka*, Mark 4:10). "'Hoi peri auton' are 'his party.' those who are on his side." Antecedents and Contemporary Models

The Church's Uniqueness

There was no group or organization in the first century quite like the Christian church. It was not a national religion, neither was it the same as other sects and movements in Palestine at the time. In the Gentile world also there are few close parallels. Yet it partook partly of some of the features of various organizations. In fact, it uniquely adapted to the cultures into which it was planted; but while it adapted, it transformed. It was thus a kind of incarnation: The church cannot be totally different, neither can it be totally the same as the institutions of the world, if it wishes to accomplish its mission. We look first at Palestinian Judaism.

Palestinian Judaism

Israel was a nation into which people were born or proselytized. Israel's covenant sign was circumcision, as well as the Sabbath. But the church was a voluntary group which people chose to join. Its covenant sign was baptism.

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"The Church in Descriptive Figures," in this volume.
18 For the statistics see Coenen, 1:297-99.
19 Thus Leonard Goppelt says, "The saying to Peter in Mt. 16:17-19 distinguished itself so greatly from all other comparable sayings of Jesus that it could not have come originally from him." Theology of the New Testament, trans. John E. Alspaugh, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, 1981), 213. But Goppelt argues on other grounds that it was in fact the intention of Jesus to found the church.
21 Ibid., 11.
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Sects. Christianity was at first regarded simply as one of the several sects, or haireseis, of Judaism. The Sadducees (Acts 5:17), the Pharisees (Acts 15:5), and the Christians (Acts 24:5, 14) were all called sects. It was a movement, like that started by John the Baptist, which also became a sect (cf. Acts 19:1-7). But all the groups were regarded as being within the house of Israel, at least until after the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. Perhaps they might be better termed “parties.”

John the Baptist with his movement is clearly seen in all the Gospels as a forerunner and antecedent of Jesus. Indeed, several of Jesus’ disciples had before been disciples of John’s (cf. John 1:35-37). According to Matthew, the message of Jesus was identical to the message of John (3:2 and 4:17), and both movements practiced baptism, even of Jews. In some sense, then, the church was in continuity with the Baptist movement, even as it was in continuity with Israel.

The Pharisee haburah. The scribes and rabbis of the Pharisees developed a relationship between teacher and disciples. A fellowship of disciples was called a haburah. The disciples in turn became teachers who raised up disciples.

The 12 disciples of Jesus lived together with Jesus as a haburah, and they later became apostles, but not rabbis. Jesus told them, “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brethren. . . . Neither be called masters [leaders, kathégetai], for you have one master [leader], the Christ” (Matt 23:8, 10). Jesus did not intend for His disciples to take His place, though in many respects they were to be like Him. Rather, they were to be channels and conduits of what Jesus taught, making people of all nations to be disciples of Jesus, not of themselves (Matt 28:18-20). That was different from Pharisaism.

The Essene communes. The Essenes, apparently the people who pro-

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22 The word hairēs from which we get the word “heresy,” did not originally carry the same connotation which it later acquired. It meant literally “a choice” or “persuasion,” as when we speak of “the Quaker persuasion.” It therefore meant a sect or denomination. The later pejorative meaning appears in 2 Pet 2:1.

23 In Judaism ritual immersion was used for purification from defilement and for the reception of Gentile proselytes into Judaism. But one did not have to be baptized if he or she was born a Jew. The baptism of John was apparently something new.

24 This Hebrew term, derived from the verb habar (to join), means an association, a company of friends or colleagues. It could refer to a group united for partaking of the Passover lamb (Exod 12:4; cf. Mishnah Pesahim 7:3), whether permanent or temporary, to a group or college of scholars; or to members of a religious association (obviously those categories could overlap). A member of such a group was called a habar, a comrade or colleague. The habarim saw themselves in contrast to lax Jews, the †ammi hēbreis. See Marcus Jastrow, A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yeruhalimi, and the Midrashic Literature, reprint (Brooklyn, 1967), 416, 421; George Foot Moore, Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim (Cambridge, 1927), 2:73.

25 In practice, of course, the transmitter of the tradition of Christ does in a sense have disciples. Thus Paul could say, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1, RSV; cf. 4:16).
duced the Dead Sea Scrolls, had an organized community which they called the *yahad*, or Union. They also referred to themselves as the *qahal* of God. They made their headquarters in the wilderness, to prepare the way of the Lord (following Isa 40:3) and lived in a commune. They considered themselves to be the true Israel, thinking the rest of the nation to be apostate. They kept themselves apart from other people.

A council of 12 laymen and three priests governed their community. The whole system was extremely hierarchical, for every single member had someone who was higher, and someone who was lower (except, one supposes, the lowliest member). It was a perfect chain of command in which no two people were equal. There was a long period of probation before one was accepted as a member, and strict discipline. They owned all things in common. They were taught to love each other, but to hate outsiders.

The church also developed a well-structured organization, and for a time held all things in common (Acts 2:44). But Jesus forbade hierarchical relationships (Matt 23:8-12; cf. 20:25-28), taught that His disciples should love their enemies (Matt 5:43-48), and by example and precept insisted that they not withdraw from sinners (Luke 15).

The *synagogue*. Of particular interest for our study is the synagogue, the meeting house where Jews assembled for instruction and worship. Jesus (Luke 4:16) and Paul (Acts 17:2) attended it regularly and made it their normal place to preach. The earliest Christians, who were Jews, continued to attend the synagogue services until they were expelled. Early Christian worship was

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26 That Jesus was not simply warning against abuse of power, but was also referring to status, is clear from the nature of the titles warned against. Jesus’ teaching about the equality of brethren did not, however, deny that a person could possess natural qualities of leadership or receive spiritual gifts of leadership or administration; neither did it forbid that one could exercise administrative or leadership functions, though this was to be on the order of *prima manus* (Luke 15). Thus Peter chaired a meeting at which a replacement for Judas was chosen (Acts 1:15-26), and James presided at a meeting of the brethren for discussing whether Gentiles as Gentiles could be considered legitimate members of the church. It is to be noted that though James expressed a judgment which was accepted (Acts 15:19-20), this judgment had force only because it was accepted as the sense of the meeting (vs. 22). The *despontos*, or relatives of the Lord, beginning with James the Lord’s brother, seem to have formed a succession of leaders of the Palestinian church, and it is true that these were later thought of (by Eusebius and others) as a succession of bishops; but such ascension of episcopal office in a formal sense was probably anachronistic. It was probably simply a matter of natural respect rendered to those who were related by family to Jesus. Particularly in the Pastoral Epistles a good deal is said about church offices and ministerial status. It is a vexed question whether this represents the beginning of a tendency, reaching an extreme form already in the epistles of Ignatius early in the second century, which was contrary to the spirit of Jesus’ original intention, as expressed in the Mattan:an passages cited.


28 The Hebrew and Aramaic words translated by this Greek word were *knesset* and *kahal*, in late Judaism these words replaced *qahal* as the designation for the local assembly.
based on the synagogue service even after it had to be conducted elsewhere.\(^\text{29}\) But the concept of the synagogue is not simply the Jewish equivalent of "church." The term was applied only to the local gathering place, not to the totality of the people. One would not speak of a worldwide synagogue.

Non-Jewish Institutions

Christianity arose in the countryside and small towns of Galilee, touched base in Jerusalem, and eventually moved on to the urban Gentile environment of the great Hellenistic cities.\(^\text{30}\) We now look at some institutions of the Gentile world which could have influenced the shape of the church as it moved across into non-Jewish culture.\(^\text{31}\)

Mystery religions. Many conservative Greeks and Romans probably regarded the church as another of the oriental mystery religions which were invading their world from the east: the Magna Mater cult, the Isis cult, eventually Mithraism, and other such religions. These cults differed from the traditional, ethnic, and civic religions in that a person was not born into them. The worshiper chose to join and was initiated. There was also a good deal of secrecy about them, with their worship centering around cultic mysteries. The church was similar in that a person decided to join and was initiated by baptism. But its mysteries were open mysteries, openly proclaimed.

The city. Another great institution was the politeia, the city community. People were proud to be citizens of this or that city (cf. Acts 21:39). The author of Hebrews transfers this civic loyalty to the church, "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12:22). The ancient cities also had second-class citizens and slaves; foreigners could not become citizens at all. But the church did not discriminate; anyone who believed and was baptized could become a member, and the church welcomed foreigners and aliens.\(^\text{32}\)

\(^{29}\) It is possible that in some localities the synagogue became predominantly Christian (which may be the explanation for the usage in Jas 2:2), but where this was not the case Christians eventually—sometime after A.D. 70—had to find separate meeting places. Prior to that time Jewish Christians probably attended synagogue Sabbath morning and then had separate meetings for the Lord's Supper on Sabbath afternoon or evening. The synagogue service was a service of the Word; the Lord's Supper was a service of the upper room, ultimately derived from the Passover. By the middle of the second century Christian worship (as described by Justin Martyr in his first Apology) consisted of two parts: a service of the Word, and a service of the upper room.

\(^{30}\) Paul's evangelism was based in the cities. Gentile Christianity moved from the urban areas outward, and the rural areas were the last to be converted. The English words "pagan" and "heathen" come from the Latin paganus, a country dweller (derived from pugus, country district), and from the archaic English word heath, a relatively uninhabited district.

\(^{31}\) An excellent popular treatment of many of these social and religious institutions is provided by Derek Tidball, The Social Context of the New Testament: A Sociological Analysis (Grand Rapids, 1984).

\(^{32}\) Eph 2:12, 13, 19; Heb 11:13; 1 Pet 1:1, 17; 2:11.
The household. Also important was the oikonomia, the household community. Because of the breakdown of many other ancient institutions and loyalties, the household became the most important social unit of the Roman Empire. The household consisted of an extended family or number of families, servants, friends, and clients, bound together under the authority of the senior male of the principal family, as many as he could support.33

The household community was a binding relationship of loyalty and mutual obligation. The head of the household chose the religion of the group.34 Early Gentile churches were house churches, meeting in the homes of wealthier members. Paul used the household in his missionary strategy, and we read of the baptism of households.35

Voluntary associations. There were also many voluntary associations in Greek areas (for which the Greek term was koinonia, “fellowship,” “community”). They were somewhat like our service clubs. Most common were burial societies. Membership was voluntary and marked by an initiation ceremony. The mystery religions and Judaism were often regarded as such associations. Many of the emperors were suspicious of these clubs because they often got involved in politics. Undoubtedly the church offered many of the services and attractions of these societies, and in fact koinonia was an important value in the early church (1 John 1:7).

Philosophical schools. Some Greeks would have regarded Christianity as something like one of the philosophical schools. By NT times the popular philosophical schools were

not simply intellectual schools of thought but ways of life . . . similar to what we today would call religious movements. Then as now, people embraced a new way of life because they were impressed by an exemplary life, because someone in their family belonged to a particular school, because of ties of marriage or friendship, or similar reasons. Joining a philosophical school often had little to do with rational argument or appeals to empirical evidence.36

33 Ibid., 79-80.
34 Rom 16:4, 5, 14, 15, 23; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phil 2.
35 Tidball comments, “In the context of our western individualism it is hard to grasp how any decision can be a genuine and personal decision unless individually taken. Yet in other social contexts people do not see the strong divorce we make between the individual and the corporate. Thus a decision can be authentically personal, and an individual can be very much a party of the decision, whilst the decision is taken by someone else” (Ibid., 84). Perhaps older Americans can understand this by remembering how they had no part in the United States’ declaration of war against the Axis powers in December 1940, yet they individually gave themselves to the war effort with personal enthusiasm.
36 Robert L. Wilken, The Christians as the Romans Saw Them (New Haven, 1984), 77. The most popular philosophical schools of the time were Platonism, Stoicism, Epicureanism, Cynicism, Aristotelianism, and Pythagoreanism.
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This provides some of the background for Paul's speech and reception on Mars Hill (Acts 17).

Patterns of association in a culture and the way the church adapts to them can hinder or assist the growth of the church. All of the Jewish and Gentile institutions we have surveyed had some effect—to greatly varying degrees—in shaping the church in the early centuries, yet the church was different from, and more than all of them.

Relationship of the Church to Israel

Jesus: The True Israel

Israel was the people of God, the Lord's inheritance (Deut 4:20); but as we have noted, a narrowing took place until at last the true Israel became one Person, Jesus. The NT writers, no doubt reflecting the teaching of Jesus Himself, show this fact in a number of ways.

Matthew reapplies Hosea 11:1 (originally referring to the people of Israel) to Jesus. In John 15:1 Jesus declared, "I am the true vine." The vine was a symbol of Israel (cf. Isaiah 5), used as an artistic symbol of the nation in every synagogue. When Jesus called Himself "the true [a/ethine] vine" the contrast is not with the false but with the typical and symbolic. He was the antitypical, real vine—the real Israel. Paul is at pains to insist that the seed of Abraham was singular and meant Christ (Gal 3:16).37

The New Israel

After this drastic narrowing comes an immediate widening, for the new, true Israel includes everyone who by faith and obedience to the message of Jesus is joined to Him—His disciples, who were to be the members of the church. Incorporated into Christ they thus became, by being in Christ, one corporate person. Many are regarded as one, and one represents many.38 The metaphor in John 15:5 pictures it well: "I am the vine, you are the branches." God's plan was to gather and "summarize" (anakephalaioo) all things in Christ (Eph 1:10). So when Saul of Tarsus persecuted the church the voice said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9:4).

As Richardson says, "The individual Israelite was a member of Israel: the

37 For fuller discussion of these and related themes, see Alan Richardson, An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament (New York, 1958), 242-90.
38 This way of thinking had antecedents. Thus in the OT Adam represented the whole human race, and the king of Israel represented the whole nation.
39 Ibid., 254-55.
individual Christian is a member of Christ.' This way of thinking is also involved in the metaphor of the church as the body of Christ, with Christ as the head of the body.\textsuperscript{40} Because of this identity of Jesus with His followers 2 Peter 1:4 could even say that they are ‘partakers of the divine nature.’

\section*{Relationship to Ethnic Israel}

Against the backdrop of this sublime theological conception we must trace the history of the relation of the church to ethnic Israel in the NT. Jesus’ ministry on earth, as a matter of stated policy, according to Matthew, was limited to unaffiliated, religiously lax Jews (‘\textit{am ha'aretz}, literally ‘the people of the land’).\textsuperscript{41} When He sent out the twelve, He instructed them, ‘Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matt 10:5-6). He reiterated this principle even when He was making exceptions to it. To the Syrophoenecian woman He bluntly declared, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ (Matt 15:24), and to the Samaritan woman He did not hesitate to affirm, ‘salvation is from the Jews’ (John 4:22).

Though Matthew most clearly reports this exclusive policy, it is he also who reports Jesus’ prophecy of a time when it would end. Jesus told the Jewish leaders, “the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it” (Matt 21:43). He foretold, “this gospel of the kingdom [cf. Matt 4:17] will be preached throughout the whole world, as a

\textsuperscript{40} Rom 12:4-5: 1 Cor 12: Eph 1:22-23; cf. Eph 4:4, 15-16.

\textsuperscript{41} The pejorative Hebrew term used here occurs in Ezra 4:4 and Neh 10:30-31, where it refers to the poor Jewish peasants who were left behind when the respectable people were taken into captivity. They did not develop the carefulness concerning religious practice which those in the captivity developed in order to preserve Jewish identity under pressure, and they may have been more susceptible to heathen influence and intermarriage. By the time of Jesus the term ‘\textit{am ha'aretz}’ was simply a derogatory term applied to anyone who did not observe certain commandments or were ignorant of the Torah, especially in the eyes of the Pharisees. It was a socioreligious category. As David Rhoads has observed, probably the majority of Jews were the ordinary peasants of Israel, who were in general lukewarm about religion, yet who entertained a popular religious loyalty to the divinely ordained institutions of Israel—the Temple, the law, the Holy City, the holy land, and the festivals. It was apparently to this kind of people that Jesus especially directed His mission. The Pharisees, referring to the people who followed Jesus said, “Have any of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? But this crowd, who do not know the law, are accursed” (John 7:48-49). It would not be inappropriate to refer to them metaphorically as “unchurched” Jews. In reference to those Jews who were affiliated with one of the Jewish denominations (in the time of Jesus only a few thousand), especially the Pharisees, Jesus with great irony remarked, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17). Though Jesus thus clearly described His target audience, He did not adamantly turn away others who took the initiative of coming to Him, such as a Nicodemus, on the one hand, or a Syro-Phoenecian woman on the other.

\textsuperscript{42} It is interesting to compare this saying with the one in Matt 10:23b.
testimony to all nations; and then the end will come” (24:14).42 After His resurrection He commanded, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (28:19). All this pointed ahead to “the replacement of the old through the new covenant people.”43

Replacing ethnic Israel. When did the change take place? In a sense, the birth of the new Israel was already beginning while Jesus was on earth. So Luke the Gentile saw it. Jews who followed Jesus—and all of Jesus’ followers were Jews—made up a nation within the nation, so that the Abrahamic covenant was never abrogated (Luke 1:73). “The church was the continuation of pious Israel.”44

It is difficult to point to a single incident in history when the church replaced ethnic Israel as the people of God. Some see it happening when the Jewish leaders stoned Stephen (Acts 7:58-60), in fulfillment of Daniel 9:24-27, and it is true that the scattering of the disciples from that event led to the spread of the gospel to the Samaritans and ultimately to the rest of the world.45

It was Paul who was most responsible for the success of the mission to the Gentiles, but the book of Acts makes clear that wherever he went in his missionary journeys (certainly after the stoning of Stephen) he always gave first chance for hearing the gospel to the Jewish community there.46 This modus operandi was in accord with a conscious policy which he states in Romans 1:16, “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Indeed, it appears that Paul regarded his Gentile mission as a means for converting ethnic Israel (Rom 11:11-12, etc.).47

Paul’s metaphor of the olive tree (Rom 11:17-24), however, makes clear that the reconstituted Israel will lack those ethnic Israelites who remain unfaithful, while including Gentiles who believe.48 In fact, he elsewhere plainly indicates that the church is the “Israel of God” (Gal 6:16): “He is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart, spiritual and not literal” (Rom 2:29). In the ultimate sense, Christ is the seed of Abraham to whom the promise was made (Gal 3:16), and all who are joined to Him, like branches grafted into the olive tree or the branches of the true vine, constitute

43 Cf. Oppelt, 2:229-35.
44 Ibid., 284-88.
45 Acts 1:8 gives us the programmatic and outline of the book of Acts: “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.”
47 Paul emphasizes the perpetuity of the promises made to the Patriarchs (cf. Gen 12:2-3; 17:7, etc.) for ethnic Israel: “As regards the gospel they are enemies of God, for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:28-29; cf. 9:4-5).
48 See Richardson, 252, 267-78.
spiritually the real Israel, which is the church.

A parable in Matthew 22:1-10 suggests that the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 was somehow decisive. A king gives a marriage feast for his son, but those invited mistreat and kill the messengers sent to summon them. "The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city" (vs. 7). It is then that the invitation goes out to everyone else.49

Judaism's rejection of Christians. We know that shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, the surviving rabbis of the Pharisees gathered at a small town called Jamnia (Latin; the Hebrew name was Yabneh) to reconstruct Judaism. They adapted Pharisaism to the new situation and made it the norm for all Jews. In this manner they moved against all groups and writings which did not conform to their ideas. Among those to be expelled from the synagogues were the Christians and their writings. Their final offense may have been welcoming into their fellowship uncircumcised Gentiles.50

Part of the synagogue service was the standing prayer ('Amidah), or "eighteen benedictions" (Shemoneh 'Esreh). Anyone could be asked to lead out in the recitation of this series of prayers, and all were expected to respond to each of them with a hearty "Amen." The rabbis of Jamnia inserted a new prayer into this part of the liturgy, called the Birkath ha-Minim (prayer concerning the heretics). In its original form it ran something like this:

May the apostates have no hope, may the dominion of wickedness be speedily uprooted in our days, may the nozrim [Nazarenes?] and the minim [heretics] quickly perish and not be inscribed together with the righteous. Blessed art thou, the Eternal, our God, who crushes the wicked.52

This liturgical addition marked the final schism between synagogue and church.53

49 To be sure, as Acts and the Epistles abundantly record, the Gentile mission began long before the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (as noted above). But the events surrounding the catastrophe of A.D. 70 mark a watershed in the relationship between Christianity and Judaism: the stoning of James the Just, the pillar of Jewish Christianity; the flight of Jewish Christians from Jerusalem to Pella beyond the Jordan; the Birkath ha-Minim. In the parable, the going into the highways and byways to gather as many as could be found bespeaks a total lifting of restrictions and limitations. Henceforth the Gentile mission could and did disregard any scruples and reservations harbored by the conservative church of the circumcision.

50 See Acts 15.

51 In Modern Israeli Hebrew nozrim is the normal word for Christians.


53 The inclusion of the incident of John 9:34 is believed to be a reflection of what happened in the synagogues because of the decision of Jamnia, made probably shortly before the composition of the fourth Gospel.
The Origin and Nature of the Church

The Church and the Kingdom of God

Alfred Loisy was responsible for the reproachful quip, "Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God and the result was the church." This acute remark implies that the church was not quite what Christ intended. A somewhat cognate observation was made by Bultmann: "He who formerly had been the bearer of the message was drawn into it and became its essential content. The proclaimer became the proclaimed..."

Jesus indeed proclaimed the reign of God (Matt 4:17 and parallels) Was it His intention that the church arise to proclaim Christ? Is the church, as in classical Catholic thought, in fact the kingdom of God?

Church Centers in Christ

To start with, it is clear that there would not have been a church had there not been the proclamation of Jesus. "The Church in idea and fact came into existence because Jesus polarized the religious life of his disciples round his person." Barrett rightly comments,

The gathering of a community, pledged to obey the will of God as he himself declared it, was thus (according to Mark) a fundamental element in the work of Jesus; and a group gathered about and dependent on Jesus, committed to his understanding of God and of his purpose, is certainly not far off "church" whether or not the word ekklesia is used to describe it.

It is also necessary to take into account Matthew 16:18 and 18:17.

54 Thus does H. C. Snape translate the citation in Maurice Goguel, The Primitive Church (London, 1963), 29. The famous remark was in Loisy's L'Evangile et L'Eglise, 5th ed., 152. An English translation appeared: The Gospel and the Church (London, 1903), 166: "Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the Church that came."


56 It has been well established that "the kingdom of heaven" means "the reign of God." "Heaven" was a common Jewish euphemism of "God"; Jews were reluctant to use the word "God," let alone the tetragram YHWH, lest they transgress the third commandment of the Decalogue. Matthew usually followed this usage, since he was probably writing for a community of Jewish Christians who retained this sensibility. Basilea (kingdom) represents malakath or malkath. The expression refers to the reestablished rule of God in the messianic age.

57 Goguel, 29.

58 Barrett, 12.
Church Not Identical With Kingdom

But even if the foundation of the church was within the intention of Jesus, we cannot say it was identical with the kingdom of God. There is hardly any occurrence of the latter expression in the NT where it could bear the meaning of "church." How could that be the meaning, for example, in the saying, "But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt 12:28)?

The reign of God was both an eschatological expectation and a present reality. To put it simply, God reigns wherever He has control. This reign can be in an individual human heart, among a body of believers, and ultimately, at the end of the age, over a world which had formerly been in rebellion (Rev 11:15).

To the extent that the kingdom of God was an eschatological reality and the church was not, the church must be viewed as an interim institution with an eternal result. The church exists between the resurrection of Christ and His second coming, and yet it finds its proper home in heaven. Hence Barrett calls the church a kind of eschatological monster, neither one thing (of the present) nor the other (of the future). And I add at once, lest my perhaps unfortunate word be misunderstood, a monster intended and brought into being by God. Like Paul, the church as a whole was (and is) an abnormality, an untimely birth, a freak, an ektróma (1 Cor 15:8). If the story had ended with the ascension of Jesus and, with this, the assumption into heaven of the elect, there would have been no problem; but it did not end there.

Put briefly, the church is ideally the fellowship of those persons who have

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59 There has been much discussion whether Luke 17:21 should be translated "the kingdom of God is within you" or "the kingdom of God is among you." The question revolves around the meaning of the Greek preposition enos. There is no parallel expression in the NT, but it occurs in secular Greek. C. F. D. Moule, An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1960), 83-84, reviews the evidence and seems to conclude in favor of within.

60 Let the reader bear in mind that the concept of church in this chapter keeps in view the ontological meaning of the word, not any metaphorical usage. We are speaking of the Christian church founded by the Messiah Jesus (cf. Matt 16:18), the incarnate (not preincarnate) Son of God.

61 The disciples/apostles will sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28), and their names are inscribed upon the foundations of the wall of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:14), which is, perhaps, mystically identified with the "household of God" (Eph 2:20), which is the church.

62 Barrett, 18. Further on, Barrett declares, "In fact—and here at least there will be no dispute—the resurrection happened; the parousia did not; so that the followers of Jesus were left in a period they had not expected, or at least had not expected to last long, a period of what we may allow ourselves to describe as partially realized eschatology" (p. 24). A detailed discussion of the relationship of the kingdom to the church, and of the centrality of the church in the thinking of Jesus is found in R. Newton Flew, Jesus and His Church: A Study of the Idea of the Ecclesia in the New Testament (London, 1951).
We may still ask the question, however, When did the church begin? There were any number of events which could claim the honor, though it is difficult to know whether to call them the time of birth or the time of conception. Jesus began His mission with the calling of disciples (John 3:5ff.; Mark 1:15ff.), spoke of founding His church (Matt 16:18; 18:17), appointed and trained His disciples for ministry—to be apostles (Mark 3:14, Matt 10)—and gave them a commission to carry out His work (Matt 28:18-20).

The apostles, in turn, reconstituted the collegium of 12 after Judas’ defection (Acts 1:15-26), received the Holy Spirit and began their mission (Acts 2), taught the new believers (Acts 2:42), organized them for survival (Acts 4, 5), and developed the organizational structure of the church (Acts 6). Paul is added to the number of apostles and began his ministry in Acts 9. The movement is already called the church in Acts 5:11. In terms of scriptural reference, as good a proposition as any is to say that the church had its conception in Mark 3:14/Luke 6:13 and its birthing in Acts 2.67 But there were crucial events in between these points.

Constitution of the Church

The church was constituted by the new covenant. During Christ’s last Passover and first Eucharist He presented the cup to His disciples with the words, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I shall not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:24-25). The blood was His life (cf. Lev 17:11). A covenant is something God establishes in order to place people in a special relationship with Himself. Through Christ’s death God brought the believers into a new bond with Himself.68 Paul reports that this covenant is “the new covenant” (1 Cor 11:25), which is surely an allusion to the promise in Jeremiah 31:31. Under that covenant the law would be internalized, intimate relationship with God would be restored, the knowledge of God’s will would be direct and not dependent upon human mediation, and sins would be totally forgiven (Jer 31:33-34).

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67 This is certainly the usual view. Thus Ladd says, “Strictly speaking the ekklesia was born at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the small circle of Jewish disciples of Jesus, constituting them the nucleus of Christ’s body. The disciples before Pentecost should be considered only the embryo church” (Ladd, 347).

68 Cf. Goppelt, 219, though he rather says, “Through the stoning death of Jesus, God placed all mankind into a new bond with Himself.”
The Origin and Nature of the Church

Membership of the Church

Visible/invisible church. The NT presents two ways of looking at the question of who belongs to the church. In the first way, visible membership is the only kind of membership. This model of the church is particularly characteristic of Paul (cf. 1 Cor 5:12-13). In the other, the church which God recognizes is not identical with that which the human eye sees. This model is especially characteristic of John's writings.

Speaking of certain false teachers, "antichrists," 1 John 2:19 declares, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us." Thus, they never really belonged even before their departure. They had been in, but not really in.

The other side of the coin is presented in John 10:16, where Jesus says, "I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd." Thus, they are not presently visible members, but they belong to Jesus and will eventually belong. They are out, but not really out.

Hence not everyone who is in the church is really in, and not everyone who is outside is really outside.

A mix of true and false. The NT envisions a situation in which there are false brethren in the church. This is most notably pictured in the parable of the tares69 (Matt 13:24-30, 36-43). There the presence of such members is not only acknowledged, but it is forbidden to purge them.70 Apparently, the kind of stem discipline of erring members that Paul demands in 1 Corinthians 5 is to be administered only in cases of gross and publicly known immorality. John 15:6 speaks of unfruitful branches, which do not abide in Christ, being cast forth. But the accompanying language suggests that Jesus is referring to the eschatological judgment: "And the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned." This is in harmony with Matthew 13:41. The saying in Mark 9:43-48 and parallels may be taken to refer to church discipline, but it seems to apply more naturally to personal discipline.

In fact, the parallel in Matthew 18:5-14 is a severe warning to church

69 The weeds in the parable are zizania, bearded darnel, a noxious plant which closely resembles wheat until the mature stage.
70 Ladd, fearing that the usual interpretation of this parable results in the identification of the church with the kingdom, makes a point of stressing that Matt 13:38 "expressly identifies the field as the world, not as the church" (Ladd, 111-12). But the world is the location of the church, and were we to say that the parable is about those who would purify the world, rather than the church, we would make it meaningless for Matthew's readers, for whom the performance of such a purge was an impossibility, and we would destroy the parallel with the parable of the net in vs. 47-50.
leaders who deal harshly with weak and marginal Christians. On the other hand, 18:15-20 prescribes due process for dealing with a brother who is obdurately offensive, leading to disfellowship, though this is immediately tempered with a plea for a forgiving spirit (18:21-35).

Judas is the prototypical paradigm of the false brother in the church, and how to deal with him.

The Cosmic Nature of the Church

The most mature expression of Pauline thought about the church is in the letter to the Ephesians.71 There, two dimensions particularly stand out: the Christological importance of the church in God’s cosmic plan, and the nature of the church as God’s people in spiritual and ontological continuity with Israel.

Theater of God’s Grace

The cosmic importance of the church flows from the cosmic importance of Christ, who is head of the church: “And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:22-23). According to the eternal, divine purpose realized in Christ, “through the church the manifold wisdom of God” is now made known “to the principalities and powers in heavenly places” (3:10). In other words, the church is a theater of God’s grace, and all the universe is the audience.

One True Israel in Christ

In the church all nations, Jew and Gentile, are brought into the true Israel and become the new heirs of all the promises made to that nation.

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh... were... separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. (Eph 2:11-16)

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In Christ the Gentiles are "fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (3:6). The same point is stressed in 1 Peter 1:3-4, 15; 2:5. In Christ all, whatever their ethnic origin, belong to the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, God's own people (cf. 1 Pet 2:9-10; Exod 19:5-6). "Once you were no people but now you are God's people" (1 Pet 2:10; cf. Hos 2:23). As of old, God still has a people, and their purpose in existing is still to bring glory to His name (cf. 1 Pet 2:9).

The Ephesian meditation on Christ and the church ends with this doxology: "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen" (Eph 3:20-21).

Bibliography


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