

The Church Of The Living God

By J. Cameron.

In the widest sense, the Church may be said to embrace all who shall be found approved by the Lord when He comes. In the narrowest sense, the two or three met together in the name of Christ in that place is the Church. In both of these communities, Christ is the head: for in a sense, as the Apostle says, "The head of every man is Christ."

The truth involved in this proposition is by no means realized as it ought to be; for it implies the absolute submission of every disciple to the will of Him they call Master and Lord. This relationship, with the privileges and duties it brings with it, may well engage our thoughts for a little, if peradventure we may learn a little more of the responsibility it lays upon us, and drink a little deeper into the spirit it naturally breathes. It is by correct knowledge of the true nature of things that we can expect to sustain our own relation to them, and reap the full benefit such relationship is fitted to impart.

What Is The Church?

Every human society is founded on some characteristic which is common to the whole membership, in which none is defective, whatever else may be possessed over and above. Whether it be an Anti-Slavery Society, a Free-mason fraternity, or a simple village Co-operative Store, the same rule applies. Membership, with its duties and privileges, is based upon some qualification which all possess in common. This, and this alone, makes the whole each other's Fellows or equals so far at least as corporate status is concerned. Want of this deprives of fellowship and its privileges, no matter what other qualifications may be possessed.

Divine wisdom has seen fit to incorporate that community called the Church upon the same simple principle, the members of that body may be the merest babes in Christ, or they may understand all mysteries, and have all knowledge; but if they have complied with the terms which God has been pleased to prescribe, they are, in virtue of this, and of this alone, entitled to

rank as fellows of the very chief of the Apostles, because they are the brethren of the Lord Jesus the Anointed, the Son of God; and consequently the “sons and daughters of the Lord God Almighty.” This principle finds a beautiful illustration in the designation by which the community of Christ’s brethren are most commonly known in the New Testament, namely, “the church.”

Modern nomenclature has obscured the light which the original word sheds on the simplicity of the constitution of the Christian community. The Greek is *ekklesia*, which is compounded of *kaleo*, ‘I call’, with the prefixed preposition *ek*, ‘out’, and signifies “the called out;” that is, the Ecclesia, or Church, consisted of the aggregate of those who had been called out from among the world at large, embracing both Jews and Gentiles. This aggregate was divisible into groups of smaller dimensions, according to the different localities in which it had pleased the Lord to cast the lot of His called ones. But there is no indication that any other principle than that of “local habitation” was ever allowed to subdivide the members of the body of Christ.

Pity it is that what God has thus joined together, any man should presume to put asunder. Pity it is that human wisdom has invented terms and conditions of Church fellowship which Christ and His Apostles never dreamt of, and have substituted these for the Divine invitation in the glad tidings of the Kingdom of God. And pity it is that the professed disciples of Christ have in so many instances suffered such interference with “Heaven’s easy, artless, unencumbered plan.”

How Is The Church Called Out?

In the calling out of God’s Ecclesia, “the simplicity which is in Christ” is abundantly manifest. The Gospel is the only means by which “God has visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.” A few quotations will shew this to be the case: - “But we are bound to give thanks alway to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God has from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit, and belief of the truth: whereunto He called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” 2 Thessalonians 2:13, 14. “Be not thou therefore ashamed of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but be thou partaker of the afflictions of the gospel, according to

the power of God; who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began; but is now made manifest by the appearing of our Saviour Jesus Christ, who hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” 2 Timothy 1: 8-10.

Paul’s gospel is the gospel Paul preached, a specimen of which we have in what he preached for two whole years in his own hired house at Rome. This is described in these terms: “Preaching the Kingdom of God, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ.” The Kingdom of God is that Kingdom to be established on the earth in the land of promise, over restored Israel and the nations. “The things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ” are summarized by Paul himself in these words: “That Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first to rise from the dead.”

Upon an intelligent apprehension of the things scripturally involved in such a summary as this, confessing Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God, believers of the Gospel were immersed into the name of Jesus, and were thus called out from a world lying in wickedness. But “the Gospel of the Kingdom” is not only the means by which God is inviting sinners to become His sons and daughters, the Kingdom is also that to which they are invited when it shall be set up according to Divine prediction. A few extracts will demonstrate this without a word of comment: - “As ye know how we exhorted and comforted, and charged every one of you, (as a father doth his children,) that ye would walk worthy of God, who hath called you unto his kingdom and glory.” 1 Thessalonians 2:11, 12. “But the God of all grace, who hath called us unto his eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that ye have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you.” 1 Peter 5:10. “Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold of eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses.” 1 Timothy 6:12. “I press toward the mark, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 3:14.

Those thus called to God’s Kingdom and glory by the Gospel, constitute God’s Church or Ecclesia, irrespective of all other human requirements. These are mere inventions which the foolishness of men seek to impose on the wisdom of God.

The “Fellowship In The Gospel.”

When Paul wrote to the Church at Philippi, whom he styles “all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons,” he had no other idea in his mind regarding the fellowship than that of those called out by the Gospel. He says: “I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy.” For what? “For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.” But the Philippian Church seems to have been highly favoured in respect of their fellowship being in the Gospel. For we read of this simple basis of fellowship being interfered with at other places by men who would have “God’s easy, unencumbered plan” eked out with human wisdom, which but too often proves to be folly. Thus, at Antioch, certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “except ye be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses, ye cannot be saved.” This was happily quashed by a decree of the Apostles at Jerusalem, based on the simple fact stated by Peter: “How God at the first did visit the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name.”

This form of human attempt at improvement on Divine wisdom was fruitful of evil in Rome, Galatia, and probably at other places. Paul’s letters to the Romans and Galatians are specially directed against this form of sectarianism. In the former epistle (Romans 16:17, 18) he seems to have this evil fully before his mind: - “Now, I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned and avoid them. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.”

This “causing (or *making*, ποιεω) divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which they had learned” cannot be applied to such divisions as existed at Corinth, which shewed itself in a preference for certain teachers, none of whose doctrines are called in question. But the Judaizers come under Paul’s description most fittingly: for the divisions they made were contrary to the doctrine they had learned. And be it remembered that the main design of the letter to the Romans was to vindicate the simplicity of the faith against the very class who taught the necessity of keeping the Law of Moses in order to justification.

The One Foundation.

The figure of a building is often employed by the apostles to illustrate the simplicity of the Christian fellowship. To the Corinthians Paul wrote: - "For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry; ye are God's building. According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise master builder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which, is Jesus Christ." And to the Ephesians: - "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner-stone; in whom all the building, fitly framed together, groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

This is in exact agreement with what our Lord taught his disciples. He asked them, "Whom say ye that I am?" Peter replied "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said "Blessed art thou Simon Bar-Jona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee but my Father who is in heaven. And I say unto thee that thou art Peter (*Petros*, a stone) and upon this rock (*Petra*, a rock) I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This rock is none other than Jesus himself in his character as the Messiah of Israel, and the Son of the living God. This is the foundation of the apostles and prophets, for it was predicted by the prophets and preached by the apostles, namely, Jesus Christ, the chief corner-stone laid in Zion.

Thus the prophet: - "Therefore thus saith the Lord God, Behold, I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner-stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste." - Isaiah 28:16. Peter, quoting this, says, "Ye also as lively stones are built up a spiritual house"

Diversity In Unity.

The one foundation having been laid in Jesus the Christ, and the living stones built thereon, on the simple principles of gospel faith and obedience, there could not fail to be many diverse elements outlying the cementing medium by which each unit was united to the foundation. This connecting

link was the faith of the gospel. There were Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, Greeks and Barbarians, the wise and the unwise. They differed about meats and days, but the apostles expressly forbade such diversity to interfere with the unity which existed alongside of it in the one faith, of the gospel. Paul was thoroughly cognisant of this diversity in unity from the very first. He even accommodated himself, at the express request of a fellow apostle, to the prejudices of his Jewish kinsmen, by observing a certain ceremony in the temple. The oneness was in Christ Jesus, not in the manifold units of the body. "There is neither Jew nor Greek ... for ye are all one in Christ Jesus." A Jew remained a Jew, and a Greek a Greek. But each was a child of God, and an heir of the Kingdom. In 1 Corinthians 12. Paul at great length treats of this diversity in unity. "The body is not one member but many. But the eye never becomes an organ of hearing, nor the ear an organ of vision." As the body is one and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ."

The Necessity Of Forbearance.

It must be evident that in a society composed of such materials as the Church of Christ, there must be the greatest need for forbearing with each other. There would always be a danger of those things in which they differed exalting themselves over those in which they were one, thus marring the unity of the body. In beautiful adaptation to this liability we have a perfect body of injunctions and exhortations by the apostles. Those men never dreamt of classifying the disciples into groups or sections, in accordance with their various peculiarities and prejudices. As a specimen we might select one from Paul, which is thoroughly characteristic: - "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you, that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism. One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. But unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ." Ephesians 4:1-7.

Here are surely elements of unity sufficient to constitute the most stable bulwark against division, if only allowed to have their due influence. This is nothing less than paramount. All opinions or theories apart from the one

faith of the gospel are the private property of their possessors, and must be subordinated to the unity of the church. If such are deemed important, and worthy of being taught, and others willing to hear, well and good. But it is purely a matter of courtesy that any member of the Christian brotherhood is allowed to teach his brethren anything that is outside “the common faith,” and that for the simple reason that everyone is as much entitled as he is to express an opposite opinion if so disposed.

Baptised Believers Of The Gospel Of The Kingdom.

The application of these principles to the present day among ourselves should not be very difficult to the sincere respecter of God’s will in preference to man’s. If God has called my fellow-creature to His Kingdom and glory by the gospel of His Son, what am I that I should not hail him as a fellow-worshipper in the assembly of the saints? Shall I presume to say “Stand back, for I am holier than thou;” I understand all mysteries and have all knowledge, while you know little beyond the simple elements of the gospel preached by Christ and his apostles for the obedience of faith? Nay: for has not my Master said “Whoso shall offend (cause to stumble) one of these little ones that believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depths of the sea.” “Take heed that ye despise not one of the little ones, for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.” – Matthew 18:6-10. And has not his servant Paul left us a charge in his letter to the Philippians, we do well to ponder? “Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.”

This is truly an object worthy of our strife, not among ourselves, however, but with those around us; earnestly contending for the faith once delivered to the saints.”

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