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THE CHURCH

by  
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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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The subject of the church is much under discussion at present. The Second Vatican Council made the character of the church a main topic of debate, and the ecumenical movement which occupies so much of Christian thought and activity these days is based on the concept of reuniting the church but it has a mistaken notion of what the church is, so that in effect, it is directing much of its efforts in a wrong direction.

In the New Testament the word "church" is one of several Old Testament terms which have been given a spiritual meaning. The word "church" was a common Greek word meaning "a gathering" or "an assembly", or "a group of people", or in older English "a congregation". The most famous church or gathering of the Old Testament was, of course, the assembly of Israel when the nation was gathered round Mount Sinai at the giving of the law. In the Greek Old Testament this is described as the "day of the church" when God gathered all His people round Him at Mount Sinai and spoke to them the words of the ten commandments.

Later on, when the nation had settled in Palestine all the men assembled at Jerusalem three times a year at the temple, for this was the place where God dwelt among his people. So the Old Testament assembly or church was a physical gathering of all the people of God, in the presence of God, first at Mount Sinai, and then later

at Jerusalem. In the New Testament, as so frequently with Old Testament concepts, the idea is spiritualised. Jesus builds His church as He said, but it is a spiritual gathering around Himself in the spiritual world of heaven; and thus the writer of the Hebrews in chapter 12, contrasting the position of the Christian with the Old Testament Israelite, says that Christians have not come to a physical mountain, Mount Sinai, but have come to the heavenly Mount Zion, where Jesus is, and they are all there together in a group, or "church", which the writer calls the Church of the Firstborn, that is to say, the church or gathering of God's true people, for in the Old Testament all the firstborn were Gods, being dedicated to Him at birth.

Christ builds His assembly or church as men and women respond to the gospel, and the foundation rock of this church is the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord. When Peter confessed Him as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, Jesus predicted "on this rock I will build my church". The apostles were the first to confess Jesus as Lord and all who receive the apostolic witness and make the same confession of Christ as Lord are built by Christ into His assembly or church.

In the New Testament "church" belongs to those space motion terms drawn from the Old Testament which are used to describe our present spiritual relationship to God through the Gospel.

There is quite a group of these terms: thus Christians are said to have been "brought near to God". In the Old Testament, of course, only the priest could come near to God, that is could enter into His presence within the temple. Now all Christians are priests, for all come near to God. Other terms are "access" and "standing in God's presence". These terms described the Old Testament High Priest who once a year stood before the ark. Now all Christians have access - a space notion term - and stand in God's presence through Christ. The way the New Testament puts it is this, that through the resurrection Jesus Christ has ascended into the heavens and has sat down at God's right hand. And Christians have been raised with Him and are now "in Christ", members of His body, and are seated with Him at God's right hand in the heavenlies. We are participants in the group or gathering around God's throne which Christ is forming in the presence of God. This is the basic use in the New Testament of the word "church". It describes a spiritual relationship which is a spiritual experience. Now being in a gathering means being in fellowship together for the purpose for which the gathering is formed so that the New Testament concept of membership of the gathering or church of God's people in God's presence in Heaven is a way of saying that we have fellowship through the gospel with God and Christ, and with one another. This is what John says in

I John 1 and that is what being members of a gathering means. Now the next thing to note is that fellowship if it is to be expressed between ourselves while we still remain in the body in this physical world, must involve meeting. In the days before the telephone or the post office the only way you could have fellowship with somebody else was to be in their company, to talk to them by word of mouth and by exchange of glances and generally to have personal relationship. So that being in the Heavenly church, that is to say, being in fellowship with God and one another through the gospel, involves being in fellowship with one another in a physical visible assembly or meeting. Now the heavenly and the earthly are not two fellowships, or two gatherings, one unseen, the other local and visible, but they are the same fellowship both heavenly in God's presence and at the same time local and physical because we live in a physical environment.

Fellowship is meeting and so naturally in the New Testament the word "church" is very frequently used of those gatherings whether in the home or in some other place where Christians assembled.

Human fellowship creates structures such as positions and duties to be discharged and since God gives His gifts permanently to those to whom He gives them, naturally enough those who occupy these positions occupy them

more or less permanently. In our modern times these church structures have not only been formed within the local gatherings or churches to assist their better fellowship, but have also been formed as links between these local gatherings and in the course of history these have been formed into groupings or denominations with their own structures and ministries.

In revising these structures and bringing them up to date, which is the object both of the Second Vatican Council and the Ecumenical Movement, the essential thing to keep in mind is that the structures were formed by the fellowship to serve the fellowship; and that the fellowship in turn is based on the gospel, so that in examining these structures and in revising them we must ensure that they assist fellowship and express the gospel. All too often these structures with their rules and customs have grown so that they now get in the way of fellowship and contradict the gospel. This is true both of the central denominational structures as well as the congregational structures and ways of doing things. Here is the area where attention must be given and where reform must be undertaken.

One of the difficulties is that Vatican II and the Ecumenical Movement have both made the mistake of identifying the church with these outward visible structures which were created to serve the fellowship. The church is

the fellowship which God has with us and which we have with one another. Since you cannot have fellowship unless you meet, the fellowship is a church or gathering, a gathering thought of primarily as with Christ around God's throne, and at the same time in physical gatherings. We who are members of Christ's church should lift our thoughts to where Christ is, and remember that the purpose of Christ's gathering us in His presence is for fellowship with Him and with one another by our hearing His voice which comes to us in the preaching of the gospel within that fellowship.

Let us see to it that we are regular members of that fellowship and that those who minister within it preach the gospel.

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