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THE SPIRIT AND
THE CHURCH

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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I Corinthians 12:13: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body and were all made to drink of one Spirit".

Each of the four gospels emphasises at the beginning of the Lord's ministry that His work would be to baptize with the Holy Spirit, and they put this in sharp contrast to the ministry of John the Baptist, who was baptizing with water. At the end of Jesus' ministry, on the eve of His ascension, our Lord reaffirmed that baptism with the Holy Spirit was to be the experience of every Christian. He told His disciples, "John indeed baptized with water but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days hence". This promise of baptism by Jesus with the Holy Spirit was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, when the small band of Christian disciples - 120 in all - were gathered in the upper room, when Jesus poured out on them His Holy Spirit. Having received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit, He poured it out on the disciples, is how St Peter explained the phenomenon to the marvelling spectators. A little later Cornelius and his household received the same baptism with the Holy Spirit at the hand of Jesus, as they believed the Gospel Peter was preaching. It was the same baptism as at Pentecost. Peter explained, "As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell on them, even as on us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how that He said, 'John indeed baptized with water, but

you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit".

Baptism with the Spirit of God is the initial act which makes us Christians. It is the gift of Christ, for it is He who adds to the church. In Titus, Paul calls this action a 'washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit', and in John 3 Jesus calls it 'a new birth', a 'being born of the Spirit', and in the next chapter he calls it a 'drinking of living water' which becomes a well of water bubbling up within the Christian and bringing him into eternal life. In John 7 Jesus described this work of the Spirit as rivers flowing out from the Christian's heart. It is interesting to note that all these images of this initial work of the Spirit in the Christian are drawn from water - washing, pouring, drinking, baptizing, bubbling wells, flowing rivers - all are water metaphors, and this imagery is based on the Old Testament where the life-giving Spirit of God is often spoken of in terms of water - a natural metaphor in a dry and parched country.

In our text the work of Jesus in making us Christians through His Spirit is described by the Apostle Paul under a two-fold water metaphor. "We were all baptized with the Spirit... and we were all given the Spirit to drink". We should note the universality of this work of the Spirit throughout the Christian body. As the Prophet Joel foretold, every Christian has the Spirit

poured out on him; that is, he has been 'baptized with the Spirit' to quote Jesus' words; he has 'drunk of the Spirit' to quote St Paul in our text. It is this work of the Spirit within which makes the Christian a new man, a new creation; for the Spirit is the Spirit of God, the Creator, and St Paul says in Romans "If any man has not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His". If we have not been baptized by Jesus with the Holy Spirit in regeneration and the new birth, then we have not begun to be Christians, we are still in our sins, still lost eternally. The initial step is to respond to the gracious invitation of the Lord "If any man thirst, let him come unto Me and drink".

The fact that every Christian without exception has received this relationship to the Spirit becomes the ground of our unity as Christians. It is a very close unity, often compared in the New Testament to the unity of the human body. It is a supernatural unity; it is brought about by each of us sharing in the Spirit of God himself. St Paul stresses the Spirit as the unitive factor: "With one Spirit we were all baptized into one body and we were all made to drink of one Spirit". Elsewhere in the New Testament this unity is spoken of as the fellowship of the Spirit, for Christian unity is not a dead inert unity, but it is a unity created by God's presence, by the life-giving Spirit of God, so that it is personal; it is fellowship.

Within this fellowship the Spirit of Christ gives specific gifts with the view that ministering among ourselves these gifts, we may both express our fellowship and build it up. Some of these gifts are mentioned in the passage from which the text is taken. We read of apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, healings, helps, administrators, tongues. Elsewhere St Paul mentions other gifts given by the same Spirit. Everyone has his own gift and the whole fellowship supports each of us in the exercise of our gifts, which we should use for God's glory and for building one another up.

The Christian church is primarily a spiritual unity, "With one Spirit were we all baptized into one body" and from within this unity we exercise our God-given gifts of teaching, of helping, of administration, of evangelism.

How does a local church fit into this concept of God's people being a fellowship through the Spirit of Christ, with the unity of the one Spirit in the diversity of different gifts? In our text the church is compared to the human body, which is a unity with its different parts held together in an intense oneness by the person whose body it is. This is the church, of which we have been made members by the baptism with the Spirit of Christ.

Where then does the local church fit into this picture? Or for that matter, where does our denominational

organization fit in? The church is a fellowship as we have seen, and if we reflect on the nature of fellowship we will see that all fellowships create structures through which they express themselves and which assist them in being fellowships. Take for example the simple illustration of a Women's Fellowship meeting. One of its members will provide the tea and another the milk, another takes the chair. These simple structures are designed to strengthen and assist the fellowship in its functioning. So, too, the Christian church, which is a fellowship of the Spirit, has over the centuries created various structures to express its fellowship, and to assist it. The purpose of these structures is to strengthen that fellowship by being vehicles for its expression, and a means of assisting the exercising of the ministries of its members.

The great danger is the ever present tendency to regard the structures as important in themselves, especially as they are more visible than is fellowship, which is personal and invisible though the real thing. The danger is that instead of the denominational structures serving the fellowship it comes about that the fellowship is made to serve the structures, and this destroys the fellowship. Structures, too, may become too heavy or out of date, and so injure the fellowship instead of assisting it. They may become authoritarian and centralistic, and so infringe and

injure the exercising of those ministries which the Spirit of Christ gives directly to each of His members. The test of any church structure is whether it assists the fellowship of the Spirit and aids the Spirit given ministries of the members.

A church building is a useful structure and is in itself a symbol of unity, for its sole purpose is to provide a meeting place for God's people where they can express their fellowship by coming together to unite in common prayer and praise, and to join together in the fellowship meal of the Lord's supper and to hear God's Word expounded. Thus the church building should serve in furthering one of the basic ministries which the Spirit of God gives within the body of Christ, that is, the ministry of teaching the Word of God. Teaching is essential in the church, whether the teaching is in the home by the parents, or in the congregation by the minister; for the knowledge of God is the foundation of Christian faith, Christian worship and Christian obedience. The Christian life is motivated by the Christian hope. These things must be taught. We are not born with this supernatural knowledge, we must be taught it from the Word of God. Christ rules our consciences through His Word and the pastor who rules the flock of God must teach the Word, and apply it to the conscience. This is his only instrument for ruling in the name of Christ. It is not possible to be a pastor

without being a teacher, and that is why the Scripture insists that those who are admitted to the office of pastor must be 'apt to teach'. So a church building should be a place of fellowship and a place of instruction designed to serve the fellowship which the Spirit of God creates when He baptizes us into Christ.

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