

the point is . . .

What is the Church?
How are we to understand it?
The Word of God is our authority!

the church of the living God

(1 Tim 3:15)

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Whenever I ask a group of Adventist youth whether a person can be a Christian without attending a church, they inevitably reply with an unqualified "yes." For an increasing number of youth the church is not only considered irrelevant for their daily lives, but also equally unnecessary for their Christian existence. In our extremely individualistic western cultures, faith is perceived as a private decision, and church attendance, even for Christians, a matter of personal preference. Yet for the early believers, to belong to Christ meant at the same time to belong to His community.

The modern stress on individual choice has led many to ignore their need of a corporate life. Of course, Christianity affirms the individual. One need only refer to Jesus' concern for isolated persons like the woman at the well (John 4:1-42) or Zacchaeus in the tree (Luke 19:1-10) to make that clear. The individual Christian is the temple of the living God and destined for eternity (1 Cor 6:19-20). That puts a supreme value on each person.

But though personal, Christianity isn't private. It also emphasises the corporate group. Those who were forced into Stalin's Russian penal system found themselves in an archipelago-like cluster of prison. Many a victim survived the horror of that system by receiving and passing on messages that were tapped out on their cell walls with whatever instrument came to hand. Despite the deprivation of Stalin's penal system, prisoners were able to form a contact-system of mutual support. Christians also belong to an "archipelago" network; not in the form of a cruel prison system, but in the form of a worldwide cluster of churches.

When asked to write down the first word that comes into their mind on hearing the term "church," many think of either the place of worship or an organisational structure. Both of these views are misconceptions. It is vital that Christians understand that the word "church" in the NT refers to a local congregation (or a group of congregations) sharing a common life in Christ and not to an administrative hierarchy or to a physical place of worship. Christians are called to come to Jesus the living stone and themselves to become "like living stones, [that] are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 2:5).

It follows that to reverence God's sanctuary requires more than silence in the church building; it demands a commitment to all one's fellow believers. When the NT speaks of Christian fellowship it uses the Greek noun form of the word *koinos* (common) which includes ideas of sharing and participation. Thus an essential aspect of a Christian community is its sharing, its fellowship, its having things in common, or communion. And what Christians share is the gospel, the Spirit, Jesus, suffering and their money (Phil 1:5; 2:1; 1 Cor 1:9; 2 Cor 1:7; 9:13; 13:13).

This rich experience of a common life has its focus in each Christians sharing in the death of Christ. Thus the Lord's Supper is a communion with Christ and with each other, the one loaf and the single cup from which we all partake being a sublime declaration of Christian oneness (see 1 Cor 10:16-17).

One can thus appreciate Paul's fondness for likening the community to the body. The body has various parts but forms a unity, so also the church. Just as pain or pleasure in one part of the body brings sadness or joy to the whole, so it is in the church. Each part of the body has its role in the total life, so the various gifts have a place in the total life of the community (Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12:12-31). The spiritual network of interpersonal relationships that forms the church is just as indispensable to the Christian faith as is the personal conversion of the individual. The NT is very clear on this: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Cor 12:27); "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone" (Romans 14:7); "we are all members of one body" (Eph 4:25).

The gifts that the Spirit distributes to the members of the body of Christ are exercised "for specific tasks within the fellowship itself or in fulfilment of its commission to those outside."[1] But no gift is set above another; each has its importance and function, whether it be prophecy, service, teaching, support, welfare, leadership (Rom 12:6-7). There was to be order and regulation in the Pauline churches, but this was the result of the presence of the exalted Christ through the Spirit, not by a rigid system of government. The congregation itself has greater intrinsic value than the office-bearers, since it is the congregation that is "the house of God" not the leadership.

With the exception of Matthew 16:18 and 18:17, the term "church" (*ekklesia*) is not found at all in the Gospels. This is because the primitive Christian communities sprung up as a direct result of the apostolic witness to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus intended that such assemblies should come into existence, as is clear from Matthew 16:18, but he did not establish them in His own

lifetime. Nevertheless, within a decade of Jesus' decease, Christian communities began to spring up in some of the major centres like Jerusalem and Antioch. The extent and speed of the spread of the Christian churches after the death of Christ is inspiring (see Acts 2:41, 47; 4:4).

When baptised into Christ, a person is baptised into His body (1 Cor 12:13). Baptism cannot be isolated from the assembly. As parts of the one body, no member should consider himself or herself above another (Phil 2:3-4). Thus the local church is an organic unity, bonded together by the Spirit and a common faith in the crucified and risen Lord. "From him [Christ] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph 4:16).

The bond between Christians was so close that they treated each other as family members. Hence the use of the terms "brother" (used 73 times as an address by Paul) to address fellow believers. This is why Paul and Peter refer to the assembly as the "household of God (or) faith" (see Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 4:17). The family atmosphere of the early communities was further fostered by the fact that most groups were quite small (20-40 persons). So small indeed that they met in private homes. Not until about A.D. 250 did the Christian communities own property that was set aside exclusively for corporate worship. The NT speaks repeatedly of the "church that is in your/their house" (Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Philem 2). This very simple Christian "family worship" was quite different from the cultic temple worship of Judaism or paganism.

What then is the church? To answer that question, the NT uses over one hundred terms, images and metaphors to describe the Christian community. One of these likens the church to a temple (1 Cor 3:16-17) with Christ as the central foundation stone (Eph 2:19-20). It is a living edifice built of spiritual worshippers who offer spiritual sacrifices (Rom 12:1; 1 Pet 2:5) and praise (Heb 13:15). The church is a temple because God's Spirit dwells in the congregations midst (2 Cor 6:16). And just as the presence of God in the midst of Israel demanded a holy life, so the new Israel is called to holiness in the environment of an idolatrous pagan world (2 Cor 6:16-7:1).

God's holy building (1 Cor 3:9) is still in process of construction. The gifts of the Spirit are given to empower God's artisans to continue to build His house, the church (1 Cor 3:9-15; 14:12; Heb 3:6). The new temple's edifice grows through evangelism, and the converts, are called from every nation, race and language. God's building is inclusive and knows no discrimination on the basis of race or gender (Galatians 3:28). It is emphasised throughout the Book of Acts that the Spirit was building a new temple by drawing women and men of every nation to faith in God through Jesus (Acts 2:47; 9:31; 14:27; 15:3).

The NT uses over one hundred terms or images for the Church

The image of the church as a bride has its roots in the OT (Isa 54:5-6; 62:4-5; Ezek 16). Paul uses it in several exhortations to local congregations (Rom 7:1-4; 2 Cor 11:2). His most extensive use of it is as a picture of the universal church in Eph 5:22-33. As the body metaphor depicted Christ as the head, the bride image pictures Christ as the Groom and Husband. Jesus loves His bride, the church, and invites submission from her. Christ's death cleanses His bride and prepares her for a glorious future at the Second Advent (Eph 5:27; cf. Rev 21:2). Incredibly Paul applies this metaphor to Christian marriage as providing a model of loving marital harmony (Eph 5:25, 31-33).

Thus the church is like a body with the head, Christ, holding its diversity in an interdependent unity (Col 1:18). It is like a group of friends (Acts 4:23) sharing the gifts of God with each other. Or the church is like an extended family with members from every nation, where Jesus is the brother of all (Heb 2:11-12). Each congregation is a temple where God is present and ministering through the Spirit (Revelation 1.13-20). The church then is the living and essential expression of the gospel and not simply an addition to the faith.

During Australia's early days as a penal colony, convicts in solitary confinement on Port Arthur (Tasmania) had one moment of respite when on Sunday they were marched, masked and alone, into the chapel. Each prisoner was locked into a separate cubicle before the mask was removed. Vision was thus restricted to a forward view, which in practice meant looking exclusively at the preacher. These victims of silence sang the hymns with animated gusto, delighting in the sound of their own voice reverberating in their confined chambers. After the service they were masked and returned one by one to their solitary confinement. The church's role in this barbarity was of course shameful, for it was punishment and not corporate Christian worship.

The church, in contrast with the restrictive penal isolation of the Port Arthur worship experience, is an environment of inclusion, acceptance and open unity. Christian faith is not then a private pursuit that locks one into one's own devotional life like an eastern mystic or a Port Arthur convict. On the contrary, Christianity involves an indispensable communal, though not monastic, life. So can a person be a Christian and purposefully choose not to belong to a local congregation? Not according to the New Testament. ■

1 L. Coenen, "Church" *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 3 vols. (Leicester: IVP, 1992) 2.300.

For reflection . . .

- Why do many Christians see faith as a private decision, and church attendance as being purely a matter of personal preference?
- What was meant by the term "Church" in New Testament times?
- "The bond between Christians was so close that they treated each other as family". Is this closeness possible, practical and desirable today?