

# THE CHURCH

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CONTOURS *of*  
CHRISTIAN  
THEOLOGY

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## THE COLONY OF HEAVEN

In the heart of London's financial district, dwarfed by the soaring towers of the city, nestles St Helen's Church, Bishopsgate. How did this ancient church survive the bombs of Hitler, of the Irish Republican Army, and the bulldozers of progress? Sheer glass walls surround it, the faceless centres of banking and business. A programmer peering down at the quaint church from his thirtieth-floor office smiles over his coffee at this lonely monument to an implausible faith.

Christianity, of course, has never lacked prophets of its demise: among the more recent Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx, Gide and Sartre.<sup>1</sup> Yet since the Second World War the culture of the West, profoundly influenced by Christianity, has been undercut, not so much by the processes of urbanization and globalization, as by a 'systematic dismemberment, a "trashing" of our culture'.<sup>2</sup> Leaders in education, in the media, and increasingly in government, have attacked Christian faith and values, claiming that they oppose both individual liberty and global unity.

A Tuesday visitor in the nave of St Helen's takes advantage of the quiet to reflect on the church in modern life. A young businessman appears, takes a seat and begins to pray. Fair

enough. A small percentage of Britain's diverse population still does this sort of thing. But then another young man appears, and another. Soon they come streaming into the church from the surrounding concrete canyons. Financiers and office staff, men and women, young and old, they crowd in by the hundreds for the lunch-hour Bible exposition, famous at St Helen's for more than a decade.<sup>3</sup> Dick Lucas, pastor of the church, climbs into the pulpit, announces a hymn, then asks his audience to open their Bibles. With startling clarity and force, he explains just what the passage says about Jesus Christ, and why the men and women before him need to know the Lord.

Remarkable as such services may be in a secular age, do they really affect our estimate of the church? It is 'not the New Moon or the Sabbath', but the lunch hour when these people gather. No doubt many are not church members at all. Some will appear for congregational worship on Sunday morning, but office workers cannot create a neighbourhood church. Does the Tuesday-noon gathering at St Helen's only reinforce the impression that the institutional church is indeed a relic, whatever may be the remaining attraction of the gospel message? After bomb damage in 1991 and 1993, St Helen's sought permission to renovate so as to provide more seating. Societies dedicated to preserving period architecture vigorously protested. They wanted the church restored as a monument, not as a centre for gospel proclamation to the city.<sup>4</sup>

## The church in an age of pluralism

Once the church was central in European culture. All Christendom assumed that there was no salvation outside the church. The Protestant Reformers never questioned the importance of the church. Failing to reform the church of Rome, they challenged its claims by distinguishing the marks of the true church.

Now, however, the Roman Catholic Church has surrendered its claim to a sacramental monopoly on salvation. Vatican II describes the blessings of new life in Christ, then adds:

All this holds true not for Christians only but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active



invisibly. For since Christ died for all, and since all men are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery.<sup>5</sup>

Even this sweeping concession still assumes that salvation requires some secret identification with Christ in the 'paschal mystery'. Not so, say radical contemporary theologians. Salvation is not limited to the church, to Christianity, or to Christ.<sup>6</sup> All religions have equal rights for they hold an equal claim to religious truth. An enlightened Christian world citizen, we are told, will avoid Christian terminology that might offend other religions. He or she will speak of God as 'he / she / it'.<sup>7</sup> The only God who might take offence at this neutering is the God of the Bible, noted for his exclusive claims. That God, we are told, died long ago with orthodox theology, and the church is his tomb.

Faced with the revival of heathenism and 'earth religions', should we shelve our concerns about the church and return to Paul's message on the Areopagus, proclaiming to modern pagans the unknown God, Lord of heaven and earth? Many urge just such a change. J. C. Hoekendijk once observed that 'In history a keen ecclesiological interest has, almost without exception, been a sign of spiritual decadence . . .'<sup>8</sup>

To be sure, if the church rather than Christ becomes the centre of our devotion, spiritual decay has begun. A doctrine of the church that does not centre on Christ is self-defeating and false. But Jesus said to the disciples who confessed him, 'I will build my church.'<sup>9</sup> To ignore his purpose is to deny his lordship. The good news of Christ's coming includes the good news of what he came to do: to join us to himself and to one another as his body, the new people of God.

The very threats to the existence of the church in the twenty-first century show again our need of the church. The courage to stand apart, to be unashamed of Christ's claims, is nurtured in the community of those who are baptized into his name. The church may not apply for a union card in a pluralist establishment by signing away its right to proclaim the only Saviour of the world. Together we must make clear that it is to Christ and not to ourselves that we witness. In that witness we are not only

individual points of light in the world, but a city set on a hill. In the ethnic hostility that ravages Europe, Africa and the Middle East, the church must show the bond of Christ's love that unites former enemies as brothers and sisters in the Lord. Only so can the church be a sign of his kingdom: the kingdom that will come when Christ comes, and that is already present through his Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Modern technology and mass media are not in themselves secularistic. They also serve the spread of the gospel. Yet the worlds of business, education and information assume that, while ethical issues remain, religious matters are private concerns, outside the realm of public policy or interest. Individual testimony to Christ's lordship and kingdom wins only a shrug: 'If you have had a religious experience, fine. So did the Jehovah's Witnesses who bothered me yesterday.'

The church, however, as the community of Christ's kingdom, can show the world an ethical integrity it must respect. When Peter describes the impact of Christian righteous deeds in a pagan world, he is thinking not of isolated saints, but of the *people of God*, called out of darkness into God's light.<sup>11</sup> Christian witness that is limited to private religious experience cannot challenge secularism. Christians in community must again show the world, not merely family values, but the bond of the love of Christ. Increasingly the ordered fellowship of the church becomes the sign of grace for the warring factions of a disordered world. Only as the church binds together those whom selfishness and hate have cut apart will its message be heard and its ministry of hope to the friendless be received.

The need of the secular world is greatest at the very points where its criticism of the church is most intense. Only God's truth can set people free; for the church to concede the secular assumption of a chance universe is to deny both Christ's lordship and its own meaning.<sup>12</sup> The church is the community of the Word, the Word that reveals the plan and purpose of God. In the church the gospel is preached, believed, obeyed. It is the pillar and ground of the truth because it holds fast the Scriptures (Phil. 2:16).<sup>13</sup>

Heightened political awareness has again reached the evangelical churches. The left-leaning activism of liberal churches has been overshadowed by the activity of the 'religious



right'. Dedicated Christians have blocked access to abortion clinics with their bodies, accepting police brutality and imprisonment. Protests against pornography and government-sponsored lotteries have caught the attention of news media. Americans have taken new interest in the history of European Christian political parties.

Freedom of religion, so fundamental for democratic life, has moved to centre-stage as Christians have become aware of its erosion under secularist pressure. Jesus declared that his kingdom is not of this world.<sup>14</sup> How, then, are his disciples to witness for truth and justice without forfeiting their pilgrim status? Is the church to be an association for the promotion of detached piety, and is all engagement with society to be the task of Christian organizations distinct from the church? If we are to be faithful to the Lord of the church we must first understand his will for the church.

## The church and the churches

Our concern for the relation of the church to the world forces us to consider also the relation of the church to the churches. For some, the denominational divisions of the church express a healthy diversity. They see the church as a tree bearing twelve kinds of fruit on different branches,<sup>15</sup> and view organizational uniformity as threatening the organic diversity of free growth. In these days, however, even the most ardent advocate of diversity must plead for some limit to the splintering of the people of God.

The missionary expansion of the church has made the issue of church unity inescapable. In the twentieth century the church has been planted in every major country of the world. 'Receiving' churches have become 'sending' churches. The Presbyterian churches of South Korea, for example, now play a major role in the world mission of the church. Missionary concern was a leading factor in the development of the ecumenical movement. Denominational competition in missionary activity could not be controlled by comity agreements (a colonialist technique of dividing up unevangelized areas into assigned missionary territories). The collapse of European imperialism called for a drastic shift in missionary polity. Sending churches and missions

had to take account of the 'younger churches' established in the areas they served. Concern for the visible unity of Christ's church has come to the fore again as heretical sects have rushed in to exploit greater freedom of religion in Eastern Europe.

The ecumenical concern of Christians has been channelled in liberal directions, however, by the ecclesiology of the World Council of Churches (WCC). In the course of the century the ecclesiology of the ecumenical movement traced a full circle. In the early days of the Life and Work movement (one of the confluent streams from which the WCC originated), the motto was, 'Theology divides; service unites.' To an old-fashioned liberal, the peace movement stirred by the First World War offered an obvious and urgent channel for unity in service. But the need for doctrine could not be escaped. In the mid-thirties, confronted with Hitler's nazified German Christian Church, Visser 't Hooft and other neo-orthodox leaders showed the need for a doctrine of the church to answer Hitler. The Faith and Order Conference in Lund in 1952 concluded that 'the doctrine of the church [should] be treated in close relation both to the doctrine of Christ and to the doctrine of the Spirit'.<sup>16</sup>

Theological studies in response to this call during the next ten years, however, did not yield a biblical doctrine of the church that was grounded in renewed understanding of Christology and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Rather, the theological assumptions that had shaped ecumenical ecclesiology were applied to these more fundamental doctrines as well. The church had been defined as becoming rather than *being*; it was not a company of the redeemed, but a ministry of redemption. Accordingly, Claude Welch argued that the doctrine of Christ as well as the doctrine of the church must be consistently expressed in terms of becoming, of 'being-in-relation'. The divine and the human in Christ appear, not as two 'natures', but as a polarity resolved in personal relatedness. The incarnate Christ as well as the church exists in *act*, in becoming, not in being.<sup>17</sup>

The ecumenical movement was close to a consensus in ecclesiology, a consensus shaped by the tension of dialectical theology. Faith and Order reports in preparation for the meeting in Montreal in 1963 tried to resolve the contrasting views of the church by setting them in polarity. The tension