

Church or Synagogue?

"Will the real Church please stand up."

Q. There are so many Christian denominations. Which one is the true church?

A. None of them. As soon as a church becomes a denomination it ceases to be scriptural¹ and cannot therefore be a church. Christ is one and undivided, so his body must be one and undivided. There is no place in Christ for denominations.

Q. Do you mean that only independent churches can be valid churches?

A. At this stage I'll answer Yes to that question, though it's a qualified Yes.

Q. But some denominational churches are alive and flourishing. Surely they must be on the right lines? And what about the house churches? Do you regard those as being a denomination?

A. It all depends on what you mean by a church, or "the church". In the early days of the apostles of course there was nothing tangible which an outsider could see or identify as being "church". There were no special buildings, no special clothing, no organisation with a head office and headed notepaper; just a loosely defined group of people whose one characteristic in common was that they were all devoted to Jesus. By the middle ages of course the exact opposite was the case; the mediæval church had become a hugely powerful and oppressive feudal organisation whose chief characteristic was that its officials were certainly *not* all devoted to Jesus, and all too frequently it persecuted, tortured and murdered the few who were.

But today there are many organisations which call themselves churches, or even The Church. Some have a high visibility in the world and an ordained priesthood which claims to derive its legitimacy from a long tradition which (they say) goes back to the apostles. Membership of such a church is obtained by going through an admission ceremony of some kind and is afterwards maintained by regular attendance at its services, including of course regular payment of a subscription.

Then there are those of which membership is reserved for people who have had a recountable conversion experience of God or can demonstrate their continuing qualification for membership by an on-going profession of faith in him, and who maintain their membership by regular attendance at its meetings, including of course regular payment of a subscription.

Some of these latter churches hold a doctrine of "the priesthood of all believers" and do not have an ordained priesthood as such. They would probably say that the true church is invisible to the world, existing only in the hearts of those people who have somehow acquired a saving faith in Jesus. But of course there are very very many churches, probably a majority, which contain a mixture of both beliefs, some of the visible and some of the invisible overlapping and living side-by-side together.

Q. But you say that none of these is the true church?

A. Correct.

Q. Then what is? Or perhaps, where is it?

A. We have to begin with what Jesus himself said about it. In view of the enormous organisation which "the church" has now become and the large part which it plays in the life of most Christians, it's perhaps surprising to find that Jesus didn't actually say very much about church at all. He seems to have mentioned the subject only twice, and then almost in passing. If he had come to earth for the express reason of founding the vast collection of organisations which now claim to be "the church" one would think he would have said more, and in particular would have given some instructions about how they should be run; but for all we know to the contrary he didn't. Both accounts of the little he did say are found in Matthew and are printed below. To distinguish what Jesus said from modern practice I have replaced the word "church" by a transliteration of the original Greek word - "ecclesia".

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my ecclesia; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be having been bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be having been loosed in heaven. Then he charged his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ. (Matt. 16:18-20)

Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the ecclesia: but if he neglect to hear the ecclesia, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be having been bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be having been loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching everything² that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matt. 18:15-20)

The Language Jesus Spoke

Q. You have focused here on the Greek word *ecclesia*, but Jesus actually spoke Aramaic didn't he, not Greek.

A. It is commonly supposed and frequently taught that Jesus normally spoke Aramaic and some of the time perhaps he did, especially when he was in Judea. After he had raised Lazarus from the dead certain Greeks who wanted to see him spoke firstly to Philip,³ who was from Greek-speaking Galilee. Presumably that was because either they had heard Jesus himself speaking Aramaic, or had assumed that being in the Bethany and Jerusalem area he would be an Aramaic speaker, and in either case he might not understand them, so naturally they approached Philip first because they had probably heard him speaking their own language. But I think the truth is that he who is The Word incarnate could probably then – and certainly now – speak any language of men or angels as he wishes; but as most of his ministry was in Galilee, and the Galilee spoke Greek, it follows that most of the time Jesus probably spoke Greek too. And there are some good reasons for that assumption:-

1. Of approximately 1,600 extant Jewish monumental epitaphs in ancient Palestine dating from 300 BC to AD 500, some 70% are in Greek; 12% are in Latin; and only 18% are in Hebrew or Aramaic.⁴ At the very least this suggests that those who wrote and read the inscriptions were perfectly familiar with Greek, and probably that it was their first language.

2. The region in which Jesus and his mother lived during the Ministry is known in scripture as "Galilee of the Gentiles".⁵ It would hardly have been known as that if the predominant language and culture there had been Aramaic. Even before the time of Alexander⁶ and certainly afterwards, the language of Galilee was that of international commerce and that language was Greek. Jerusalem may have regarded Galilee as a religious backwater but economically it thrived. Capernaum was not bashful about its world status.⁷

3. By the third century BC Jews in Egypt could barely read Hebrew at all, so the scriptures had been translated into Greek – the Septuagint. It was from this translation, not from the Hebrew scriptures, that the evangelists quoted when they drew attention to the Messianic prophecies which had been fulfilled by Jesus.⁸ They would hardly have done so, and the Septuagint would hardly have been copied so laboriously by hand at all, if the people for whom it was written had been speaking Hebrew or Aramaic in normal conversation. Greek, not Aramaic, was the common language and must have been familiar to everybody.

4. Some of the disciples had Greek names.⁹ Pagan Hellenistic imitation had been deplorably widespread amongst the Jews,¹⁰ and even Caesar Augustus, who had forbidden the use of Greek for making speeches in the Senate of Rome, nevertheless had a personal Greek tutor, quoted from the Greek poets, and seriously applied himself to speaking Greek well.¹¹ On the apparently few recorded occasions when Jesus did speak Aramaic his words are preserved verbatim; but as the remainder of what he said was recorded in Greek it is reasonable to suppose that Greek was the language he actually used. Some of his most cutting words such as "hypocrite", were completely Greek and had no counterpart in Aramaic at all. And if, in the extremity of his agony on the Cross his very last word (*tetelestai, it is finished*) had been Aramaic, would not that Aramaic have been devotedly and carefully recorded by those who heard him? It wasn't.

5. In an informative and readable work¹² Alfred Edersheim asks "*Can we believe that, in a Hebrew service, the Messiah could have risen to address the people in Greek, or that he would have argued with the Pharisees and Scribes in that tongue, especially remembering that its study was actually forbidden by the Rabbis?*" With all due respect to the able and eminent scholar we must answer his question Yes. Jesus went deliberately out of his way to *break* the rules invented by those same Scribes and Pharisees and he did so repeatedly. He spoke *to* the people in the language *of* the people, and that language was Greek.

6. The writer to the Hebrews made it clear that the Incarnation was an epochal event. The long-awaited Messiah had arrived; there had been a change of the priesthood and therefore there had been a simultaneous change of law.¹³ Suddenly the promises to Abraham embraced even the despised gentiles! So what better way to force upon stiff Hebrew necks and stubborn Hebrew hearts the profundity of that change than to use the gentiles' own language in which to proclaim it? And of course the New Testament itself was written in Greek. There have been claims that Matthew was written in Aramaic, but if so not a single copy has survived, whereas there are thousands of NT manuscripts in Greek. Hebraisms in the Greek there certainly are and Tyndale was the first to spot them,¹⁴ but the gospel in Aramaic? Not that I know of.

7. Finally, all the alphabetic characters of Hebrew and Greek have numeric values¹⁵ and the study of Gematria - a process of reckoning up the numeric value of scriptural words and phrases - has now become something of an industry.¹⁶ The Greek scriptures, in addition to making available the precision of thought and expression required by a Paul, also display very many remarkable internal mathematical patterns which, matching as they do both those in the ancient Hebrew and those in the natural world around us – *but in no other book or language!* - defy coincidence and compel belief that the timely availability of the Greek tongue cannot be regarded as other than an act of Divine providence. Having therefore prepared Greek specifically to contain and propagate the gospel, would not its Author have used it for that very purpose in the days of his flesh?

So if we can accept that Jesus normally conversed in the same Common Greek as that in which his words were recorded by the four evangelists, we can proceed to consider his use, and our translation, of the Greek word *ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία).

Tyndale's Translation of Ecclesia

In his excellent biography of William Tyndale¹⁷ the late Prof. David Daniell summed up Sir Thomas More's antipathy towards Tyndale thus:-

*"Tyndale's offence has been to offer the people Paul in English, and translate four key New Testament words (presbuteros, ecclesia, agape, metanoeo) in their correct Greek meanings (senior, congregation, love, repent) instead of priest, church, charity and do penance."*¹⁸

Each of these four words was, and still is, loaded with theological dynamite. Here we shall look briefly at just one of them, ecclesia, and attempt to understand why it was that Tyndale defended to a horribly cruel imprisonment and death his translation of the word as congregation, and refused to accept church.

The early English word (written **circe** but pronounced **church**) meant a physical building. However Tyndale's German contemporary Luther had not used the closely related kirche in his translation of ecclesia; he had used the word gemeinde which means something akin to community. Many Germans today refer to the kirche just as Scots refer to the kirk, but in the writer's experience a modern German house church refers to itself as a hauskreis - house circle - laying the emphasis, as Luther did, on the people and not upon a building.

And somewhat awkwardly for any translator, Jesus had employed a word which had neither correspondence in Jewish thought nor background in Jewish tradition. There were several Hebrew and Aramaic words he could have used which described various kinds of assembly familiar to the Jews but he didn't use any of them. Instead he used a word, and used it twice, which came not from Moses but from Periclean Athens, and that word did not describe a religious assembly at all, not even a pagan one. We have seen that in Matthew's gospel the word ecclesia occurs only twice and in the other gospels not at all, and those two brief occurrences in Matthew simply cannot be pulled out into a description of, and justification for, the vast, wealthy, and powerful religious organisation which in Tyndale's day claimed, as it does today, to be the body and bride of Christ's own choosing. For Tyndale, scholar, thinker, and theologian, there was a large and obvious mis-match between the few words of Christ and the mighty mediæval church which dominated feudal Europe. Doctrines were taking shape in his mind of which into the wrong ears it was death even to speak. Translating ecclesia was going to be a problem!

Tyndale was writing for Englishmen, not Germans, so Luther's word gemeinde was not open to him. Refusing to use the mediæval word church, neither would he borrow the Greek word synagogue, though it meant a safely neutral "going together". Possibly he avoided synagogue and left it for posterity to the Jews - another indication of the long-standing Jewish use of Greek - because he didn't wish unnecessarily to alienate the anti-Semitic Luther. But more probably Tyndale was already aware from his classical and Hebrew studies that although the services in a Jewish synagogue were very similar to the services in a modern Christian church, **what went on in both of them was wholly unlike anything which happened in a classical ecclesia.** Although Tyndale disliked Latin he settled finally for the Latin word congregation. We may glimpse from his choice perhaps something of the tactical burdens which lay upon his work.

The King James Version

The King James Version of the New Testament borrowed heavily from Tyndale but not in the case of ecclesia, which in the KJV is usually translated church. The Puritans argued against it but they were over-ruled by the King (who disliked their egalitarian outlook anyway). Nevertheless even in the KJV we do sometimes find the word ecclesia rendered more accurately when the context is such that it could not possibly have been translated in any other way. In Acts 19 we find Paul at Ephesus and as usual he is at the centre of a riot. Ephesus was in an uproar and the situation had to be calmed down by the town clerk or risk being forcibly broken-up by the Romans, whose emperor Tiberius hated public disorder and punished it accordingly. Now the Greek word which Luke used of that crowd is ecclesia (vs 39 & 41) and was translated by Tyndale with perfect consistency as congregation; but in the KJV it became "assembly", for under no circumstances could that melee of pagan rioters possibly be described as a Christian church. Yet elsewhere in the King James, as in most other translations of the New Testament, church is precisely how the same word is normally translated. Like most things decided by committees it's a muddle. The scholarly Tyndale would never have tolerated such unscholarly inconsistency.

So what actually was the Ecclesia?

As commentators never tire of telling us, the word ecclesia means literally "called-out ones" and it does indeed mean that; but two thousand years ago it also meant much more. In the Golden Age of classical Greece (480 - 404 BC) the ecclesia was the governing body of a city state. It comprised all the free men of the city who had reached the age of eighteen and who were otherwise eligible to try cases and pass laws (no slaves, no women). The ecclesia combined two functions which in a modern democracy we usually try to keep separate, the legislature and the judiciary. The Greek ecclesia was the supreme civil authority, the governing body of a city, and its decisions were binding and final. The ecclesia held magistrates to account, it ratified or overturned decisions of the courts, and when necessary it declared war. Jesus's hearers knew perfectly well what an ecclesia was because since the time of Alexander, Greek language and administration had prevailed throughout the whole of what we now call The Middle East, and much of it remained behind even after the Romans had fought their own way through. The Romans allowed or adopted other nations' customs when they found them useful, and the ecclesia was one of them. In Matthew 18 we find Jesus describing an ecclesia functioning in a way which would have been perfectly familiar to his hearers, namely as a court of appeal in a case of tort. The ecclesia was a civil and

legal body, it was definitely not a religious one. Neither was it a standing committee; it did not meet every week. It was an *ad hoc* assembly which met only when summoned - hence its name - and it didn't sing hymns!

Q. What happened to the ecclesia? Did it eventually die out?

A. Well you may be surprised to learn that the ecclesia of which Jesus spoke has actually survived to the present day right here in England, though now so greatly changed in form and function that it is seldom recognised as such.

*"The jury is the one great contribution of the Franks to the English legal system. Unknown in this country before the Conquest, the germ of it lies far back in the practice of the Carolingian kings. In origin the jury was a royal instrument of administrative convenience: the King had the right to summon a body of men to bear witness under oath about the truth of any question concerning the royal interest. It was through this early form of jury that William the Conqueror had determined the Crown rights in the great Domesday survey. The genius of Henry II, perceiving new possibilities in such a procedure, turned to regular use in the courts an instrument which so far had only been used for administrative purposes. Only the King had the right to summon a jury. Henry II accordingly did not grant it to private courts, but restricted it to those who sought justice before the royal judges."*¹⁹

From its origins in Periclean Athens the ecclesia was adopted by the Roman emperors, after whom its use was continued by those European states whose legal systems had been founded upon Roman law. In the 11th century it leaped with the Normans across the Channel to England, and today we are familiar with it in its modern form, the jury of "twelve honest men" whose function is to decide the guilt or innocence of persons on trial. Our modern jury is a limited and less potent form of the ancient Greek ecclesia, but a direct descendent of it none the less.

What did Jesus mean by Ecclesia?

Though accustomed we may be to the concept of the jury and the important part it plays in our English legal system, when the Lord Jesus spoke of his ecclesia he was obviously thinking about something other than jury service. And for the translator into English there is worse yet, for by the first century AD *only* the Roman emperor could summon the ecclesia, so it is doubly surprising that we find Jesus using the word. The Greek city-states had long since lost their power, Rome ruled the world, and only the emperor could speak of *his* ecclesia. So for an obscure Jewish rabbi in a backward province on the edge of the empire to speak of *his* ecclesia would have puzzled and perhaps even embarrassed his followers. It was incongruous to say the least. His use of the word would have furrowed brows then and it should furrow brows now, because an ecclesia didn't pray, it didn't sing hymns, it didn't read from any sacred writings, it didn't endure sermons, and it didn't take up any offerings. The only assembly in first-century Palestine which did *then* what in church we do *now* was a synagogue, but although Jesus taught in the synagogues he never used the word when teaching, except to condemn their hypocrisy! And he certainly didn't go about "synagogue planting" because God had never commanded the building of synagogues anyway. Synagogues arose during the Jewish captivity to Babylon because the Temple had been destroyed and its five visible manifestations of the Divine Presence²⁰ had vanished, so the Jewish exiles in Babylon presumably began to meet on the sabbath day to read such portions of the scriptures as they still had, and no doubt also to weep for the glory past and pray for better times ahead. Synagogues were a pathetic attempt to recapture – or at least to keep alive the memory of – that surpassing glory which had once been the Temple in Jerusalem, but that's all they were. They were never part of God's original plan. Whatever Jesus meant by "my ecclesia" he certainly wasn't talking about a Jewish synagogue, nor even about the synagogue's modern religious descendent that today we call a Christian church. The ecclesia was an assembly of free men which could be called together by the emperor for the express purpose of ratifying his decrees and judgments. Henry II used it in that way and it had absolutely nothing to do with the worship of God.

Q. Well, it's true perhaps that Jesus didn't say much about the ecclesia, but then he didn't say much about the cross either. However the apostles did, and Paul most of all. Surely it was Paul's teaching which guided the first believers into the sort of churches we have today?

A. The apostles' teaching about the church has to be viewed in the light of what Jesus himself had taught. Paul indeed said much more than Jesus about the ecclesia BUT..... we make a great mistake if we read into Paul's teaching the supposition that what he was thinking and writing about was what today we call a church. Paul must be read forwards from the starting point of the ecclesia that Jesus spoke of, not backwards from what WE today call a church. Our modern churches are as far removed from the ecclesia of which Jesus spoke, and Paul wrote, as is its modern descendent the jury. Both have degenerated greatly from the ecclesia that both Jesus and Paul knew. In short, our modern churches bear exactly the same relationship to the ecclesia of the New Testament as today's Jewish synagogues have to Solomon's Temple at Jerusalem; even at best (which usually they are not) they are only a distant folk-memory of the real thing.

Translating Ecclesia into English

A. Scholars have argued mightily about translating ecclesia, and it was even one of the many things over which the Civil War was fought (though of course there were others). Tyndale's use of "congregation" was a brave step away from the mediæval "church" and towards what Jesus meant by ecclesia, but it was only a partial step, and even that was forcibly resisted by the establishment. Even the modest "congregation" was heresy to those of the Roman allegiance because it laid an axe to the root of everything the mediæval church was. Tyndale's congregation could assemble itself together without a priest; it could be governed by un-learned men; the people owed their congregation nothing but love; and to repent of their sins they needed only a sincere change of mind, unencumbered by the expensive and humiliating penances which for a

thousand years had reinforced both the church's coffers and its dominance over the souls of men. No wonder the church hated William Tyndale! Tyndale's transparent humility, sincerity and Godliness were all a standing rebuke to More's pride, cleverness and uncleanness,²¹ and just as the learned Scribes and Pharisees had resolved upon the death of Tyndale's master, the learned Sir Thomas More resolved upon the death of William Tyndale. Thus it was that in a damp and dark Flanders prison, England's greatest classical scholar and Godliest theologian found the courage and faith to follow his divine master; not only to a cruel execution but, when men had done all that they could do, beyond it to the Father of lights and [the congregation of first-born sons which are written in heaven.](#)²² Well indeed did Tyndale pray that God would open the king of England's eyes. Pent in that evil fastness at Vilvoorde, did William Tyndale perhaps glimpse something of the living but mysterious relationship implied by the very un-Jewish word which the Lion of Judah had used? Something vital which still eludes most of us today?

Q. Er..., what was that then?

Binding and Loosing

A. Think of what Jesus said. On both the occasions of which his use of the word ecclesia is recorded he went straight on to talk about "binding and loosing" (a figure of speech incidentally which had absolutely nothing to do with the current unscriptural fad for "binding" Satan).

"... [whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be having been bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be having been loosed in heaven.](#)"

Q. OK, so what is this "binding and loosing"?

A. "Binding and loosing" is a Hebraism for giving legal judgment. A rabbi would "bind" some things as being commanded by God and "loose" other things as not being so commanded, and that language was familiar to Israelites from the time of Moses onwards.

*"In making their decisions as to applications of the law, the rabbis would forbid some things and permit others. These acts of forbidding and permitting were called "binding" and "loosing", and we have many examples of rabbinic ruling in the Mishnah (the written version of the oral law) where the words "bind" and "loose" are used in this technical sense of "forbid" and "permit". It is significant to note that in present-day Israel one sees public notices prohibiting smoking, or walking on the grass, or permitting photographs to be taken, using the modern Hebrew words for "bind" and "loose" in the same technical sense."*²³

However there was something different about the way Jesus used the expression in connection with *his* ecclesia. He said "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be **having been bound** in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be **having been loosed** in heaven." The words **having been** are conveyed clearly by the tense of the Greek but they have not generally survived the process of translation into English, presumably because few translators have understood what Jesus was talking about. However they are vitally important to the sense because they enforce the fact that the judgments pronounced by the Lord's ecclesia are **not the judgments of earth, but the judgments of heaven**. The ecclesia of God is a legal, practical, and prophetic body by means of which the Lord Jesus now fulfills and answers the prayer **Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven**. The ecclesia is a body of people who pronounce upon earth with prophetic authority the judgments of God which he has spoken in heaven, exactly as he gave legally binding judgments to Moses at the door of the tabernacle. In brief....

The purpose of the ecclesia is to speak and ratify on earth the decrees and judgments spoken by God in heaven.

Of course to function like that demands of an ecclesia that it have the same prophetic relationship with God as was given to Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Peter, Paul, and John. Such a relationship was certainly not given to the corrupt mediæval church of Rome, and today it still lies beyond our lax and lukewarm Laodicean church, but it was not always so. The late David Gardner, in his book *The Trumpet Sounds for Britain*, described how God so frequently answered the nation's prayers during the Second World War, and those of a certain age will remember how Rees Howells then led a prayer group of about a hundred and twenty believing and faithful Christians in Swansea, South Wales. Throughout the war the Lord would tell Rees what Hitler was about to do and how things were going with our men who were fighting the Nazis. At critical moments in the fighting those Christians in Swansea knew more about what was happening at the front than did anybody else in England, sometimes more than Winston Churchill. One man who attended those daily meetings and also had access to Churchill's war cabinet would then drive from Swansea to London to brief the Prime Minister on what the Lord had said, so that Churchill could then decide upon the orders he needed to give (see also 2 Kings 6: 8-12). But there were also times when more than human strength was needed. The missionary Norman Grubb wrote an account of it all in his book *Rees Howells Intercessor* and here just one example will have to stand for many.

"In September 1943 the danger spot was Salerno, where our troops were landing to establish a beachhead prior to opening the way to Rome. Rees Howells, his voice scarcely audible, said to the meeting "The Lord has burdened me between the meetings with the invasion at Salerno. I believe our men are in great difficulties, and the Lord has told me that unless we can pray through, they are in danger of losing their hold." The awe of God settled down upon us, for this came as a complete surprise, there having been no official news to this effect on the wireless. ... The Spirit took hold of us and

suddenly broke through in the prayers, and we found ourselves praising and rejoicing, believing that God had heard and answered. ... The victory was so outstanding that I looked at my watch as we rose to sing. It was on the stroke of 11 pm.

We waited to hear the midnight news. The announcer gravely told us exactly what (Rees) had told us from the Lord – that unless some miracle happened, our troops were in grave danger of losing the beachhead before morning. This only served to confirm to us the guidance of the Spirit. ... On Thursday morning one of the daily newspapers displayed a front page headline in large print, "The Miracle at Salerno". The account of the reporter personally at the front ran somewhat as follows: "I was with our advanced troops in the invasion of Salerno on Monday. The enemy artillery was advancing rapidly and with ceaseless firing. The noise was terrible, and it was obvious that unless a miracle happened, our troops could never hold up the advance long enough for the beachhead to be established. Suddenly, for no accountable reason the firing ceased and the Nazi artillery stopped its advance. A deathly stillness settled on the scene. We waited in breathless anticipation, but nothing happened. I looked at my watch – it was eleven-o'clock at night. Still we waited, but still nothing happened; and nothing happened all that night, but those hours made all the difference to the invasion. By morning the beachhead was established."

Similar things happened at Dunkirk, during the Battle of Britain, at Alexandria and El Alamein, at Moscow, Stalingrad, and on D-Day itself. On 8th July 1945 Mr Howells said "I don't believe there is anything to compare with the night we invaded Normandy. We said that God was going over before our men and it wasn't going to be like Dunkirk. The Daily Telegraph reported that it was only that night the U-Boats did not patrol the Channel. The way we went over to Normandy was beyond imagination – 4,000 ships and 11,000 aircraft – and they never met a single ship or aircraft of the enemy! God said "I am going over and there won't be a set-back; and although while I am preaching there is a big battle on, I go back to his word that there will be no reverses."

The secular historians have done a good job of documenting the military actions of the war but how few of them, even now, know where the spiritual battles behind them were being fought? And they were no picnic. Mr Howells told his prayer group "You don't leave anything to chance in this. Don't allow those young men at the Front to do more than you do here."

Q. Well, this is all a bit new to me. That sounds to me like prevailing prayer certainly, but not really binding and loosing as you have described it. What sort of things attract such judgments of God? Can you give me some practical examples?

Examples

A. If you wish. Some Christians in London received news that a family of believers in a Muslim country had been imprisoned, so the brethren in London began at once to pray for their release. For three days there was no answer from heaven, but then suddenly one evening the word came, and it was a word of command from the Lord Jesus to the Muslim authorities. "Release them!" So one of the brethren in London spoke that command out loud in the Name of the Lord Jesus, and immediately the thing was done. News arrived the following day that the whole family had been released.

On another occasion a brother in England received a phone call from a Christian woman in America who asked him to pray for a friend of hers in whose ovaries two tumors had recently been found to have grown so large that the surgeons did not dare to touch them and had declared the patient to be inoperable; she was not expected to live long. Having some discernment the Christian woman asked her friend if anybody had been using witchcraft against her? Sticking pins in a doll or something like that? Was there somebody perhaps who was jealous of the woman's husband and fine young children? Well, yes, it turned out that there was, an elderly woman relative was exactly so jealous. As he listened to this account by phone from America the brother knew that something more than prayer was called for, so he fasted for a day just to ready himself and then early the following morning he went to battle. Standing up and turning to face in the general direction of America, he rebuked the demonic powers who had been invoked by the elderly relative's jealousy. As he did so he found himself immediately in the spirit and looking down upon America from a place in the heavens high above the home of the woman who had been attacked and had the tumors. He rebuked the enemy in the name of Jesus, and as he spoke he saw demons fly out from that woman's home in all directions, as mice flee from a cat who has pounced upon their nest. The brother ordered the demons to keep away in future and then committed the woman into the Lord's hands for healing. A week later that woman went again to her hospital and this time of course there was no sign of anything wrong with her. To the amazement of her doctors the inoperable tumors had simply vanished.

Q. Well, I can see how those could have been a sort of "loosing". Jesus himself spoke of a woman being loosed from the bondage of Satan like that.²⁴ But what about "binding". Do you have an example of that?

A. Yes. A brother had warned a local assembly which called itself a Baptist church that they were tolerating gross sins in their midst which greatly dishonoured the Lord's Name, but the elders took no action. The brother was then sent by the Lord to live for nearly six months several hundred miles away. When he returned, but before he had had any opportunity to meet with the brethren, that brother was woken at four-o'clock one Monday morning by the Holy Spirit, who wrestled with him until seven. Then suddenly the word of the Lord came in the form of a prayer which the brother prayed out loud back to God who had given it: "**O Lord, pull down the Baptist church.**" That was all. On the following Thursday the Baptists held a church meeting at which fully half of the membership resigned and walked out. The brother had not opened his mouth to them again nor played any part in the process at all - except to speak that prophetic word from heaven which accomplished the Lord's will. The people who were the object of that word never heard it, and to this day

they are still unaware of the prophet's part in what happened. But God had bound that assembly, and when his servant spoke the thing was done.

Again, there was a Christian brother whose greatest persecutors throughout his childhood had been his own parents who, until he reached the age of forty mocked and despised his faith in the Lord Jesus, and lost no opportunity to ascribe to him the very worst of motives and generally to blacken his name. The last letter which that brother had received from his own father was so malevolent in its content that having read it he burnt it, and being grown to manhood, he resolved to break off further contact with both his parents for they had proved themselves to be enemies of the Lord and of his gospel.

After the passage of years a situation arose in which an unrelated woman blasphemed badly in the brother's presence, and for several days the matter troubled his spirit because she had said things which ought not to have been spoken. Late one night that brother was woken by the Holy Spirit and given a word which he spake out loud into the darkness. "**Shut your filthy mouth, or I will cut out your tongue and shut it for you.**" Having spoken the words the brother returned to bed and slept. The following morning his Bible reading contained the words **The mouth of the just bringeth forth wisdom: but the froward tongue shall be cut out** (Prov.10:31). Now the previous night had actually been Passover night, in which (whether Christians know it or not and usually don't) God still takes vengeance on the enemies of his people, and the timing combined with the scriptural word confirmed to the brother that the prophecy had been of the Lord. So he waited to hear that it had been done to the blasphemer according to the word which had been given by God. But the days passed and no such news came. Indeed quite some time passed, and still there was no news. But then when about four years had gone by, there came news that the man's own mother had died, and the notice in the newspaper mentioned that for the last four years of her life the woman had been without the power of speech. The other woman whose blaspheming had grieved the brother's spirit had not in fact been the object of his prophecy (though she might very well have been); instead the object of the brother's prophetic word had been his own mother, whom the Lord had thereby punished for her own past blasphemy. She who had once railed at her own son, pointing the finger in scorn, deriding him, and mockingly calling him "*the man of God*" (as the Roman soldiers had once mocked his master Jesus) found out to her own very great cost that a man of God was exactly what her son was. The Lord had arranged for his servant to speak aloud the binding judgment of God in the matter, and that without any transgression of the fifth commandment.

So here we have seen examples of what the Lord Jesus meant by his ecclesia "binding and loosing". In each case a man spoke on earth the judgments which God had already spoken in heaven, and because the word of God carries within itself the power to do the will of God, judgment was immediately carried out.

Q. So are you saying that doing this sort of prophetic speaking should be what we do in church?

A. No, not in the assemblies which today call themselves churches, because they are not built according to the heavenly pattern. But it *is* what Jesus said *his* ecclesia would do. The word proceeds from the throne of God. When a believer receives that word into his heart it becomes flesh, and when he speaks it forth it goes out from him and executes the will of God. It comes from heaven into the world, and it does not return again until it has accomplished the will of God who gave it. It can be a word of healing or a word of judgment. Let us imagine a company of believers who listen continually for the pronouncements of God spoken in heaven and then speak out those very same words upon earth. God's will embraces matters great and small; the lives of individuals and the affairs of nations. Nothing is beyond his knowledge; nothing is beyond his wisdom; nothing is beyond his power. At the word of God a sparrow or a kingdom may fall and another rise in its place. Even the very powers of heaven may be shaken. **What could God not do by the binding and loosing work of such an ecclesia!**

Christian Synagogues

Q. Then why aren't our churches doing this kind of thing?

A. Because they are not churches at all; they are Christian synagogues. In this country we have some thirty thousand Christian synagogues, but not a single ecclesia.

Q. I'm not sure I understand you. You have just said that Jewish synagogues arose during the captivity in Babylon. Are you now calling our churches synagogues?

A. Yes.

Q. But why?

A. Because that's what they are. Had you ever been to a Jewish synagogue you would know that in terms of what goes on there it's not really very different from our so-called churches. First (and it is *first*) there's a reading from the Bible, then a hymn or two, a prayer or two, then somebody preaches a sermon. And yes again, there's that same great central act of participatory worship, the offering. It's all pretty much what we Christians do so we may as well use the same word for both. We don't have any ecclesias in England but we do have a great many Christian synagogues.

Q. But Jesus said that wherever two or three are gathered together in his name, he would be present in the midst of us. He didn't say that about synagogues, he said it only to Christians.

A. No, he said it to Jews.

Q. Well yes, I suppose he did. But they *became* Christians. That's what makes the difference.

A. Unfortunately it doesn't. He isn't personally present at our Christian synagogues any more than he is personally present at the Jews' synagogues. God gave no commandment concerning the building of either their synagogues or ours, for neither was ever part of his plan.

Q. Oh, come on! I've just quoted the promise he made. He said that wherever two or three are gathered together in his name he would be there in the midst. How can you possibly say that he isn't?

A. Because we never fulfill his condition. He didn't say "Wherever two or three Christians gather themselves together I will be present". He said "Wherever two or three **are gathered together in my name** ²⁵ I am there in the midst". "Are gathered" means "as sheep are gathered by their shepherd."

Q. Isn't that the same thing? Surely you're splitting hairs now.

A. Far from it, and the difference is life and death. Consider this: Who is it that can speak or act in another's name? Obviously only somebody who has been authorised to do so. Nobody can take it upon himself to be the ambassador of a king; only a person who has been individually called and legally authorised can act in his king's name. Only one who has personally received his king's instructions can repeat them in front of others as the king himself would do if he were there. The apostles were called and chosen and authorised to act in the name of Jesus when he sent them out to heal the sick, cast out demons, raise the dead, preach the gospel, and nobody else could do it. Only those who had been commissioned personally by Jesus had the power and authority to act in his Name, and people knew that.

Q. But isn't that power now given to every believer?

A. No, it isn't. Many are called but few are chosen. Being an ambassador is a position of immense trust, for whatever an ambassador says binds his king. How many Christians in your church can raise the dead? The illiterate Yorkshire plumber Smith Wigglesworth (1859 – 1947) did it more than a dozen times, but who in England does it now? There's nobody in England today whom God can trust as he could trust Smith Wigglesworth. Wigglesworth was called, and chosen, and faithful,²⁶ therefore he was authorised by God to act in the Name of Jesus. You aren't, therefore you can't.

Q. But the Lord was with Wigglesworth everywhere he went. He was a remarkable man certainly, but you must admit he was an exception.

A. Exactly. And that's precisely why we now have synagogues, not ecclesias. Unless you have been authorised to act in the Name of Jesus you cannot possibly meet, speak, pray, or do anything else **in his Name**. If you are not meeting in his Name he will not be present at your meetings, and if God isn't present at your meetings you don't have an ecclesia, you have a synagogue.

Q. Hmm.... So how can we move from being a synagogue to being an ecclesia?

A. Apart from a sovereign act of the Lord Jesus we can't. It is he alone who controls where the candlesticks are placed.

Q. You've lost me again. What candlesticks? Are you referring to the seven candlesticks which John saw on Patmos?

A. Yes. The candlesticks are the Lord's ecclesias, and he alone decides where to put them. Men can start synagogues but God never commanded them, and synagogues are not the ecclesias of which the Lord Jesus Christ is the head.

Q. Well, in that case I can never have come across an ecclesia! Do they actually exist?

A. Not that I know of now in England, though we have occasionally had one or two in the past and I do know of some ecclesias elsewhere in the world now. Indeed, going back for a moment to Tyndale, the very reason we haven't got a functional English translation of the word ecclesia is that we haven't got a functional English ecclesia to embody it. Where an ecclesia of the Lord Jesus does exist in some other parts of the world it's normally known to him alone, because only he speaks the words of judgment in heaven which are given voice by his ecclesia on earth, and that speaking is usually done in private. It's prophetic in nature. Very few Christians have ever experienced the operation of prophecy in this way and the few who have don't talk about it.

Q. And you say we haven't got even one of those now in England?

A. Correct. Today in England we have some thirty thousand Christian synagogues of various hues and denominations, but not one single ecclesia.

Q. Can we not ask the Lord to put one here?

A. You can ask, but unless there are at least two or three who fulfil his conditions he probably will not do as you have asked. Remember he said, "Wherever two or three **are gathered** together **in my name**". The Greek verb here is in the passive voice, which means the two or three have to **be gathered** by the Lord. They cannot just gather themselves together²⁷ and expect God to do whatever they want, and they cannot be gathered together by anybody at all **in the Name of Jesus** unless he has commanded them so to do. It is his ecclesia and he alone makes all the plans and takes the initiative in it.

Q. So isn't there anything we can do? This all sounds a bit passive, even defeatist.

A. It precludes a lot of human effort certainly. **Except the LORD build the house, they labour in vain who build it?**²⁸ In her book²⁹ on the Welsh revival of 1904-5 Mrs Jessie Penn-Lewis wrote "*It is of the most vital importance that the people of God should discern the true inwardness of God's workings, lest they be occupied with the outward manifestations and seek to copy that which only can be produced by God Himself when his people obey the conditions of blessing.*" The normal meaning of the common Greek word *hypocrite* which Jesus spat at the Pharisees was **actor**, because that's what the religious leaders were. They were self-satisfied fakes who had learned their part and could act out a religious pantomime to a gullible audience, improvising where necessary. They had never been dealt with personally - naked and alone - by the Omnipotent One, the Eternal One, the Omniscient One, the Mighty All-Powerful and Immeasurable One, the God of Burning Fire at whose very Breath stars came into being or fled in terror from His face. They neither go into the Kingdom themselves, and those who would go in they turn away. Yes indeed, we have plenty of those smug well-educated religious hypocrites today, and they blunder on in their darkness doing terrible damage to the Lord's interests.

Nevertheless there are things we can do which are the normal response of a believer to the command to "be occupied"³⁰ and if we truly mean business with God we can do those and he will take note of them. We can very well preach the gospel and start a meeting for prayer and Bible study; those are obviously commendable activities. But whether or not the Lord Jesus responds by planting a candlestick in your town or village or house will depend upon what his messengers report to him, and then upon what he himself finds if and when he visits you in person to assess your situation.

Q. I assume by messengers you are referring to angels? What can we do to ensure a good report?

A. A lot.

Preparation for becoming an Ecclesia

1. Deal thoroughly with all sin. As the Jews have to remove all yeast from their houses before Passover you have to remove all sin from yours, but *you* have to do it permanently. And sin is what God calls sin, not what mere pastors, priests, politicians, or people have decided is or isn't sin. If God has said that a certain thing is abomination to him it has to be an abomination to you too.

2. Settle it in your hearts that you will *believe* every word of scripture and *obey* its every command.³¹

3. Refuse membership of your meetings to any who are not truly born again. The enemy will send them to you but you must sensitively and firmly refuse them entry no matter who they are. When one of Wesley's preachers called him to Dublin because he couldn't manage the six hundred souls who had joined his meetings, Wesley travelled to Dublin, personally interviewed every one of the six hundred, and expelled fully half of them from the meetings.

4. Also refuse entry to all who love the sound of their own voice or the praise of men. The enemy will send some of those too but you must bluntly and firmly refuse them no matter who they are. Typically they will be those who have held office of some kind in something they have hitherto called a church and will consider themselves to be elder brethren who should naturally have a leading part in any work of God begun in your area. They will sense intuitively where the power is, but don't you even let them through the door because they will want to take over the meeting and only Jesus has that right. The Temple in Jerusalem had armed guards to keep out the uncircumcised and you too have to exercise exactly the same vigilance in keeping uncircumcised hearts out of your meetings.

5. Pray without ceasing that the Lord's Presence may be gracious to come amongst you. But beware... IF he should do so you can expect him to have a zero-tolerance of sin and to reward rebellion and disobedience with death, as he did in the case of Ananias and Saphira. Are you quite sure you all want that? All of you? Always?

6. Then, if you have done all the above, all you can do is watch and pray and wait, perhaps for years. The great apostle of China Watchman Nee said that it's like seeing a beautiful bird singing in a tree outside your window. You would love the bird to fly into your room and sing, but all you can do is open the window. You cannot compel the bird to come in, and indeed any foolish action on your part will have the very opposite effect and send it flying away. You can only open the window, keep quiet, and hope.

The Angel of The Presence

But *if you are genuine the Lord Jesus will hear you*, and at some stage he will visit you and make a decision. You will probably not see him, and if he does not like what he sees he will probably just quietly leave again, so don't waste his time.

But if he should decide to establish you as an ecclesia he will station amongst you a unique and most holy angel who will bring his abiding Presence amongst you to give you his orders and to relay your prayers to him.

For he said, Surely they are my people, children that will not lie: so he was their Saviour. In all their affliction he was afflicted, **and the Angel of his Presence saved them:** in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit: therefore he was turned to be their enemy, and he fought against them. (Psalm 63:8-10)

That angel was seen by Moses as a shimmering silver-blue light above the Mercy Seat between the Cherubim, by the Persian Magi (who had inherited Daniel's teaching) as the star of Bethlehem,³² and by John after the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus as *seven* stars, the Angels of the Ecclesias. I have yet to meet any Christian who could explain the significance of the *seven* stars, which is an abject failure of modern so-called Christianity because the seven stars are also described in scripture as being **in his hand** (Rev 1:16-20), **lamps of fire before the throne** (Rev 4:5), and so intimately part of the Lord Jesus himself that John saw him as **a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth.** (Rev 5:6). The seven spirits here described are therefore not created angels but part of the One God himself, which is why John could write **Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before his throne; and from Jesus Christ** (Rev 1:4). Here, at the very opening of the book, **the seven spirits are equated with God.** No created angel is ever spoken of like that. The Angels of the ecclesias do not just bring messages from God: they bring his very Presence into the ecclesia. We shall have more to say about this later, but first a dire warning:-

Warning!

Most Christians will probably never see any of the Angels of the Presence until the second coming and resurrection, and you must NEVER under any circumstances even think of contacting spirits of any kind yourself, because dabbling in such matters will attract only deceiving spirits from the devil. **You deal *only* with God the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.** The Angel of the Presence IS Jesus, a man, the living Word of God made and manifest in the flesh, and he deals with us as a man to other men. Angels come and go and do His will, and exceptionally you may see them, but you do not seek them out. If in doubt, ask.

The Living Ecclesia

IF - at the sole discretion of the Lord Jesus - he should make of you an ecclesia, the Angel of his Presence will take up his station amongst you.³³ Some of you (probably the prophets) will see the Shekinah³⁴ in your meetings and of course you will be preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God, healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead, and doing all the other works of a scriptural ecclesia. You will grow very quickly and you will be persecuted by the world, by the carnal and nominal Christians, and by the servants of antichrist. But of course you already know that.

Q. Where is this description of an ecclesia taught in scripture? I cannot remember seeing it anywhere.

A. It is there. But remember this: that scripturally and historically Christ himself is a mystery, and scripture tells us that **The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.**³⁵ Understanding spiritual things is impossible for both the unregenerate and the carnal (which covers most people) therefore if the unregenerate and the carnal *can* see it, it isn't an ecclesia. Only the spiritual can discern that which is spiritual and then only by revelation, not by intellectual effort. But the pattern of the ecclesia is there all right. Take this passage in Zechariah 4:-

And the angel that talked with me came again, and waked me, as a man that is wakened out of his sleep, and said unto me, What seest thou? And I said, I have looked, and behold a candlestick all of gold, with a bowl upon the top of it, and his seven lamps thereon, and seven pipes to the seven lamps which are upon the top thereof: and two olive trees by it, one upon the right side of the bowl and the other upon the left side thereof. So I answered and spake to the angel that talked with me, saying, What are these, my lord? Then the angel that talked with me answered and said unto me, Knowest thou not what these be? And I said, No, my lord. Then answered I and said unto him, What are these two olive trees upon the right side of the candlestick and upon the left side thereof? And I answered again, and said unto him, What be these two olive branches which through the two golden pipes empty the golden oil out of themselves? And he answered me and said, Knowest thou not what these be? And I said, No, my lord. Then said he, These are the two anointed ones, that stand by the Lord of the whole earth.

Here we see the pattern exactly. Cast your mind back to the Ark of the Covenant, which in the days of Moses was (and possibly still is) the physical throne of God upon earth. As long as it stood in the temple the blood of a bullock and the blood of a ram were mixed together once a year and sprinkled seven times by the high priest upon one specified end of the mercy seat.³⁶ At either end of the Ark (not on top of it) stand two man-sized cherubim holding staves of authority, their gaze fixed upon the mercy seat. Now these holy artefacts are the pattern of real things in the heavenlies. There are real Cherubim now close to the throne of the Father (the word Cherub means "tightly grasped") and these are the anointed ones, the sons of oil of which Zechariah was shown the likeness in vision. The seven-branched candelstick is the ecclesia, the bowl above it is the Word of God, and the olive oil is the Holy Spirit who proceeds continually from the Father. We are not good at visualising the concept of one person proceeding continually from another person but this is what the scripture says of him.³⁷ The spiritual will understand. In a properly functioning ecclesia the cherubim continually receive the Living and

Holy Spirit from the Father. The Son - seated at his right hand above the seven Angels of his Presence - receives the spiritual words which in the Son become flesh. The Son speaks the word continually to the angels, who in turn impart his living words to the elders of the ecclesias (who must therefore be male,³⁸ appointed, and anointed,³⁹ not elected) and they minister (serve) God's words to the believers who make up the ecclesias. The whole picture is one of continually spiritual LIFE flowing like a river! The cherubim continuously empty themselves into the ecclesias in order to receive further life from God for the nourishment of the Body of Christ, and the Lord Jesus is at the centre of everything. He mediates the invisible God to us. In him the invisible and unknowable light and love of God are made known to us as truth and grace. On the very day of the feast on which the blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat Jesus himself cried out,

If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink. He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water. (But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believe on him should receive: for the Holy Ghost was not yet given; because that Jesus was not yet glorified.)

and immediately the crowd divided into those who believed and those who didn't. It's the same now. Jesus has been glorified, the Spirit has been given, and is even now being poured out upon the ecclesias. Some believe and the rest don't.

Synagogue or Ecclesia?

Now ask yourself a question: *Do you yourself belong to an assembly of which the above passage in Zechariah is clearly and unmistakably a description?*

Probably not, and that's because your church is really just a synagogue and not an ecclesia. The difference between a synagogue and an ecclesia is the Real Presence of the living God dwelling in the midst of his people, just as the Ark was always at the centre of the Israelite camp. (And interestingly, because the Roman army patterned itself upon the army of Israel,⁴⁰ the Roman church has retained the term "Real Presence", hearkening back to the time when that Presence truly was a reality, though of course they have overlaid it now with so many layers of mediæval priestly superstitious dogma that the real meaning has long since been forgotten). If unbelieving believers come to your meetings, do they fall down flat on their faces and confess that God really is among you? ⁴¹ When Paul wrote,

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.⁴²

the word he used for "assembling together" was not merely "synago" as he would have used of a synagogue, but **epi**synago, and again the difference is vital, for the Greek preposition **epi**- means "unto". We who have already been gathered **by** Jesus are to "assemble together **unto**" the Real Presence of God, who does not dwell "up there" but **in the midst** of an ecclesia. Whether Jewish or Christian, an assembly without his Real Presence is just a synagogue. The ecclesia has to be an **epi**-synagogue, and it cannot function at all unless Jesus is actually present in the midst to give the orders. When was the last time anybody in what you like to call your church ever actually saw Jesus standing or sitting amongst you? The first apostles did: I have known Christians in modern times who have done so, but what about you? If God did not even exist at all, most churches would be able to carry on much the same from week to week without anybody even noticing the difference, but an ecclesia cannot possibly do so. It cannot even meet at all unless summoned by Jesus. The biggest and commonest mistake is to think that we are able to create functioning ecclesias by going through the motions and acting the part. We can't. It is Jesus alone who plants and removes ecclesias. Our part is to do the work of an evangelist and gather the believers, to put our assemblies into God's order as set out by Paul, and then to hold ourselves ready for inspection by our Commanding Officer.

Victorinus

And this is probably the right place to mention something else of significance which few seem ever to have heard of, and it relates to what we discussed earlier about the seven angels of the churches. An early church father, Victorinus of Pettau in the Balkans (c.270 - 310 AD)⁴³ regarded number in scripture as significant and said that Paul himself had taught that there were only seven ecclesias in the world. Victorinus was not infallible, but commenting on the book of Revelation he wrote:-

*"And He had in His right hand seven stars. He said that in His right hand He had seven stars, because the Holy Spirit of sevenfold agency was given into His power by the Father. As Peter exclaimed to the Jews: Being at the right hand of God exalted, He has shed forth this Spirit received from the Father, which you both see and hear. Acts 2:33 Moreover, John the Baptist had also anticipated this, by saying to his disciples: For God gives not the Spirit by measure unto Him. The Father, says he, loves the Son, and has given all things into His hands. Those seven stars are the seven ecclesias, which he names in his addresses by name, and calls them to whom he wrote epistles. Not that they are themselves the only, or even the principal ecclesias; but what he says to one, he says to all. For they are in no respect different, that on that ground any one should prefer them to the larger number of similar small ones. **In the whole world Paul taught that all the ecclesias are arranged by sevens, that they are called seven, and that the catholic (universal) ecclesia is one.** And first of all, indeed, that he himself also might maintain the type of seven ecclesias, he did not exceed that number. But he wrote to the Romans, to the Corinthians, to the Galatians, to the Ephesians, to the Thessalonians, to the Philippians, to the Colossians; afterwards he wrote to individual persons, so as not to exceed the number of seven ecclesias. And abridging in a short space his announcement, he thus says to Timothy: That you may know how you ought to behave yourself in the ecclesia of the living God. 1 Timothy 3:15 We read also that this typical number is announced by the Holy Spirit by the month of Isaiah: Of seven women which took hold of one man. Isaiah 4:1 The one man is Christ, not born of seed; but the seven*

women are seven ecclesias, receiving His bread, and clothed with his apparel, who ask that their reproach should be taken away, only that His name should be called upon them. The bread is the Holy Spirit, which nourishes to eternal life, promised to them, that is, by faith. And His garments wherewith they desire to be clothed are the glory of immortality, of which Paul the apostle says: For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. 1 Corinthians 15:53 Moreover, they ask that their reproach may be taken away—that is, that they may be cleansed from their sins: for the reproach is the original sin which is taken away in baptism, and they begin to be called Christian men, which is, Let your name be called upon us. Therefore in these seven ecclesias, of one catholic ecclesia are believers, because it is one in seven by the quality of faith and election. Whether writing to them who labour in the world, and live of the frugality of their labours, and are patient, and when they see certain men in the ecclesia wasters, and pernicious, they hear them, lest there should become dissension, he yet admonishes them by love, that in what respects their faith is deficient they should repent; or to those who dwell in cruel places among persecutors, that they should continue faithful; or to those who, under the pretext of mercy, do unlawful sins in the ecclesia, and make them manifest to be done by others; or to those that are at ease in the ecclesia; or to those who are negligent, and Christians only in name; or to those who are meekly instructed, that they may bravely persevere in faith; or to those who study the scriptures, and labour to know the mysteries of their announcement, and are unwilling to do God's work that is mercy and love: to all he urges penitence, to all he declares judgment.

Q. Hmmm. So what is the pattern of an ecclesia? What does it look like?

A. There are two parts to this: first the relationship between the brethren, and then our assembling unto God.

(i) The relationship between the brethren

(a) It should not need to be said that only born-again believers can comprise an ecclesia, but experience shows that it has to be said again and again. Anyone desiring to belong to a Christian assembly must be able to demonstrate to the elders that he has received the spirit of Christ, and in my experience the best way of establishing this is to ask that person simply to talk about Jesus. If somebody were asked to talk about the Queen you would expect him to say certain things known to most British people; but if instead you were to ask him to speak about his own wife you would expect him to speak in a very different manner because of the uniquely intimate knowledge and relationship that is between a man and his wife. You should expect a genuinely born-again believer to be able to speak in a similarly intimate manner about Jesus, not just to repeat the things he can read in a book about him, not even if that book is the Bible. A new believer may not be able to say very much, but it isn't quantity you are looking for, it's quality. To judge this quality will naturally require some spiritual discernment on the part of the elders, but then if they haven't got such discernment they shouldn't be elders anyway.

(b) Then it must be said that the New Testament gives no justification for any kind of priesthood other than the High Priesthood of Jesus and the priesthood of all believers as they stand between him and the unsaved who are in the world. **For there is one God, and ONE mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.**⁴⁴ The practice in most denominations of making a division between believers based upon some of them having passed an examination in theology and claiming that they have a "calling" is wholly unwarranted and unscriptural (the apostles closest to Jesus were uneducated fishermen) neither does the scripture justify anywhere what is called "the apostolic succession" – an Elizabethan theory dreamed-up by a cleric named Richard Bancroft as a stick with which to beat the Puritans (he later became Archbishop of Canterbury). Nobody ever laid hands on Paul (who was a Benjamite) except a humble believer in Syria of whom we know nothing except that he was commanded by the risen Christ to do this one thing. So any Christian claiming today that he has been ordained priest is a fraud. A pious fraud perhaps but a fraud none the less, for no such priestly ordination was ever taught by Jesus (who himself came of Judah not Levi) nor is such a thing sanctioned anywhere in the New Testament.⁴⁵

(c) What IS taught though but seldom obeyed, is harmony and submission, for these are the essential operating principles of an ecclesia. In an ecclesia of the Lord there are no ordained clergy, and there is no "first among equals" in the eldership either.⁴⁶

(ii) Assembling unto God

In the days of the Soviet Union it was often and in many places against the law to be a Christian or belong to a Christian assembly, and churches were often raided by the police. It was impossible therefore for the brethren to meet in a normal church building or to advertise the time and place of their assembling together to wait upon the Lord, and of course the telephones of known Christians (even if they had one) were bugged so they couldn't ring round either. Instead each person had to listen carefully and continually to the Holy Spirit, and when told by him to go to this or that place would go there to find the other brethren also assembling. This does not have to be the norm, but the members of an ecclesia should certainly be able to meet in this manner if need be. And when the elders meet to minister to the Lord they must be in harmony together about everything, for that is the only proper translation of Matthew 18:19,

"If two of you shall agree (lit. symphonise) on earth as touching EVERYTHING that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."⁴⁷

A brother once remarked that if he heard his young children making a rumpus in the nursery and went in to calm things down, he didn't have to raise his voice because the only thing necessary for peace to break out in the nursery was that

Father should be present. The children knew his authority and immediately submitted to it. I hope we are beginning to understand what Jesus was talking about here, for that is exactly how things are in a genuine ecclesia. When Jesus himself is present there is very quickly harmony **for all recognise his authority and shut up!** When the elders have to make a decision about a matter they should pray, if need be with fasting, and wait until all are in agreement and peace about it. It is by no means unknown for one to have heard the Lord correctly and the rest not, in which case a majority vote would be completely out of order and lead everybody astray. Complete and genuine harmony **must** be obtained, or a decision postponed until it is. This is not a case of one elder taking the lead or over-ruling the others; it's a case of all the elders submitting to the Lord Jesus, for only when there is such harmony between the elders can the rest of the brethren be expected to submit to **them**. First the elders submit to the Lord, then the brethren can submit to the elders. Other examples of submission are specifically named in scripture: wives to husbands, children to parents, young to old, subjects to kings, and so on. The kingdom of God is not a democracy. Every Christian must be able to say at once to whom he or she is in real and genuine submission, for sadly it is not unknown for some to claim that they are in submission but for the reality to be very much otherwise. The one man whose faith was greater than that of anybody else in Israel was not a Jew at all but a Roman centurion, and the one thing we know about that man was that he had a good soldier's crystal-clear understanding of authority. He knew whom he had to obey and he knew who had to obey him. But rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft.⁴⁸ A woman who wears the trousers is an object of disgust in every age and nation upon earth, and I have known such a one to put on a headscarf in an outward show of submission and then to argue doctrine with me! Some women refuse even to cover their heads at all when praying. Such things ought not to be.

Many Christians who desire to play a prominent role amongst the brethren but cannot credibly claim to be apostles, prophets, or evangelists, conclude by default that they must be pastors or teachers, so they set about pastoring and teaching. This is a big mistake. The scriptural ministry of teaching is, like all the spiritual ministries which God has set in his ecclesia, wholly dependent upon him for its inspiration. It is not remotely akin to that teaching in a school which can be done by the unregenerate. Our example as always is Jesus himself, and if we look at what he taught we see at once that he did not do what our churchmen do, announce their text and then spend half an hour expounding it. That isn't teaching, it's scribalism. It's what the scribes did who followed in the tradition of Ezra. They read the law and then gave the sense of it. There's nothing wrong with that and it has its place, but it isn't the supernatural ministry of teaching. When Jesus taught the people what did he do? He taught them about his Father's kingdom **on his own authority** and there's the rub. Only one who has come down FROM heaven can teach about the kingdom which is OF heaven, and that's as true now as it was then. Jesus could do so because he had come down from heaven, and any man today who has also been in heaven (Ephesians 2) can bear witness with authority to what he has seen and heard there about how the Lord rules his kingdom, but let no man presume to teach about the kingdom of heaven who has never been there. "[The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach.](#)" Doing always comes before teaching, and if you haven't done the works of the kingdom how dare you even think about teaching! And as elders must be [apt to teach](#)⁴⁹ and teaching must be done only by a man,⁵⁰ obviously no woman can be an elder in the ecclesia of Christ. In the Church of England perhaps, if that's what they want, but if so neither the CofE nor any other denomination can ever be the Lord's ecclesia.

Each member of an ecclesia is responsible for knowing the Lord's will for his own life in submission to those whom God has set over him. All are to work at a proper job of work, that there be no lack of anything and that there should be sufficient to give to those who have less. The only worker entitled to draw upon the financial support of the brethren is a commissioned and itinerant apostle who is always on the move and who cannot therefore combine the work of preaching with holding down a proper job,⁵¹ but there is no scriptural sanction for the ecclesia's supporting an able-bodied man who is settled in one place and can perfectly well do a normal job of work to provide for himself and his family. Use the Lord's Prayer as the pattern for all prayer. People pray first about the thing which is most important to them, and the first thing Jesus prayed was [Hallowed be thy Name](#), but in sixty-five years as a Christian I have yet to attend a meeting in which anybody even mentioned the sanctity of God's Name as a topic for prayer, notwithstanding that clearly the matter lies at the top of Jesus' heart.

When we have aligned our priorities with his and submitted to his orders - all of them - we may perhaps warrant an inspection with a view to our synagogue being made into an ecclesia. Until then, not.

IN CONCLUSION

We have nothing in the West today like the ecclesia of which Jesus spoke. The Lord's ecclesia is a group of people called together by him personally so that he may come to dwell in the midst of them, to deliver his judgments to them, and then beyond them to other people and events on earth. Membership of the Lord's ecclesia is by his invitation, followed by testing and subsequently - for a few - commission. There are no volunteers. However God is constantly on the lookout for suitable people.

The construction and purpose of the ecclesia is nothing like that which today we call a church, nor could any of our churches even function as an ecclesia because none of them is built according to God's pattern. The ecclesia is not a visible organisation; it is a structure of relationships and the fundamental relationship is one of submission to authority. There is no priestly ordination and there is no "first minister". Christians have argued since the Reformation about where spiritual authority lies, but seem not to have realised that until Jesus returns and rewards his obedient servants, nobody has authority over other believers at all. The scriptural teaching is on submission, not authority, for until you have learned to obey orders yourself you are not fit to give them to others. In a real ecclesia, all submit to Jesus and the brethren submit to the elders who, being men over forty and responsible for the ecclesia, must maintain a submissive harmony at all times. Jesus is our master and we are all brethren. His word is law.

The ecclesia is holy and a preparation for resurrection life in the New Jerusalem. It cannot be common or mundane and it must never contain sin. The required standard is certainly very high but not impossibly so. God has provided no other system for the government of nations and for doing his will on earth, which is why "all political lives end in failure"⁵² and all political parties and economic systems fail with them.

The will of God is to glorify his Son, and utterly to destroy Satan and all his works. All other matters are subordinate to this one great purpose.

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References and Notes

- ¹ 1 Corinthians 1:10-12. There are no divisions or denominations in Christ. None!
- ² **Everything**, not anything. Thus the Greek. This condition is seldom met or even understood, especially by translators.
- ³ John 12:20
- ⁴ P.W. Van Der Horst, *Biblical Archaeology Review*, Sept.-Oct. 1992.
- ⁵ Matt. 4:15
- ⁶ Alexander is popularly but incorrectly supposed to have died in 323 BC. This common 82-year error is due to the widespread use of the pagan 'Canon' of Ptolemy to date events in ancient history. Ptolemy was intelligent but not inspired, and his sources were grossly inaccurate. The Hebrew scriptures are the oldest and incomparably the best surviving history of creation, and on internal evidence the earliest part of Genesis was written by God himself and given to Adam on clay tablets. Moses presumably transcribed the text on to vellum, and presumably that was during his years guarding Jethro's sheep in Midian; but Genesis is not included with the books of Exodus to Deuteronomy which are on the scroll in a box on the back of the Ark of the Covenant. The foolish are at liberty to try to get at it, but are advised to set their affairs in order first.
- ⁷ Matt.11:23
- ⁸ e.g. The second Cainan in Luke's genealogy (Lk. 3:36,37). That Cainan is not in the inspired Hebrew, but he is in Luke's equally inspired Greek.
- ⁹ Andrew and Philip are indisputably Greek.
- ¹⁰ 1 Maccabees 1:15
- ¹¹ Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, Augustus, para. 89
- ¹² Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, original edition Vol 1, p 130.
- ¹³ Heb.7:12
- ¹⁴ Daniell, Prof David, *William Tyndale - a Biography*; Yale University Press 1994, ISBN 0-300-06123-3, Ch 11.
- ¹⁵ Latin used only a few of its characters for numerical purposes, and interestingly the sum of them is 666. "M" was not among them, being an invention of modern monumental masons.
- ¹⁶ See various works by Bullinger, Panin, and in modern times the websites of mathematician Vernon Jenkins at <http://www.whatabeginning.com> and <http://www.otherbiblecode.com> etc.
- ¹⁷ op cit
- ¹⁸ op cit; Part 3; Ch 10; *The Dialogue Concerning Heresies*.
- ¹⁹ Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, Book Two, Chapter Thirteen: *The English Common Law*.
- ²⁰ The Ark; the Divine Fire; the Shekinah; the Prophetic Voice; and the Urim & Thummim.
- ²¹ Offensively evident from the vocabulary of the midden which he employed in his verbal assaults upon Tyndale, and from occasional unguarded lapses in Utopia.
- ²² Hebrews 12:23 WT
- ²³ From an article by David Forbes published in *Prophecy Today*, Nov/Dec 1992
- ²⁴ Luke 13:16
- ²⁵ Passive voice
- ²⁶ "...they that are with him are **called**, and **chosen**, and **faithful**." (Rev 17:14)
- ²⁷ Those who read Greek may respond correctly that the voice here can be middle as well as passive, and that the middle voice is reflexive. But as we have shown above, no group which simply gathers itself together can possibly be **in his Name**. Only those who have been called and chosen and commissioned by the Lord Jesus **in person** as Paul was, can ever act **in the Name of God**. All others are imposters and frauds. Pious and well-intentioned frauds perhaps, but frauds none the less. The verb is passive.
- ²⁸ Psalm 127:1
- ²⁹ Jessie Penn-Lewis - *The Awakening in Wales*, pub. CLC and others.
- ³⁰ Luke 19:13. The word means "be occupied" or "be busy".
- ³¹ In order to do this you must use a version of the Bible which is still Holy, and for all practical purposes in English that means **only** the King James (Authorised) Version. Almost every other translation since 1881 has used the Westcott and Hort Greek text of the New Testament which was edited by two Anglican clergymen who for thirty years were practicing spiritualists and traffickers with demons, and of course they corrupted their text to reflect their master's lies and wishes. The "Ghost Club" which they founded at Cambridge in the nineteenth century is now called The Psychical Research Society, a world-wide umbrella group for demonic activities of all kinds. **Be very wary indeed of modern so-called Bibles!** If you don't read Greek, find a good King James reference Bible, preferably an old one with the original references, and use that.
- ³² No, Jupiter and Saturn have never yet been observed skipping along the rooftops of Bethlehem! Oh, the utter nonsense that is written by some who are so ignorant of this holy subject that they are reduced to churning out such wretched stuff as this. For understanding the Bible an ounce of personal experience is worth more than a ton of guesswork. The Star of Bethlehem and all the seven Stars of Revelation are of a size capable of being held in a man's hand (see Revelation 1:16).
- ³³ the angel of his presence saved them. (Is 63:9)
- ³⁴ The Shekinah is a theophany of The Holy Spirit, typified by (in Hebrew) *Mayim Chayim - Living Waters*.
- ³⁵ 1 Corinthians 2:14
- ³⁶ Leviticus 16:3
- ³⁷ John 15:26
- ³⁸ Because of the angels, as Paul explained in 1 Corinthians 11. So this was not a mere cultural matter; it applies to us too.
- ³⁹ And that only by one who has the Lord's personal commission to appoint elders. Ask the Lord Jesus to tell you to whom he has given that authority and then don't argue with him about it! He may well name somebody you wish he hadn't but I'm afraid you will have to humble yourself and live with that. Kick against him, and *you* will be in trouble!
- ⁴⁰ Josephus, *Wars of the Jews*, Book III, Ch V. In the Whiston edition see also Whiston's useful comment on the chapter.
- ⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 14:25
- ⁴² Hebrews 10:25
- ⁴³ <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/victorinus.html> .The Romans adopted the word as they adopted the thing itself.
- ⁴⁴ 1 Timothy 2:5
- ⁴⁵ It is certainly not the concept of dedicated service which offends against scripture but an "ordained priesthood". Even John Wesley found himself unable to defend the practice when it was pointed out to him that whereas the apostle Paul had commanded the evangelists Timothy and Titus to ordain bishops, how was it that mere evangelists could confer upon a man the authority of a bishop unless they had a superior authority themselves? Wesley was - perhaps for the only time in his adult life - completely lost for words and unable to answer. The fallacy of course lies in a wholly mistaken understanding, both of the sacraments and of rank and authority in The Service,

the last of which Jesus himself corrected when he placed a child in front of the apostles, and again when he told them plainly that "it shall not be so among you." (Matthew 20:25 et seq) Similarly, when Paul wrote to the Thessalonian believers about the necessity of doing an honest job like everybody else he didn't exempt the clergy, for the blindingly obvious reason that there weren't any clergy! (1 Thess. 4:11-12 and 2 Thess 3:10-12) See also Paul's last instructions to the elders of Ephesus, which today's "clergymen" would do well to ponder and take to heart (Acts 20:33-35). Even the patriarch Jacob's much-compromised honour forbade him to live off another man's sheep. Every Christian man must have an honest trade and get his living by it. The only exceptions are the very few men commissioned by Jesus Himself as itinerant apostles who are always on the move preaching and living out of a suitcase; and even they should work when they can, as Paul did during his time in Ephesus. He likewise ordered those in Thessalonica "... *this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat* (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Deal with it, you who call yourself clergy, pastors, priests, or whatever other names you have taken to yourselves to justify living off the sheep committed to your charge. "*Feed the flock of God which is among you, ... **not for filthy lucre** but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.*" (1 Peter 5:2-3)

⁴⁶ The odious expression "Primus inter Pares" was invented by Octavian Augustus Caesar, Pontifex Maximus, High Priest of Jupiter, to justify his taking control of the Senate of Rome. It is an example of those weasel words which come from the wicked one but never from God. Obviously there can never be a first among equals, for if one is first they cannot all be equal, and neither can some be "more equal than others". For that matter too the word "Augustus" actually means "Reverend", which ought to bring home to those who want to use it the true pagan origin and nature of that blasphemous title. Jesus never called himself the Reverend Jesus. Much repentance and reform are called for here brethren, don't you think, eh?

⁴⁷ Matthew 18:19

⁴⁸ 1 Samuel 15:23

⁴⁹ 1 Timothy 3:2 and 2 Timothy 2:24 (repeated because it matters)!

⁵⁰ 1 Corinthians 2:11-15

⁵¹ Though even the apostle Paul did not avail himself of this privilege. See 1 Corinthians 9:15. "*But I have used none of these things:*"

⁵² Rt. Hon. Enoch Powell MP, in his 1977 biography of Joseph Chamberlain.