



Queensland  
Churches Together

# CHRISTIANS IN DIALOGUE

## WHAT ON EARTH IS THE CHURCH FOR?

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## **What on Earth is the Church for?**

This material is an adaptation of a booklet written by Martin Reardon and published jointly by the British Council of Churches and the Catholic Truth Society. We thank the author and the publishers for permission to adapt the booklet.

The adaptation has been made by the Brisbane based Christians in Dialogue Task Force which represents the Anglican, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches. This five session discussion programme has been designed for small interchurch groups. We recommend that it be used at Pentecost to follow the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. It can, of course, be used at any time during the year.

Each of the five units of the programme has the following sections:

- A. Summary of the Essay
- B. Suggested Bible Reading
- C. Suggested Questions for Discussion
- D. Prayer
- E. The Essay



# LEADER'S GUIDE

## 1. Gathering

People coming to a group for the first time will often have some anxiety –

- ◆ Will I know anyone?
- ◆ What will be expected of me?
- ◆ Did I switch off the oven?
- ◆ It is important to help them through this first awkward stage. Have all your preparations done well beforehand so that you are able to greet each person warmly on arrival, introducing them to one another, and perhaps having tea and coffee available.

## 2. Beginning

- A. When all have arrived get the session started by giving them a clear statement of what the group is about - Welcome the group
- ◆ who we are;
  - ◆ why we're here;
  - ◆ when we will finish.

It might go like this: "Welcome to my place, and I'm delighted that each of you has been able to make it. We are a group of people from Churches gathered together to reflect and share our ideas on ... (*name of study*). Tonight we will be looking at Study One .....

- B. Then invite the members to introduce themselves saying:
- ◆ who I am;
  - ◆ why I'm here;
  - ◆ what I hope to get out of the program.

Lead yourself by giving a short response to each of the three areas. Then invite each of the others to do likewise. Don't worry if some respond to only one or two of the areas.

- C. Then distribute copies of the program.

Encourage participants to listen to one another's ideas with respect.

## 3. Opening Devotion

- A. You may wish to play some music quietly in the background and give the group a few moments to reflect on the opening devotion. Then call for volunteers to lead it.
- B. You might like to choose an appropriate song for the group to share

## 4. Reflection on the Topic

Invite a couple of people to read the teaching. Encourage the readers to pause between each section.

## 5. Discussion

Allow a few minutes of quiet time to reflect on the questions. Encourage participants to share responses to each question but there is to be no pressure put on anyone to speak. Be sure to make some response to each speaker if only to say e.g. "Thank you John". This makes sure the participant feels that he / she has been heard.

## 6. Closure

Thank the participants for their participation. Check to ensure venue is right for next session.

## Closing Devotion

### Cuppa

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# **UNIT 1 WHY BELIEVE IN GOD - and go to church?**

## **A. SUMMARY OF ESSAY**

Christians believe in God and go to church because they believe they have been called and attracted by Christ. However, they also have many human needs which they hope the church will meet. How does the church meet these needs? Does it merely try to satisfy them; or does it try to transform them so that the members of the church can also witness to Christ in the community at large and serve as God's agents in the world?

## **B. SUGGESTED BIBLE READING: John 6:35-40 and 60-71**

## **C. SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

Why do you (and other people) go to church - not go to church?

What do you expect to get and to give as a result?

How does the church relate to the local community?

## **D. PRAYER**

### **Call To Prayer**

Leader: Let us lift our minds and hearts to God, and give thanks for all we have received.

All: Blessed are you, God of all, now and always. Amen

### **Prayer of Praise**

Leader: Gracious God, you bless us with the gift of life. You give us life in all its fullness.

All: Blessed are you, O God.

Leader: You give us your Son as our Saviour. You teach us the word of life.

All: Blessed are you, O God.

Leader: You give us your Holy Spirit. You sustain us in the community of the Church.

All: Blessed are you, O God.

Leader: You make us your holy people. You cleanse us from our sin.

All: Blessed are you, O God.

Leader: You invite us to love you by loving others. You unite us in mutual affection.

All: Blessed are you, O God.

Leader: You give us talents to use for your glory. You call us to use them with humility.

All: Blessed are you, O God

Leader: You nourish us with the bread of life. You give us the cup of salvation.

All: Blessed are you, O God.

Leader: You promise the joys of your kingdom. You call us to sing your praises forever.

All: Blessed are you, O God.

### **Scripture Reading**

Leader: Let us listen to reading from the Gospel of John.

Reader: John:6:35-40

Pause for reflection.

### **Litany of Reconciliation**

Leader: Across the barriers that divide Christians.

All: Reconcile us, O Lord.

Leader: Across the barriers that divide race from race.

All: Reconcile us, O Lord.

Leader: Across the barriers that divide the rich from the poor.

All: Reconcile us, O Lord.

Leader: Across the barriers that divide Christians from people of other faiths.

All: Reconcile us, O Lord.

Leader: Across the barriers that divide man and woman; young and old.

All: Reconcile us, O Lord.

Leader: Confront us, O Lord, with the hidden prejudices and fears which deny and betray our prayers. Enable us to see the cause of strife; remove from us all false sense of superiority. Teach us to grow in unity with all your children.

All: Amen.

### **Proclamation of Faith**

Leader: Let us together confess our shared faith.

All: We are not alone, we live in God's world. We believe in God, who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the Spirit. We trust in God. We are called to be the Church, to celebrate God's presence, to love and serve others, to seek justice and resist evil, to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope. In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God.

### **Final Blessing**

Leader: May the love of God draw you to himself. May the joy of the Lord Jesus fill your spirit. May the Holy Spirit guide you in all you do.

All: Amen.

## E. ESSAY

### WHY BELIEVE IN GOD - and go to church?

#### WHAT DO WE MEAN BY GOD?

The word God has no agreed definition; and yet people usually behave as if it had. The phrases “I believe in God” and “I do not believe in God” tend to stop the conversation, as if they make it clear, where the speaker stands. But they do not. We have to ask “What sort of a God is it that you do or do not believe in?” The Buddhist certainly does not believe in God in any way that is widely accepted in the West. The Muslim certainly will reject the Trinitarian idea of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as held by traditional Christianity.

John Robinson’s *Honest to God* in the 1960s uncovered the widely differing views of God held within the Christian church at the time - from an almost literal picture of an old man in the sky (a picture which first appears in Christian art only in the Middle Ages), stretching to such philosophical ideas as ‘the ground of our being’.

Very few people in our society are avowed and logical atheists - that is people who positively assert that there is no God of any kind. Many people are agnostic - are unwilling to make up their minds whether there is a God. Many more live 99.9% of their lives as if God did not exist. They only think of or refer to God at those moments of death, extreme suffering, wonder or supreme joy which come rarely, but which compel self-competent twentieth century humanity to look beyond the immediate practical business of living, to face ultimate questions of the meaning and purpose of life.

The Hebrews had two words for God, and I sometimes wish Christians had three. We could use one in a mundane and general sense - ‘his god is his money, his business, his family, whatever is the pivot and main purpose of his life’. We could use a second word in a philosophical sense - of the god of the philosophers, who is ‘without body, parts and passions’, ‘the ground of our being’, or ‘the unmoved mover’. We could use the third word of the Christian God, the Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who is neither an abstraction nor an idol/substitute for a god - but is personal and who, we believe, has charge of the world, history and ourselves.

Then it would be easier to provide a satisfactory answer to the question, ‘Why believe in God?’

To those asking about the general sense of the word ‘god’ we could point to all the different values that make life worth living. In addition to those people who are religious in the normally accepted sense of the word, there are very many who have a value outside themselves to which they devote their lives - it may be their family, football, their work, their car. Or they may devote their lives to a great cause, to medicine, to peace-making, to art. In common parlance we say that these are their gods - meaning the things to which they attribute most value of worth (worthship - worship), the things, people, or ideals around which they arrange their lives. In the philosopher’s sense these values are not God, who is the ultimate source of all value; but they do show that men and women need to devote themselves to someone or to something outside themselves if civilisation is to flourish. The person whose only concern is to take care of himself becomes unbearable and antisocial. In this sense of the word ‘god’, he is the ultimate atheist. Are all churchgoers exempt from this kind of atheism?

To those asking about the god of the philosophers we could provide all the answers which philosophers have given from the time of Plato to the present day. We could point out that the world is not self-explanatory: that it must /have come from:

somewhere, must have been created by someone; that it shows evidence of purpose and design; that human beings seem to have built into them a moral sense; that the very idea of being itself implies a god. These are all powerful arguments. They prove that it is rational to believe in a god, but they do not prove to everyone's satisfaction that it is irrational not to believe in a god. The Philosophers will doubtless continue to argue about it to the end of time, when we will fall over the edge and - either know or not know!

A Christian who is asked "Why believe in God?" can point to all these arguments. But it is highly unlikely that such arguments are conclusive for anyone. The reason why we believe in God is likely to be much more specific and personal. Our imagination will have been stirred by seeing or meeting other Christians and being attracted to their way of life; by hearing or reading the Bible or an address on it; by sharing in an act of Christian worship; or, most probably, by being brought up in a Christian family, whose treasured way of life we come to make our own by personal conviction through experience. We may explain this in a hundred different ways, but ultimately we will have been attracted, inspired, challenged, captivated, by Jesus of Nazareth; and his story will have been interpreted by the Christian church as the key to living, both in this life and beyond, it. We will believe that Jesus Christ shows us what God is like. We will also believe that behind and within the world, as we know it, is a loving God, a Father, who gives his Spirit to inspire human beings. A Christian believes that this God is living and active, does not wait for us to find him, but calls to us first. Somewhere, somehow God touches us with a sense of wonder at the mystery, glory, or painful depths of life; or speaks to us when we are at the end of our tether. We catch a glimpse of a vision of this God and we begin to pray and worship. Faith in God for the Christian is not primarily something we achieve. Churchgoing is not primarily a duty. Faith is our response to God's first coming to us; and worship and prayer are our response to God's prior call to us.

### **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY BELIEVE?**

God is not the only difficult word in the question "Why believe in God?" What do we mean by **believe**? The word is used in two senses. It is used in an intellectual sense, as a little stronger than 'think'. I believe that there is a God. I have weighed up all the arguments of the philosophers and I think there is a God. It is also used in a personal sense of trust. I believe in God - I trust him. Clearly this second sense of trusting is far more significant, yet it is not unrelated to the other sense. It is difficult to trust someone if we do not believe he exists!

In the end of the day we believe in the Christian God because our imagination has been stirred by the person of Jesus. We may have philosophical reasons for believing in God. We may be attracted aesthetically to the beauty of the Christian God, but our attraction to Jesus is in large part a moral attraction. He is the person in history who shows up all hypocrisy and self-centredness for what it is, and he personifies goodness and love. Response to that love is a moral act. We want to believe in him. We may still have intellectual doubts and difficulties; we may still be perplexed by the problem of suffering and evil in the world; but if we turn away from his attraction, his call, we have rejected what we have seen to be good. In the end of the day we believe in the Christian God because he has reached out and touched our lives and has given us the grace by which we can respond. Faith is a gift.

Intellectual doubt is not the opposite, of personal faith, however uncomfortable it may be to hold them together. We have faith in a God who is too great for us to comprehend. The early Christians emphasised the mystery, the unknowableness of God. It was the gnostics - the people who thought Christianity was primarily about knowing the truth - who were major opponents of Christian orthodoxy in the early days and not the agnostics. There is at least as much danger in pretending to too much knowledge before God as to doubting the knowledge that we have.

## FAITH & QUESTIONS

‘I keep six honest serving men  
(They taught me all I knew).  
Their names are What, and Why and When,  
And How and Where and Who!’

Rudyard Kipling

In the twentieth century in the West most adults overwork poor How; and Why, What and Who become lazy. It is no accident that proportionately more very young and very old people have a living faith. They live nearer the ends of life where they are more concerned with the Why questions, and where they are less pre-occupied with the practical and mechanical questions of How to make a living. This is not true in all continents. Lesslie Newbigin tells the story of an accident in which he broke a leg in India. The Indian pastor, asked why it happened, and the explanation that satisfied him was “It is the will of God”. An ‘enlightened’ European would have asked ‘how it happened, and would have been satisfied with the answer that the brakes of the bus had failed. Neither would have been satisfied with the explanations given to the other, since it was the answer to the question they had not asked. We are governed much more narrowly by the questions we ask, than by the explanations we receive. Jesus often replied to a question not by providing the answer, but by asking another (more profound) question.

### **VIRGIN BIRTH AND PHYSICAL RESURRECTION?**

There is much debate at present about certain aspects of Christian belief. The question has been asked: does one have to believe in the physical resurrection and virginal birth of Jesus to be an official teacher of the Christian faith?

I do not intend to try to answer this question, but I make four points which should be taken into account in answering it:

1. This is how question - how was he born, how did he rise? It is the sort of question which preoccupies twentieth century, scientific and technological man. It cannot therefore be ignored. But is it as important as the what, who and why questions? Is it not more important to believe that Jesus is the expression of God in a human life than to describe how he is that? Is it not more important to affirm that the man Jesus is risen from the dead than to describe how he rose? Is it not more important to assert that he was born, died and rose again to save the world, than to be able to describe the manner of his birth and resurrection?
2. Clearly we are not able to compel ourselves or anyone else to any particular tenet of intellectual belief. We are not therefore saying that a certain person ought to ‘have this intellectual belief. It is, however, perfectly reasonable for a church to require of its official teachers both an affirmation of belief and also to refrain from teaching anything contrary to the official teaching of that church. But how do we agree the limits of orthodox teaching? Scripture is obviously the first criterion but Christians disagree on its interpretation. This is one of the major outstanding problems which divide Christians from one another.
3. People sometimes compare the Christian faith to an onion with various layers of belief. The danger of peeling off one or two layers is that there is no particular reason to stop there. One can go on peeling until there is nothing left for, it is said, an onion is merely a series of skins wrapped around nothing.

But this is a fallacy. What is being described is a dead onion. A living onion is not just a series of peels. It is, in fact a living root with rootlets growing down into the soil and leaves stretching up into the air - both taking in food and goodness. In a living onion the significant question is not how many skins has it got, but are they drawing in nutrients from the soil and the air? So in the Christian faith it is not so much a question of how much the Christian believes, but whether our believing goes down into the soil of God's goodness as revealed in Christ, and reaches up into the world of life and action. Do we live the faith we claim to have?

4. In the last two centuries Christian scholars have paid a great deal of attention to passages in the New Testament which are difficult for people today to understand or believe - the miracles, the differing accounts of various events such as the Resurrection. All this work has been of great importance. However, Mark Twain made the salutary comment that it was not the passages in the Bible that he did not understand which troubled him most, but the ones he did understand! It is easy to understand "Go, sell what you have, and give to the poor ... and come follow me" (Mark 10:21) or "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34) It is not so easy to do it!

## **BELIEVING IN GOD AND NOT GOING TO CHURCH**

For the Christian, belief in God has traditionally entailed belonging to the Christian community, the church, and regular participation in Christian worship. In fact corporate worship on Sunday has become so characteristic of the church that most Christians, if asked the question "What on earth is the church for?", would probably first answer "To worship God". We shall return to the relationship of worship and church membership later. Meanwhile, we are faced with a problem.

Most people in Australia say that they believe in God. Why do so few of these go regularly and frequently to church? Many will say that they are too busy; but that

simply means that they give priority to other activities. A woman once told me that she was afraid of going to church because it was like a spider's web. Once she got inside the building she would be caught up in a round of church-centred activities from which she would never escape.

Innumerable individual reasons for not going regularly to church will be given by those who believe in God. However, I will hazard two caricatures, or contracting viewpoints. The former used to be characteristic of the countryside, and the latter of the town or city. However, this distinction should not be pressed today.

### **1. The church belongs to the community**

According to the former view the church belongs to the community. Religion is a community religion whose roots go deep into earlier Christian centuries and even into pre-Christian elements. The church is regarded as helping to maintain the fabric of society in a cultural and moral sense. It enacts the rituals which help to provide a stable background to life at moments of crisis such as bereavement. Seasonal observance is important, and Harvest Festival alongside Christmas and Easter, will see many people in church who are not there week by week. The maintenance of regular worship is seen to be the responsibility of a professional priest or minister, and of a few enthusiasts who happen to be religious. The believers in God who do not worship regularly see the clergy and the enthusiasts as fulfilling their religious duty on their behalf. The worship of God is being maintained, and that is good for society. Such non-attending believers are often very

generous in giving money or even time in maintaining the church building. Such non-attending believers often send their children to church day schools and Sunday schools. They are often also the first to complain if changes are made in the church building or its form of worship. They see the church as a bastion of traditional values in a rapidly changing society.

## **2. The church is a club**

According to the latter view or caricature, the church does not belong to the community, and is accorded less importance by the community. It is rather a club to which people belong, even if they attend only very rarely. They would probably say that they do not attend church regularly because they rarely feel the need to do so. They would, however, allow that the church does meet the need of certain other people, needs of which either they themselves are unaware of which they do not share. They have been affected by modern, rationalist thinking and reliance on science and technology. The God they believe in is likely to be a supernatural being whose assistance is required only in those rare moments when nature, helped by modern science and technology, cannot cope; or on those special occasions when something out of the ordinary seems appropriate - especially at births, marriages and deaths. They believe in a 'God of the gaps' left by modern science. The point of view of such non-churchgoing believers in a supernatural God may seem strange to practising Christians. However, perhaps their views are the result of the church's emphasis in the past on the supernatural to the exclusion of the recognition of the Spirit's presence in the world of nature, and indeed in the working of science and technology. The existence of this very large group of non-churchgoing believers in the Christian God is very significant in Australia.

## **THE CHURCH IS HYPOCRITICAL**

There are, however, others who believe in God, who have deep religious needs and high ideals which have not been met by the traditional Christian churches which they have attended. They have looked for clear Christian teaching, for help with prayer and spirituality, or for a close-knit community devoted to what they would regard as more self-evident Christian ideals. Unaware of the riches of the Christian tradition, of Celtic

spirituality, of Franciscan simplicity, of the contemplative and mystical tradition, of Puritan devotion, of Eastern Orthodox spirituality, they have sought elsewhere. As a result idealistic young people in particular have been attracted into one of the new religious movements such as the Moonies, or one of the groups claiming their origin in a Hindu culture. Others have found Christian fellowship in one of the expanding group of house churches. They would be more critical of the institutional churches. They have been attracted by Jesus of Nazareth, but they see the church as hypocritical, as claiming the Name of Christ, but neither following his example, nor obeying his teaching.

The word 'hypocritical' is a hard one, and one used by Jesus of his own contemporary religious leaders. It is a word which need not be interpreted as meaning consciously hypocritical. But if we look at the life-style of Christians, at the ways our churches are organised and at their short-term goals, and then compare them with those of Jesus and of the early church, perhaps we shall see what our critics mean. It would be good if we could persuade someone who is attracted to the story of Jesus, but repelled by much that goes on in the church, to help us see the church as he or she sees it.

We have asked why people believe in God. We have asked why so many people, who believe in God, do not go to church often. We now ask why people go to church.

## WHY PEOPLE GO TO CHURCH

The answer has always been complex, as the following rhyme, found in an old Prayer Book and dated 1870, shows:

*Some go to church just for a walk;  
Some go to laugh, some to talk;  
Some go there for speculation;  
Some go there for observation;  
Some go there to meet a friend;  
Some the tedious hours to spend;  
Some to learn the Parson's name;  
Some go there to wound his fame;  
Some go there to meet a lover,  
Some new fashions to discover.  
Some go there to doze and nod,  
But few go there to worship God.*

For the Christian, as we have seen already, membership of the church is part of faith. The Christian is called by Christ to follow him, and, in doing so, becomes part of the community or fellowship of the church. The Christian responds to the divine call by worship.

However, if we leave aside, for the moment, the divine call, what are the human motives which impel people to regular worship? The needs which people feel and go to church to satisfy? The question will often produce answers which bear little obvious relation to Jesus of Nazareth. Any categorising of answers is bound to involve gross over-simplification, but I suggest five main headings:

### **1. To find meaning and truth**

Life is not self-explanatory and religion supplies a framework into which life's experiences may be fitted, and which will give some kind of picture of what is otherwise unknown and therefore frightening.

This was one of the motives which led the court of King Edwin of Northumbria to adopt the Christian faith in 627AD on behalf of our English ancestors. According to St Bede a member of his court likened our life to the flight of a sparrow through the king's hall, the flight was visible in the hall, but no one knew where the sparrow had come from before he entered by one window, or where he had gone after he left by another. Christianity purported to tell where our life came from and what was its destination, and so it provided meaning, and satisfied the search for truth.

### **2. To find beauty**

For centuries Christianity was the chief patron of the arts, and the life of Christ the main inspiration of the artist. Even today many people go to church partly at least because of the beauty of the music, liturgy, ritual and architecture.

The Russian Primary Chronicle tells the story of the official conversion of Russia to the Christian faith in 989AD. The Grand Prince Vladimir sent envoys to examine the great religions of the world, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, so that he could decide which to embrace. He rejected all the others, and decided that Russia should adopt the Christian faith as represented by the Eastern Orthodox because he heard one of his envoys describe

the beauty of the holy liturgy celebrated in St Sophia in Constantinople, and how through it he felt himself transported into heaven.

### **3. To establish moral values**

Australian society has developed certain moral values due to the presence of the Christian churches. Many people have falsely assumed that such values exist on their own. As secularisation and materialism take hold, and as other religions with other value systems come to this country, we are realising that moral values do not exist in a vacuum, but are dependent on a coherent system of belief and behaviour.

Any student of the Old and New Testament will be aware that central to the teaching of the Law, the Prophets and of Jesus himself is the insistence that religion without morality is of no value.

Protestantism has been highly moralistic in tone at least since the Victorian era. So much so that people give as an excuse for not going to church the fact that they are not good enough. This excuse betrays a misunderstanding of Christian teaching. The church is for sinners who are welcomed as they are, so long as they trust in Christ.

### **4. To belong and find acceptance**

Perhaps today the human motive which draws people most powerfully to church is the need to belong and find acceptance. We live in a society where communities are breaking up, even the most fundamental of all communities, the family. To find a secure base from which to live our lives we need to acknowledge our dependence on God and on one another, and this is symbolically enacted in church rituals. In baptism we are made a member of the family of Christ. Week by week we confess our sins, are forgiven and are accepted by God in Christ. We receive communion to renew our relationship with God and with one another, and are sent out into the world refreshed to continue our everyday witness to Christ by what we do and say and are.

The need to belong and be accepted may take many forms, some healthy, some less healthy. There are those who belong to the church partly because they need to exercise some kind of leadership, which they have been unable to do in the outside world. Others treat the church as a cocoon to protect themselves from the harsh reality of the world. One woman described her God as her own personal armchair into which she could nestle for comfort when life was difficult. Another woman, who lived in a Housing Commission area where probably only 2% of the adult population went to church, was asked what her non-churchgoing friends thought about a particular matter. She answered that she did not really know anyone who did not go to church. For such people the church has become an escape from reality.

### **5. To find healing**

Akin to the need to belong and find acceptance is the need to find healing. Not only are communities breaking up in our society; personalities are breaking up and in great need of healing or wholeness. From the time of Jesus onwards the Christian church was deeply involved in the ministry of healing until recently. Then for a while the church left healing almost entirely to the medical profession. Now the church has begun to discover again its ministry of healing. The reconciliation of humanity to God also involves the reconciliation of person to person, people to their environment, and the personality within itself.

## **SHOP OR SERVICE STATION?**

The need to find meaning, beauty, healing and acceptance can be met in a selfish and negative way or in an unselfish and positive, way. In response to a survey carried out 20 years ago in England an Anglican priest in Sheffield said of some of his parishioners, "They treat us like a shop". He explained that they came to church merely to get something out of it for themselves, and showed no sense of responsibility for maintaining the church, let alone for sharing its benefits with those outside it. In the same survey a Protestant minister painted a similar but more positive picture of some of his lay members: 'They regard it as a vehicle service station. They come in once a week to fill up with the Spirit to keep them going for the rest of the week; and they come in for an occasional overhaul when things go wrong'.

The point at issue in these examples is the effect of the regular worship on the worshippers. Does it make any difference to the way they live for the rest of the week? Does the meaning, beauty, moral value, healing and sense of belonging that they find in worship transform them, so that it shines through them in their weekday lives and contributes to a more coherent, beautiful, supportive and whole community in the world around them? Or do they in effect lock up these values and leave them behind in the church building, during the rest of the week adopt the values of the world at large, and so make no specifically Christian witness and contribution to wider society? Do they go to church to escape from the difficult reality of this world, or do they go to church to renew their morale and so to return to their everyday concerns with their spirit restored?

## **THE CHURCH AND THE WORLD**

This is a key issue which emerges in this unit, the relationship of the church to the world around it. It is not merely a question of the motives, needs and attitudes of individual churchgoers. It is a question of the way in which a local church relates its worship to its mission in society, and vice-versa.

Churches which are based on parish boundaries are more likely to admit to membership people of all different types and classes who happen to live in the area. They are more likely to become involved in the secular concerns of the parish area. They are less likely to have a clear-cut frontier between those who are members and those who are not, and sometimes lack a sense of closer fellowship and corporate identity.

On the other hand churches which have no geographical boundaries tend to have clearer rules of membership, but run the risk of being isolated from the secular concerns of the neighbourhood. They also run the risk of attracting into membership people of one class and attitude. They tend to have a clear-cut frontier between members and non-members, although this may be blurred by a category of adherents, who, while not being members, nevertheless attend worship occasionally (and sometimes more regularly than some of the members), but who are not prepared to commit themselves to membership.

This relationship between worship and mission, local congregation and neighbourhood, church and world is not merely a practical and sociological issue. It is a theological one. Different churches and Christian groups have differing understandings of the world and of the church's mission in it.

To caricature the extreme viewpoints; some churches believe that the world is in the power of the devil and is doomed to destruction, and that the church's task is to bring Christ's salvation to as many individual people as possible by bringing them into a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ and into the holy community of the church, the saints who are being prepared for heaven in the next world. Other churches believe that Jesus came into the world to save it, and

that means liberating those who are oppressed by injustice and so transforming the world's institutions and structures that it becomes much more like the Kingdom of God. What happens in the next world is God's concern. Our best preparation for it is our work on behalf of the poor and oppressed in this world.

## **EFFECT ON CHRISTIAN UNITY AND MISSION**

We have looked briefly at the motives and felt needs which bring people to church; secondly at the social make-up of local churches and their relationship to the secular community in which they are set; and thirdly at their theological understanding of the relationship between the church and the world. All three affect profoundly, and sometimes in hidden ways, their attitudes to Christian unity and to Christian mission. Even when Christians are intellectually convinced of the importance of Christian unity or Christian mission, they are unlikely to act upon those beliefs, if in fact the motives which bring them to church or the underlying purpose of the existence of the local church militate against mission and unity.

To give some caricatures as examples:

### **Ferry-boat to Heaven**

If a church sees its task to be plucking souls from this perishing world and ferrying them to heaven, then it is not likely to become involved in trying to improve the structures and institutions of this passing world. Nor will it see Christian unity as a priority. Indeed the greater the variety of modes of transport to heaven in the form of differing denominations, the more souls are likely to reach their destination.

### **Place of refuge**

If a person comes to church to escape from the pressure of daily life, that person will need to change before he or she is willing and able to see it as a Christian responsibility to engage in mission in the world he or she has been trying to escape.

### **Club for the like-minded**

If a local church is at heart a support club for like-minded people, it is going to have to change before it sees its mission as including a welcome to members of another class or race. It will also have to change if its concept of Christian unity is to include close relationships with people who have different ideas, or who come from another class or race.

### **Focus of secular community**

If a church believes its task is confined to providing a focus of community for the neighbourhood, it will not be likely to engage in evangelism nor concentrate on the preparation of souls for eternal life.

### **Shop for religious consumers**

If a church sees its role to be the meeting of the religious needs felt by its adherents as a shop meets the needs of its customers, then it will have little cutting edge for mission. It will have no incentive for a wider unity since a consumer society is based essentially on competition between different shops.

Of course the felt needs and motives which bring people to church are containers too small to hold the Spirit of God. The local congregations to which such people come are too narrow fully to represent the Body of Christ into which they baptise their members. Their understanding of God's mission to the world, and of the unity he desires to give his people, the church, is a container too limited to hold the fullness of his truth. However, the Holy Spirit is constantly transforming our motives deepening our needs, reshaping our congregations and

breaking open the narrowness of our minds. The Spirit is constantly reshaping the human material himself enlarging and enriching it to make it more serviceable to God's purpose at that particular time and place.

The Christ who calls us into his church is constantly raising new questions, making us aware of deeper needs; until we begin to see that our needs will be met only as we forget ourselves and allow him to use us to meet the needs of others for his sake.

## **UNIT 2 -WHAT DID JESUS COME FOR?**

### **A. SUMMARY OF ESSAY**

The first seven chapters of Mark's Gospel describe what Jesus did and said in Galilee. In Chapter 8 we learn who Jesus is: the Messiah whose coming was foretold in the Old Testament. The remaining half of the gospel describes Jesus' deliberate journey to Jerusalem, where he resolutely bears witness to God's love and justice in the public forum, is handed over to death and rises again.

The New Testament writers interpret this story in terms which their contemporaries would have understood: Jesus was the Redeemer, Justifier, Sacrifice, Saviour and Reconciler.

Jesus also gathered a group of disciples who became a community to continue his life and work as an instrument of God's purpose in the world.

### **B. SUGGESTED BIBLE READING: Mark 8:22-38**

### **C. SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

How would you try to show someone, who was not a Christian, what the life, death and resurrection of Jesus means to you? What was God's purpose in sending Christ?

### **D. PRAYER**

#### **Invitation to Pray**

Leader: The Lord be with you

All: And also with you.

Leader: The spirit you received is not the spirit of slaves bringing fear into your lives again; but you have received the spirit of adoption which enables you to cry 'Abba', Father, when you turn to God.

#### **Response**

All: O God, you have created all things, but above all you have created humankind in your image. You have bestowed your gifts on us and sent us out into the world. O God, you have commanded us to love one another. Your desire is that we should be one, as you are one with your only Son. O Lord, free us from all disharmony and unite our hearts in the fellowship of your Holy Spirit since we have become one body and one spirit and have been called to one hope in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### **Litany**

Leader: In the presence of our loving God let us repent and confess our sins against unity: Lord, we humble ourselves before you; we have brought division into the unity of your Church.

All: Have pity on us, Lord.

Leader: In our witness to the truth we have often been hard and exclusive.

All: Have pity on us, Lord.

Leader: Intent on the mote in our neighbour's eye, we have forgotten the beam in our own.

All: Have pity on us, Lord.

Leader: We have ignored our brothers and sisters, we have despised them; we have often wanted to win a victory over them.

All: Have pity on us, Lord.

Leader: We have divided the family of your children with barriers of race and nation, culture and class.

All: Have pity on us, Lord.

Leader: By our divisions we have hindered the witness of love and the spread of the Gospel in the world.

All: Have pity on us, Lord.

### **Scripture Reading**

Leader: The reading is taken from St Mark's Gospel, Chapter 8 verses 22-38.

### **Pause for Reflection**

### **Profession of Faith**

Leader: Let us profess our common faith by praying the Apostles' Creed.

I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, Our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated on the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

### **Commitment to Unity**

Leader: In response to Christ's prayer that Christians be united let us recommit ourselves to Christian unity.

All: We accept anew our call to make visible our unity in Christ. We pledge ourselves to serve one another in love, not only by words but by deeds. With God's help we will strengthen our efforts for common action, prayer and worship.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Leader: Let us ask our Father in heaven for all our needs in the words Christ gave us.

All: Our Father

## **E. ESSAY**

### **WHAT DID JESUS COME FOR?**

People go to church from a mixture of motives, some conscious, some no doubt unconscious. The churches themselves, and the Christians who attend them, understand their task in different ways. They would probably all be able to answer the question “What on earth is the church for?” using similar general phrases. They could agree that it exists to worship God and to carry on Christ’s mission in the world today. But if asked to interpret those general phrases, then the answers given would begin to diverge. Some would emphasise evangelism, others the search for holiness, others the transformation of society.

How should we set about judging which are the truest answers, and which are the right priorities today? Most Christians would agree that the best place to start to find an answer is the New Testament.

They would also agree that we should begin by studying what the writers of the New Testament considered to be the purpose of the early church. As the early church depended on Jesus, that study would lead us to ask what was God’s purpose in sending Jesus. To put it in the simple and direct terms of the fourth Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” John 20:21. The disciples’ task and purpose may not be identical with that of Jesus, but it clearly follows from his and is dependent on it. We shall not be able to understand the task and purpose of the church until we understand how the authors of the New Testament explain what Jesus Christ came into the world for, and what he trained his disciples for.

The earliest written account left to us of the story of Jesus is probably Mark’s Gospel. It is not biography in the modern sense. The author was a member of the early church, and possibly an eyewitness of Jesus’ betrayal in Gethsemane, Mark 14:51. The first verse of the Gospel declares the author’s belief that Jesus was the “Christ, the Son of God”. His Gospel is a powerful presentation of this belief and is carefully arranged to develop his theme. Matthew, and to a lesser extent Luke, follow the outline of Mark; and their additions, which are considerable, are chiefly of the sayings of Jesus.

### **BEGINNING OF THE GOSPEL**

Mark begins his Gospel with a reference back to the Old Testament. Isaiah, the prophet, has foretold the coming of a messenger who will prepare the Jews for the coming of the Lord. John the Baptist is this messenger. He warns his contemporaries that God will come to them in anger and judgment unless they mend their way of life. Many people repent and are baptised by John as a symbol of the washing away of their sins. John also points to the coming of Jesus who will baptise not only with water, but also with the Holy Spirit. Jesus is baptised by John, and he is immediately conscious of the Spirit coming upon him and driving him in to the desert, which the Jews thought of as the home of the devil. This opening scene of the Gospel emphasises the continuity of the Old and New testaments. Jesus did not come to start a totally new church and religion. He came to purify and fulfil the hopes of the old religion of the Jews, the People of God.

Luke and Matthew tell the story of Jesus’ temptation by the devil in the wilderness - stories which claim to show how Jesus himself interpreted his mission. He refused to perform a miracle by turning stones into bread merely to satisfy his own hunger. He had come to fulfil his Father’s will, not his own. He refused to throw himself off the Temple parapet to compel people to believe in him. He had not been commanded to do this by his Father, and faith separated from obedience to God is mere self-confidence. Jesus is finally tempted to use the

devil's own worldly power to establish his messianic reign. In rejecting this, Jesus was rejecting the way of the Zealots who were trying to overthrow the Roman occupation of Palestine by force. Had he fallen into this temptation he would have acknowledged the devil's right to rule this world, for he would have endorsed the devil's means of control, the power that corrupts and leads to death, instead of God's power of love which waits patiently until it evokes a response and so brings new life.

## **BEGINNING OF JESUS' MINISTRY**

From his temptation in the wilderness in the south-east of Palestine Jesus goes North to begin his ministry in Galilee, Mark 1:15, proclaiming the good news of God's rule and the coming of his Kingdom. Luke links this with the Old Testament by presenting Jesus as beginning his ministry with a quotation from Isaiah 61, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" Luke 4:18 & 19. The Jews had been expecting that God would intervene in history, and establish his rule of justice and peace. Jesus proclaims that God's kingdom has begun and will grow.

From the beginning of his ministry Jesus called men to follow him promising that they will fish for men. And in the next seven chapters of his Gospel Mark describes Jesus, and very soon his disciples also, travelling about Galilee in a ministry that fulfils Isaiah's prophecy. He preaches the coming of God's rule, he casts out devils, he heals the sick, the blind, the deaf and the dumb, and he forgives sins. He teaches the multitudes and feeds them when they are hungry. He goes aside by himself to pray to his Father.

He calms a storm on the lake and walks on the water. He worships in the synagogue. He resuscitates the dead.

Mark records that Jesus calls 12 disciples for three purposes: to be with him; to be sent out to preach; and to have authority to cast out devils Mark 3:14 & 15. "He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me" Matt 10:40. When 70 disciples return from a mission, Luke quotes Jesus as saying, "I saw the devil fall like lightning from heaven" Luke 10:18. Matthew and Luke both record Jesus' promise that the Twelve will be leaders of the restored People of Israel in the kingdom Matt 19:28, Luke 22:30.

The next unit is devoted to the beginning of the church. However, it is important to notice here that, according to the Gospels, a significant part of Jesus' purpose was to gather round him a group of disciples. These disciples followed him as master, were drawn into a community of life with him, imitated his example, received special teaching and training, and were sent out to share his ministry. The Greek word apostle means "sent out". It is therefore not surprising that, after the resurrection of Jesus and the sending of the Holy Spirit, the early church should see itself as integrally bound up with the life and work of Christ; having its origin in his life and its purpose in proclaiming his life, death and resurrection; and in being a channel through which the salvation he achieved could be extended to the world.

## **PRIORITIES**

Is it possible to establish priorities in Jesus' work at this period? Did he give priority to preaching over healing, to teaching over casting out demons, to training the disciples over teaching the multitudes? He did on occasion try to take his disciples away to avoid the crowds, but this was to restore a balance in his ministry, not to establish a priority. He also deliberately left Capernaum, where his ministry was still much sought after, on the grounds that he had to preach in the next towns also, Mark 1:38; but this does not establish the priority

of preaching over healing. It is not possible from the Gospel accounts of his actions to divide Jesus' ministry into some elements which had greater priority than others. His ministry was all of a piece where words and deeds both pointed to the nearness of God's reign.

One priority is established. His disciples are told not to go to the Gentiles, but only to the Jews, Matt 10:6. Jesus protests to a Greek woman that he was not sent to the Gentiles; however, he has pity on her and casts the devil out of her daughter, Mark 7:26 - 30; Matt 15:21 - 28. This limitation, however, is removed, according to Matthew, after the resurrection when the gospel is to be preached to all nations, Matt 2&19.

It is also claimed that Jesus gave priority to the poor and the outcast. There is no doubt of this, but we have to be careful not to oversimplify what this meant. God cares for rich and poor alike as human beings. All are called to salvation. However, personal wealth, the exercise of power and concern for respectability bring with them such preoccupations that they make people forget their need of God. The humble, the poor, and those who know they are sinners know also their need of God and of his salvation.

They are nearer the Kingdom of God, and Jesus devoted most of his ministry to such people because they had ears to hear what he was saying. Jesus' bias to the poor, what some theologians call his "preferential option for the poor", is not a manifesto for a political programme to establish exactly equal conditions for every member of society. It is certainly not an approval of the gross inequalities and injustice in society which cause such suffering and strife. Jesus knew that all he possessed, his little wealth and his vast powers of healing, was a gift of God to be used for the benefit of all those in need. He used them in this way unstintingly, and taught others to do the same.

## **WHO JESUS IS**

The first seven chapters of Mark's Gospel describe the words and deeds of Jesus and his disciples in their ministry in Galilee. In Chapter 8, Jesus takes his disciples twenty-five miles north up on to the slopes of Mount Hermon. There at Caesarea Philippi, near the source of the river Jordan, Peter recognises him to be the Messiah, Mark 8:29, the leader some of the Jews had been expecting to come and give them freedom. From that moment the dramatic and geographical direction of the Gospel changes. Jesus immediately foretells his own suffering and death, a prophecy he repeats several times as he now journeys resolutely back south again, along the line of the Jordan into Judaea and confrontation with the Jewish and Roman authorities. Peter remonstrates with Jesus, but is rebuked. "You are not on the side of God, but of men", Mark 8:33. We are immediately reminded of the Temptation story in Matthew and Luke. Jesus is consciously correcting the popular expectation that the Messiah will bring in God's reign by force. He replaces this picture with that of one who suffers. Perhaps Mark, and certainly Luke, see in this, reflections of the picture of the Suffering Servant in the Old Testament, one who was "wounded for our sins" and "reckoned with sinners". Isaiah 53:5 & 12; compare Luke 22:37 and Acts 8:32 - 35.

## **AND WHAT THE DISCIPLES WILL BE**

Mark's Gospel then continues with a saying of Jesus that challenges the disciples with the realisation that, just as they have shared his ministry of healing, preaching and exorcism in Galilee, so now they must share his way of suffering. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would lose his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it", Mark 8:34 & 35. This saying is one of the few found in all four Gospels. In it Jesus shows his disciples the inner spring of his own commitment which will shortly take him to Jerusalem and to death. His commitment in life is not to himself, but

to his Father and to others. His commitment even to death defeated the power of death and the devil, and issued in life with God. That is the good news; and following Jesus means accepting the triumph of this death and resurrection, and sharing his commitment. The world offered by the devil to Jesus at the Temptation is worth nothing if a man loses his soul, his life, his integrity, in gaining it. Here Jesus adds “for my sake”. The disciples’ commitment is no longer now simply to Jesus’ message, but to him as, in a true sense, Messiah.

A little later in the Gospel James and John ask to be with Jesus in his glory and Jesus asks them; “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or to be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?” Mark 10:38. And he foretells that they will indeed share his cup of suffering and baptism into his death. And then he continues: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”. Mark 10:45. His life is offered for others. This theme is taken up in various ways in other parts of the New Testament.

Let us pause and reflect for a moment on this aspect of Jesus’ teaching. In the first unit we looked at some of the human motives and needs which draw people to church. In his teaching Jesus promised to fulfil people’s deepest needs: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly”. John 10:10. But in fulfilling people’s needs he turned them upside down. The person looking for abundant life will find it, not by satisfying his or her own need for meaning, beauty, belonging and healing. True life is to be found in following Jesus in bringing meaning, beauty, acceptance and healing to others. We find our own life only when we deny ourselves, stop trying to satisfy our own individual needs and self-will, but rather seek God’s will and to meet the needs of others. It is only in dying to self for Christ’s sake that we find our true self, the self God intended, an unselfish self directed not by our own will, but by God’s will for the benefit of the whole of his creation.

## **THE JOURNEY TO JERUSALEM**

Jesus journeyed south and his teaching was shown to be true in his own life, given up for others in obedience to his Father’s will. According to Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus made a deliberate choice to go to Jerusalem, although he knew he was travelling towards a confrontation with the Jewish and Roman authorities which would entail his death. John’s Gospel presents a similar picture. Christ’s glory and his love are shown above all in his crucifixion.

Jesus enters Jericho amid excited crowds. Blind Bartimaeus calls him Son of David, a Messianic title. Placed here it presumably signifies the nationalistic hopes of the crowd that Jesus is the Davidic king who will restore Israel’s fortunes by force. This is a dangerous moment for Jesus. As he enters Jerusalem he fulfils Zachariah’s prophecy ‘to, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass.... and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea...’ Zachariah 9:9. In so doing he asserts both his Messiahship, and his peaceful purpose.

Jesus cleanses the Temple of those who are using its sacrificial system to make a profit for themselves. “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations, but you have made it a den of robbers”, Mark 11:17 quoting Isaiah 56:7. This is a challenge to the religious authorities, not directly to the Roman governor, and the chief priests look for a way to destroy him.

Some of the Jews, who presumably wished to be rid of Roman rule in Palestine, tried to trap him with the question “Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” Mark 12:14. He evaded the trap by stating the principle rather than giving precise guidance: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”, Mark 12:17.

Just before Jesus' own betrayal to the authorities Mark records Jesus' prophecy that similar things will happen to his followers: "But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them. And the gospel must first be preached to all, nations. And when they bring you to trial and deliver you up, do not be anxious beforehand what you are to say; but say whatever is given to you in that hour, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit", Mark 13:9 - 11. This would have begun to happen before the Gospel was written down.

In the upper room Jesus 'took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them, and said, 'Take, this is my body'. And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many', Mark 14:22-24. This giving of his lifeblood "for many" picks up the earlier promise that the Son of Man gives "his life as a ransom for many" Mark 10:45. The earliest recorded account of Jesus' words at the last supper is found in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 1 Cor. 11:24, where Jesus is reported to have added "Do this in remembrance of me". Paul's letters and the Acts of the Apostles recorded the frequent and regular, symbolic and sacramental memorial and representation of Jesus' action in the upper room. The breaking of the bread or celebration of the eucharist symbolically and sacramentally unites the participants together in Jesus' obedience to the Father, and in receiving the gift of his life for the world - "for many".

## **JESUS SUFFERS, DIES AND RISES**

The first seven chapters of Mark's Gospel are primarily the record of what Jesus said about the coming of God's rule and what he did to show God's healing and forgiving love. In the eighth chapter we begin to learn who Jesus is, a suffering Messiah. In the following chapters we see Jesus on his way to confront the religious and secular powers of his time. And so we come to the climax of the Gospel. In the last three chapters we see the bewildering power of his suffering love which allows his enemies to do what they will with him before God raises him to life from the dead.

The heart of Jesus' obedience to what he saw to be his Father's will is expressed in Gethsemane. "He fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, 'Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup (of suffering) from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt", Mark 14:36.

Judas came with a crowd and Jesus was arrested, and all the disciples forsook him and fled. How could they defend a man who did not wish to be defended by force?

According to John's Gospel Jesus answers Pilate's enquiry as to whether he claims to be a king by saying, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight...but my kingship is not from this world". Jesus goes on to explain a kingship which is in the world but not of it, by claiming that he came "into the world to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice", John 18:36 & 37. The citizens of God's kingdom then, in John's terms, are those who understand and obey the truth, and Jesus is the witness, in Greek 'martyr', of this truth. The title witness is given to Jesus in the Book of Revelation: "Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth". Rev. 1:5. Jesus rejected the use of force to compel people to obey the rule of God, but was willing to suffer death in order to show them the lengths to which patient love would go. It is not difficult therefore to see why Christians later regarded him as the archetypal martyr, or witness to the love of God, from whom they drew strength as they faced martyrdom in their witness to the gospel of love. The depth of the patience of this love is

shown by the word from the cross to the soldiers recorded by Luke: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do”, Luke 23:34. The depth of the human desolation of Jesus is expressed in Mark and Matthew’s recorded sayings; “My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?” Matthew 27:46. Mark 15:34, and the triumphant achievement of the cross in the word from John’s Gospel, “It is finished”, John 19:30. For John, Christ’s glory is shown above all on the cross, John 12:23 - 26 “ My strength is made in weakness” 2 Cor. 12:9 “I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself”, John 12:32. Immediately after Jesus’ death Matthew reports the tearing of the curtain which hid and separated the Most Holy Place in the Temple, symbolising the presence of God himself, from the rest. Christ’s death on the cross revealed God to the world in a way nothing else ever had. God is like Jesus, self-giving and patient love, but also unwaveringly just and holy.

The resurrection appearances, together with the empty tomb, show that Jesus, the same but transformed, has risen to new life. He remains the same in character in that his appearances are not so spectacularly supernatural as to compel belief. He can be mistaken for a gardener by Mary, or an ordinary traveller on the road to Emmaus, or a beachcomber by the Lake of Galilee. Yet his mode of being is transformed for he promises his continuing presence to the disciples through the Spirit for all time. According to Matthew, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (of this present world), Matthew 28:18-20.

## **THE INTERPRETATION OF THE STORY**

The early church, of which the authors of the four Gospels were also members, told and retold the story of Jesus’ life, and death and resurrection. They recounted what he had said and done in his earthly ministry. They explained who they thought he was. They told of his suffering, and of his resurrection and the mystery of his continuing presence. They told and retold this story not just for themselves, but because they realised that this was the focus of the good news which Jesus himself had preached, and which he had commanded his disciples to preach to others.

**Jesus had totally changed their lives. They searched about for language adequate to explain to others what he meant to them. The experience came first. The language of interpretation followed. Interpretation followed so close upon experience that the two fused together and Christian theology was born.**

As we have seen theological interpretation is already present in the four Gospels. Each Gospel has a different author writing for a different set of readers with different questions in their minds and possibly different needs to be met. Each Gospel therefore tends to have a slightly differing emphasis and to use different pictures and images.

For Mark Jesus is the Son of God who shows his power in healing and casting our devils.

Matthew quotes Old Testament texts to show that Christianity is the fulfilment of Judaism. Jesus is the Messiah, the king. The people of Israel are succeeded by the church. His is the only Gospel to use the word **church**.

Matthew’s Gospel would have come over with particular force to Jews.

Luke’s Gospel would have been more intelligible to Gentiles. Salvation is for all the world, and not just for Jews. For him Jesus is especially the Son of Man, who has compassion for all, especially for women, and for the outcast and shiner.

John's Gospel selects and orders the events of Jesus' life to express profound spiritual truths.

The authors of the New Testament painted word pictures to explain what Jesus' life and death meant to them. These word pictures used ideas and practices which were very familiar to the disciples and their hearers.

As they developed their interpretation they had to use picture language, because their experience of Jesus had been unique. There was no one else like him. The pictures they used were inadequate in two ways: first because no human language can adequately describe what Jesus Christ meant to them; and secondly because many of their pictures were bound to get out of date.

They wrote and spoke of Jesus' life, and particularly his death, as a sacrifice for sin, making peace with God; drawing their picture from the slaughtering of animals in the Temple according to the laws of the Old Testament. This picture began to lose its brightness as early as AD 70 with the destruction of the Temple and the ending of Temple sacrifices.

They wrote of God in Christ as their redeemer, ransoming them from sin and evil; drawing their picture from the responsibilities of Hebrew relatives for their next of kin who got into difficulties, and also from the freeing of slaves in the Roman world. This picture changed its meaning as slavery changed and then eventually ceased.

Paul wrote of our justification of by faith; drawing his picture from the law-court He also wrote of our salvation and our reconciliation, both common words which he used in a particular way. When the early Christians used these word pictures taken from the practice of everyday life and from the ideas of their time, the eyes of their hearers or readers would light up, because their fresh colours immediately conveyed something of the meaning of the disciples' experience of Jesus.

Today these word pictures are revered and valued like the paintings of old masters, but centuries of grime and retouching have dulled their colours and obscured their lines. Sometimes their meaning has changed; sometimes it has all but disappeared; and the words of Scripture, which originally helped the reader or hearer to grasp the Gospel, can today sometimes actually obscure it.

Let me say a little about each of these word pictures:

### **1. Redeemer**

Already in the Old Testament, God had been called Redeemer. He redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt, as Abraham redeemed Lot from the hands of the kings who had captured him. The word Redeemer meant 'next of kin' or 'near relative'. In Hebrew tradition it was the duty of a next of kin to redeem a relative. On this analogy God in Christ has liberated us from the clutches of sin and the devil, and has restored to us our freedom. A different example from the Old Testament was Boaz' redemption of Ruth. He redeemed her by marrying her and raising up sons for her inheritance. On this analogy God in Christ has married his bride, the church, and raised up a true inheritance.

In the time of the early church, however, the idea of redemption had another meaning on the analogy of the freeing of slaves in the Roman Empire. By definition a slave was unable to buy his or her own freedom. Anything the slave owned belonged to his master. And so a religious ceremony was held when a slave was given freedom. The slave was taken to a temple, a ransom price was paid and the slave technically became the property of the god of the temple. According to this understanding we are all the property of someone, If we are not the property of a man, we must be the property of a god. This is not an insight that modern democracy would favour!

The Pauline letters, however, make good use of the picture "...You who were once slaves of sin...having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness" Romans 6:17 & 18. In order to be free of sin, we become slaves to righteousness. In order to be free of the powers of evil, we become slaves, servants, sons and daughters of God. Indeed while we are in this life we shall never be wholly free and redeemed:

"we know that the whole creation has been groaning and travailing together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies", Romans 8:22 & 23.

## **2. Justifier**

Paul makes much of an analogy from the law court. We are pictured as prisoners at the bar of God's awful judgment seat. We remember the words of Psalm 143: "Enter not into judgment with your servant, O Lord; for in your sight shall no one living be justified". Jesus had condemned those scribes and Pharisees who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. "No one is good but God alone", Mark 10:18.

However, Paul claims that we are justified (acquitted, declared righteous), not as a result of our fulfilling all the demands of the Law, but through our faith in Christ. Jesus Christ stands with us as prisoner at the bar. He has so identified himself with us, (again the doctrine of the Incarnation), that we are acquitted. He not only lived as a man, subject to all the sufferings and temptations of mankind. He was also crucified for us, and so, according to the Law of the Old Testament, he was cursed, Galatians 3:13. "Christ who knew no sin, God made to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in him", 2 Cor. 5:21.

It is here, of course, that the picture of the lawcourt breaks down. In no human lawcourt can a criminal be identified with an innocent person and acquitted. In no human lawcourt can the judge make a criminal just or righteous.

God does not force justification upon us. We have to accept his gift of justification by faith. Moreover, this justification is not something outside ourselves, achieved without us. That means that Christ gives us the grace of righteousness if we respond by faith in him. That faith will then lead to the fruit of righteousness in our lives. Later an Archbishop of Canterbury, Anselm, explained that "what he did for us has to be done in us".

## **3. Sacrifice**

The most difficult of these word pictures for us to understand today is that of sacrifice. It is also the one used most frequently in the New Testament, not only by Paul, but by many other writers, and particularly by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews. The idea of sacrifice would have been immediately understood by every Jew.

It is the more difficult for us to understand because we think we understand it. A modern definition of the word "sacrifice" would be "to give up something for the sake of something or someone else more highly valued". But this is a spiritualisation of the ancient or original meaning, which usually involved the killing of an animal in worship.

Simply expressed the Old Testament idea of sacrifice involved offering to God something valuable, preferably something which contained the gift of life, represented for the Hebrews by the blood of an animal. It also involved communion with the God to whom the sacrifice was offered. Part of what was sacrificed was often solemnly eaten as an expression of peace or communion with God. A third element in sacrifice was the making of atonement for sin. This third element was especially stressed once a year on the Jewish Day of Atonement. What happened on that day is described in the Book of Leviticus, Chapter 6. On that day the High Priest sacrificed an animal as a sin-offering. He went through the curtain which separated the

most holy place in the Temple from the rest, and he sprinkled blood of the sacrifice on the mercy-seat there. He came out and confessed the sins of Israel as he laid his hands on the head of the scapegoat, who was then chased away into the wilderness, where the devil was pictured as living. So, by means of sacrifice, the people of Israel offered something valuable to God, separated themselves from their sins, and restored their communion with God.

Sacrifice had a representative element. The farmer did not sacrifice his whole crop or flock. He killed the first born and offered the first-fruits to God, so that God would bless the rest. Part was offered representing the whole. In a similar way the priest performed the sacrificial ceremony on behalf of the rest of the people.

The authors of the New Testament use this word picture again and again in many different ways, so as to convey their experience that through Jesus' obedience to his Father, through his death on the cross, God has received a perfect offering on behalf of us all, our sins have been forgiven, and our peace and communion with God have been restored.

It is important that we do not misrepresent this picture. Through his self-sacrifice Jesus is not propitiating an angry Father. He is expiating, neutralising, taking away, the sins of humanity, so that men and women may once more be acceptable to the holy and just God. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews emphasises that the power and effectiveness of this sacrifice, unlike those of the Old Testament, lie in the willingness of the victim; and his sacrifice is not and can never be repeated. It was made once for all, Hebrews 10:10.

Jesus Christ bore the full impact of evil and the full weight of the sacrificial suffering that can save us. We have to share in the suffering if we are to share in the life of Christ, and Christ awakens in us the will and gives us the grace to do this. He bore the Cross and died on our behalf so that we could bear the cross after him and follow in his footsteps.

#### **4. Saviour**

The word 'save' and related words such as 'saviour' and 'salvation' are not consciously thought of as word pictures when applied to God's work in Christ, except that all human words must be thought of as pictures when we try to describe God, who is indescribable. They are intended as straightforward descriptions of what God has done in Christ. When Peter was drowning, Jesus put out his hand and saved him. When people were sick in mind and body, Jesus healed, forgave, saved them, and they were whole again. In the teaching of the authors of the New Testament salvation means the transforming of a world, which is at variance with God's plans, into the wholeness he intended for it.

The verb is used in three tenses. We have been saved once and for all by Jesus Christ's death on the Cross and by his rising again. The critical or crucial work of salvation is in the past. We are being saved in the present as the Holy Spirit heals and transforms persons and relationships by making them more Christlike. We shall be saved at the last day when God's kingdom arrives at its completion.

We are not true to the idea of salvation in the New Testament if we fail to acknowledge its past, present or future dimension; if we so spiritualize it that it has nothing to do with this world; or if we so contemporize it that we either forget our ultimate hope and destiny, or deny that Christ has already won on the cross the decisive battle for the world's salvation.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not abstract. There is no pure Gospel which we can distil and keep in a bottle. It has to be re-fashioned and re-presented to each culture, in each generation and indeed to each person.

In the first unit we wrote about people's needs. The Gospel comes alive only when those needs are met by Jesus Christ. A widowed pensioner in Australia who feels battered by life

may need a Gospel to assure her of life beyond death. A young woman in Latin America who has to bring up children under an oppressive regime in a shanty town with no drains, may need a Gospel to encourage her that God is concerned for physical health and that she can do something towards getting proper drainage for her family home.

Salvation begins to come differently to different people in different needs. Salvation is never complete in this life. It always has a future dimension. When salvation is complete in the Kingdom of God it will be seen to be the same salvation for all.

## **5. Reconciler**

“God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation”, 2 Cor. 5:19 Reconciliation is one picture which does not need restoring. While broken relationships exist between human beings, and while people try to mend those relationships, this picture will never get out of date.

Nevertheless, four things should be said about God’s work of reconciliation. When two people are at variance, the best reconciler or mediator is someone closely related to both parties. Jesus was clearly a human being. The early church taught that he was divine, united with God as a Son to his Father. That is what the doctrine of the Incarnation means.

The second thing to be noted is that, in the quarrel between mankind and God, the hostility and fault was on the side of mankind. Mankind needed to be reconciled to God, and therefore it was mankind who needed to be changed. God had already taken the initiative in sending his Son. Therefore this is not a picture of a loving Jesus trying to placate an angry Father so as to encourage him to be nice to mankind. God is already at work in Jesus trying to change human wills so that they will want to be reconciled to the will of the Father.

The third thing to be noted is that God’s work of reconciliation in Christ is global or cosmic. Fundamentally he reconciles humanity to God. As a result further reconciliation follows. He reconciles the divided parts of the personality within human beings. He reconciles people to their neighbours in the community and across the world. He reconciles humanity to its environment, restoring the damage humanity has done to the creation.

The fourth thing to be noted is that the church is called to be minister of this reconciliation. It is not “peace at any price”. It is peace with God on God’s terms. This ministry of reconciliation required that Christian should be reconciled to Christian. Churches cannot credibly preach a Gospel of reconciliation in Christ, and do it in competition with one another!

The meaning of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is not expressed only in words and ideas. It is also expressed in a continuing community or institution, the church, which is called to witness to the Christ who meets all these needs. In one way the church is a continuation of Christ in the world. According to the author of the Acts of the Apostles, Saul on the Damascus road heard a voice asking, “Why do you persecute me?” Acts 9:4. So far as we know Saul had never met Jesus in his earthly ministry. The *me* referred to was clearly his followers, and so later the same Saul, now called Paul, referred to the followers of Jesus, the church, as the “Body of Christ”.

## UNIT 3 - WHY DID THE CHURCH BEGIN?

### A. SUMMARY OF ESSAY

The word *church* is used in two primary senses in the New Testament: (i) the local community of Christians who gather week by week for teaching, prayer and the eucharist: and (ii) the cosmic church, the Communion of Saints, Christians of all times and places united in Christ and built upon the foundation of the apostles. The church is a sign, instrument and foretaste of the Kingdom or Rule of God. It is described variously as the Communion of the Holy Spirit, the Body of Christ, the People of God, the Bride of Christ, the Household of God, the Servant. The local church is not simply part of the cosmic church; it is the fullness of the cosmic church trying to fulfil the purpose of God in one particular time and place.

### B. SUGGESTED BIBLE READING: Acts 2:14 and 36-47

### C. SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

What picture of the church, its nature and purpose, emerges from the New Testament?

To what extent is the church today similar, and to what extent is it different?

### D. PRAYER

#### Invocation of the Holy Spirit

Leader: Come Holy Spirit and lead us.

All: Free us from all that prevents our growth. Teach us to recognise your truth. Help us to discover God's love in our neighbour.

#### Reaffirmation of Faith

Leader: Dear friends, though conscious of much that separates our Churches, we recognise our calling to be one body in Christ. In the sight of God, then, let us reaffirm the faith of the Church through the ages.

Do you turn to Christ, repent of your sins, and renounce evil?

All: Yes, I do.

Leader: Do you believe and trust in God, creator of heaven and earth?

All: Yes, I believe and trust in God.

Leader: Do you believe and trust in Jesus Christ who redeemed us?

All: Yes, I believe and trust in Jesus Christ.

Leader: Do you believe and trust in the Holy Spirit who gives life to God's people?

All: Yes, I believe and trust in the Holy Spirit.

Leader: Together we affirm:

All: In the power of the Holy Spirit and by our fellowship in the Lord Jesus Christ we will walk in the ways of the gospel according to our best endeavours, whatsoever it will cost us, for God is our helper.

## **Scripture Reading**

Leader: The reading is taken from the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2, verses 14 and 36 through 47.

## **Pause for reflection**

### **Reconciliation**

Leader: By God's gift, through water and the Holy Spirit, we are reborn to eternal life in the new creation. May we be blessed and preserved as the people of God, united in one baptism and confessing together the faith we have inherited from the apostles. And may we be strengthened to give common witness in a divided world and to seek together the fullness of unity willed by Christ for the Church.

All: Christ is our peace. God has reconciled us in Christ. In the power of that name, which is above all other names we greet one another with the sign of God's peace.

### **Intercessions**

Leader: Only in you, O God, are we one; refresh and renew us each day in the grace of common baptism; enable us to live together in the new age.

All: Lord Jesus Christ, in you is the dawn of our deliverance; from distant shores you have called us home; in your friendship and grace may we fulfil your will for creation.

Leader: Holy Spirit lead us from estrangement to your covenant love.

All: May the prayer of our life be your praise in our lives.

Leader: Holy God, abide in us.

All: Holy God, guide your pilgrim people.

Leader: Creator of all, when we groan in distress, sustain us; when we lapse into apathy, lead us to wait upon you; when we dwell in disunity, enlist us in the service of reconciliation.

All: Saviour of the world, in your body and blood, we are forgiven and freed from fear; may your peace and love transform our lives and strengthen our resolve to walk together in you.

Leader: Spirit of Truth, be with all who are mocked, who suffer, and die for the love of your name.

All: Enrich those who illumine our lives by your presence in them.

Leader: Holy God, unite us.

All: Holy God, guide your pilgrim people.

Leader: Eternal Life-giver, we are sustained only by your unfailing love; enable us to be your servants of the new creation; bring all to your likeness. Emmanuel, god-with-us, show us how to break our divisions, prejudices, inequalities and hatreds.

All: Holy God, send us into your world.

Holy God, guide your pilgrim people.

Leader: Into your hands, Lord, we commend all for whom we pray as we say:

All: Our Father who are in heaven...

For the Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

### **Blessing and Dismissal**

Leader: May God bless you and keep you. May God turn to you and be gracious to you. May God look upon you with favour and give you peace. May God, Creator, Christ and Spirit, bless you now and forever.

All: Amen.

Leader: Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

All: In the name of Christ. Amen.

## **E. ESSAY**

### **WHY DID THE CHURCH BEGIN?**

#### **DIFFERENT MEANINGS OF THE WORD 'CHURCH' TODAY**

Before we examine the origins of the church, it would be wise to set out the main senses in which Christians use the word 'church' today. Members of different Christian traditions tend to use the word differently. When, for example, Baptists say they are members of the church, they mean they have full rights and responsibilities in the local congregation. When Roman Catholics say the same thing, they mean that they have been baptised into the universal body of Christians united with the Pope.

We list eight different meanings:

#### **Building**

1. Most commonly the word 'church' is used to describe the building in which Christians meet for worship. Clearly this is very much a secondary usage since the building is called 'church' only because the people who are the church use it for their worship. Moreover, special buildings for Christian worship date back only to the fourth century AD. For the first three centuries Christians met for worship in one another's homes. The word is not therefore used of a building for worship in the New Testament.

#### **Local community of Christians**

2. The word is also used of the local congregation of Christians meeting for worship. This is the commonest way in which the word is used in the New Testament, and it is used in this way today in almost all our denominations. In Baptist and Independent traditions this is regarded as the primary sense of the word. Thus a national organisation of Baptist (local) churches is not itself called a 'Church' but a Union of (local) churches, as is the Baptist Union of Australia.

Strictly speaking in Anglican, Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions the local church is not the local congregation, but the diocese with its bishop. The bishop is the sign of unity and continuity who represents the local church (diocese) to the wider church, and the wider church to the diocese. The Uniting Church also has a local church unit wider than that of the local congregation - the presbytery, looked after by a chairman. However, the very fact that the words **diocese** and **presbytery** are in common use means that the word 'church' is not properly used much in these senses.

### **National or Provincial group of churches**

3. The word 'church' is used in Anglican, Protestant and Orthodox circles of a national, provincial or regional grouping of local churches, as the Anglican Church of Australia, the Lutheran Church of Australia and the Uniting Church in Australia. These churches are self-governing churches which have representative synods or assemblies. Roman Catholics have not traditionally made much use of the word in this national sense, although they have referred to the French Church or the Spanish Church, for example. Moreover the increasingly important role given to national or regional Roman Catholic episcopal conferences is likely to mean that they use the word 'church' in this sense more and more frequently.

### **House or domestic church**

4. Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians have long regarded a Christian family as a domestic church in some sense. The Puritan and Pietistic traditions in Protestantism also emphasised the importance of the Christian family and family worship. In recent years many churches have reverted to the primitive practice of encouraging Christians to meet in one another's homes for study and prayer. Some Pentecostal groupings of Christians have made such a central feature of this that they are known as House Churches.

### **Universal (geographical) church**

5. Roman Catholics use the word church in a universal geographical sense of all Christians who are alive today and who are in communion with the Pope. Other traditions have been developing ecclesiastical machinery for linking their national Churches or unions together, but they do not use the word church to describe this universal entity. Anglicans have an Anglican Communion, Lutherans have a World Federation, Reformed Churches have a World Alliance.

### **Universal (cosmic or mystic) church**

6. This meaning differs from that immediately above in that it is not limited to Christians alive on the earth today. The church in this broad sense is a cosmic or mystic reality in which all Christians, past, present, and to come, are united in Christ. They are together sharing in God's cosmic purpose of bringing the whole of creation into a unity in Christ. They are sometimes referred to as the Communion of Saints.

**Of the senses of the word church listed so far the second and the sixth are clearly primary in the New Testament. The third, fourth and fifth senses are developments from New Testament usage, whether we accept the particular development or not. There are, however, two more ways in which the word church is used today which most theologians would agree to be a serious misuse of the basic meaning of church.**

### **The church as clergy**

7. It is sometimes said of a young person, preparing to be ordained as a minister, that he or she is 'going into the church'. Here the ordained ministry is treated like a profession, such as the law or medicine. Those who are not ordained as ministers are laity. In this picture the layperson is thought of as ignorant, passive, and has to do what the professional says. The ministers do the work of the church and the laity assist under their guidance.

This is a travesty of the picture in the New Testament where the word 'laity' is simply the English translation of the Greek word 'laos' which means the people (of God). In this sense the minister is part of the laity, part of the people of God. The word 'clergy' is a translation of the Greek word 'cleros' which means inheritance (of God).

Christians are sometimes heard to call for the church to say something on some issue or to act in some cause. Those who speak in this way are themselves part of the church, but they are really appealing for the minister or the Archbishop or the Cardinal to speak or act for them. Of course the ordained ministry has an important role in the church, often as a spokesman and representative, but it is misleading and dangerous simply to call the ministry 'the church'.

### **The Church as denomination**

8. In the next unit we shall see briefly how divisions between Christians have occurred. The result of these divisions has been that in every town and city there is a selection of different denominations, each calling itself 'church'. Such a state of affairs is clearly contrary to the teaching of Paul. Already in Corinth there were threatened divisions in the local church, and Paul warned that the one church of Christ cannot be divided into separate factions 1 Cor. 1:11-13. We shall return to this problem in the next unit.

### **ECCLESIA**

Now let us examine the meaning of the word 'church' in the New Testament. It is commonly said that the church goes back long before that. The Greek word for church is ecclesia. For the four previous centuries this word had been used in the secular Greek world of those who were called out to a meeting of the assembly of the citizens of a city state to form the city parliament. More significantly perhaps for us it was also the word used for the assembly of the people of Israel in some parts of the Greek Old Testament. We cannot now be sure why the early Christians chose to use the word 'ecclesia' to describe their community. They might have chosen to call themselves a synagogue, which has a similar meaning. In fact the word 'synagogue' is once used of the Christian assembly in the Letter of James 2:2; some Jewish Christians in Transjordan continued to use this word of their own community. Synagogue was the word the Jewish community chose to use for their own local Jewish places of worship.

However, when the early Christians used the word 'church' to describe their own assembly, they were almost bound to see themselves as the true successors of the people of Israel in the Old Testament - called out by God to fulfil his purposes. At the end of his letter to the Churches of Galatia Paul calls down a blessing on the church; "Peace and mercy be upon...the Israel of God". This same idea is present in Peter's letter "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" Peter 2:9.

### **JESUS AND THE CHURCH**

There is a profound sense in which Jesus had no intention of founding a church but of renewing the existing one, because for him his disciples were the inheritors of the true church or assembly of the Old Israel. In the Old Testament Israel was the people (laos) and inheritance (cleros) of God, Deuteronomy 9:29. In Jesus' parable of the vineyard the true inheritor of Israel, God's vineyard, is the Son, Jesus himself Mark 12:6, and God will give the inheritance of Israel to others, namely his disciples Mark 12:9. Jesus is the true vine of the old Israel, and his Father will cut away the unfruitful branches and leave only fruitful ones, his true disciples, John 15:1.

As we noted in Unit 2, when we described the beginning of his ministry, Jesus certainly gathered a band of disciples whom he expected to inherit the promises made to the old Israel. He chose twelve each of whom would rule one of Israel's twelve tribes. He must have expected them to form a continuing community after his death. The Gospels speak of him as a shepherd, and that would have no point unless he had sheep to follow him. A Messiah can no more be Messiah without a Messianic community than a shepherd can be a shepherd without sheep. The twelve came to be called apostles, and together with others including Paul and Barnabas, came to exercise leadership in the church.

The word 'church' is used only twice in the Gospels, and both times in Matthew. In one of the collections of different sayings of Jesus the word is used to describe a local group of disciples Matthew 18:17. The other follows immediately Matthew's account of Peter's recognition of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus says: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" Matthew 16: 18 & 19. Christians generally have interpreted this as a prophecy of the important role that Peter personally would play in the early church. Roman Catholics have also seen in this passage the origin of the role of the bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter.

These two passages in Matthew seem to presuppose a fairly well-developed Christian community.

## **PAUL AND THE CHURCH**

Long before Matthew's Gospel achieved its present form the word 'church' was in common use in Christian circles. Paul addressed "the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord, Jesus Christ" 1 Thess. 1:1 in what is probably the earliest of his surviving letters, written about 50AD. He uses similar forms of address in virtually all his letters. For him the church exists wherever Christians gather regularly. Usually he writes of the church in a town or region, but he can also write of the church which meets in a house, for example Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15. We have to remember that at this period Christians had no special church buildings, but met wherever they could, usually in the house of one of their members. Often Paul links the church with God and with Christ or both. For him the church is the church of God or of Christ, called out to fulfil their will and purpose.

Clearly Paul gives particular respect to the church in Jerusalem. It is there he goes to be assured that he is preaching the true Gospel. It is there he sends financial help when it is needed. However, for him the church is the same church wherever it is, and he is particularly concerned to maintain the unity of all the churches.

A similar picture of the church appears in the Acts of the Apostles, and there the historical spread of the church becomes clearer. Jesus promises his disciples that after Pentecost they will be his witnesses "In Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth", Acts 1:8.

A careful study of the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of Paul show that the church spread in New Testament times in two ways. Most obviously Paul, Barnabas and other apostles and evangelists crossed frontiers and took what opportunities they could to preach the Gospel in public places and to nurture the newly converted Christians in an infant church. Less obviously, though perhaps more significantly for the rapid growth of Christianity, mission and evangelism were not the preserve of the church leaders only. Many ordinary Christians bore witness to Jesus Christ, through their words, deeds and way of life, among their relatives and acquaintances, as they moved about the eastern Mediterranean. There was

considerable mobility among the population because of persecution, Acts 8:1 and 1&2, pilgrimage Acts 2:5, and other unspecified reasons, among which trade was undoubtedly one, Acts 18:24 and 19:1. This mobility gave the infant church the opportunity to spread the Gospel, since they were a missionary church in which each member bore active witness to Christ, and shared in the growth of new churches.

## **CHURCH AND KINGDOM**

It has been said that Jesus preached the good news of the coming of God's Kingdom:

but what actually arrived was the church. What is the relation of Church and Kingdom? In English the word 'kingdom' suggests a country or geographical area. However, Jesus was talking of God's rule or sovereignty, not about the place over which he rules. The Kingdom of God is present where God's rule is obeyed. It was first and above all present in Jesus, in his preaching, his healing the sick, his casting out devils, and especially in the way he himself suffered, died and rose again. For there was an overriding priority in Jesus' life, and that was obedience to God, his Father. That is why the Kingdom was shown above all in him - he acknowledged the rule or reign of God in all he said, did and suffered.

As we have already seen the disciples shared in preaching the Kingdom during Jesus' earthly ministry. According to the Acts of the Apostles Jesus spoke further to the disciples about the Kingdom of God after his resurrection, Acts 1:3. After Pentecost the early church also continued to preach about the Kingdom of God, although now the Kingdom was clearly shown to have been inaugurated by the coming of Jesus, his death and resurrection, Acts 8:12, 19:8, 28:23. The Kingdom of God which had been an evocative but mysterious phrase in the mouth of Jesus, was now given content in the story of Jesus' own life, death and resurrection.

However, this did not mean that the Kingdom of God was now relegated to the past. The Kingdom had begun to enter human history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It continued to be present and to grow secretly where the good news was preached, the sick were healed, the devils were cast out. It would come finally in full power at a moment in the future known only to God, Acts 1:7.

The church is the assembly of the new people of God, the disciples of Jesus, journeying towards the Kingdom, preparing for it, pointing to it, and in some sense also embodying it.

The church is a sign of the Kingdom in so far as its words speak of the Kingdom, its actions do the work of God and its being is like a mirror reflecting the image of Christ. It is an instrument of the Kingdom in so far as it is used by God to bring the world under his rule. It is a first-fruits of the Kingdom in so far as the life of Christ is flowing in its fellowship.

Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians have tended to emphasise the identity of the church and the Kingdom, thus stressing the perfect and divine side of the church. Not only have they asserted the church's permanence and infallibility: 'The powers of death shall not prevail against it'. They have also taught that its form and structure is divinely willed, making much use of Paul's picture of the church as the Body of Christ.

Protestants, on the other hand, have tended to emphasise the provisional and fallible element in the church, and the constant need of repentance and reform not only in the individual member, but also in the church itself. Only at the last day will the church be presented to her bridegroom, Christ, without spot or wrinkle, Ephesians 5:27

## **IMAGES OF THE CHURCH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Both emphases can be found in the New Testament, which makes use of many pictures, images, metaphors to describe the church. Some emphasise the closeness and identity of

Christ and the church, the church as a living organism - Vine and branches, Body of Christ and members. Others point to the distinctness of Christ from the church, picturing personal relationships with a Christian community - Bride of Christ, People of God, bearing in mind that God's people in the Old Testament were compared with an unfaithful bride. Some images emphasise the public nature of the church's witness. The church is a lamp shining on a lamp-stand. It is a herald announcing the good news. Other images emphasise the hidden, transforming presence of the church in society at large. The church is salt which seasons and preserves the food with which it is mixed. It is yeast which works secretly to leaven a loaf.

When the images are taken together the overall picture of the church is one of harmony among diversity, order without regimentation. It is significant that the church is nowhere described as Christ's army in the New Testament, although Ephesians 6:10-17 and II Timothy 2:3-4 speak of the individual Christian as a soldier of Christ.

In its **Final Report** the first Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) singles out the word 'communion' or 'fellowship' (koinonia) as what underlines the images of the church in the New Testament. Clearly communion is essentially a relationship between persons who are in union with Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples Acts 2, has traditionally been called 'the birthday of the church'. The faithful remnant of the old Israel was later contained in the person of one man, Jesus Christ. It came in a renewed sense after Jesus' resurrection in a growing Christian community when the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples at Pentecost. Certainly the rest of the Act of the Apostles is the story of the guidance of the Spirit upon the young Christian community, the renewed People of God.

As we saw in the last unit, the metaphors or picture language which the early Christians used to express their experience of salvation by Christ can be misleading, if we use only one picture or take one metaphor too literally. So it is with the pictures or metaphors of the church. One scholar has listed nearly a hundred such word pictures of the church in the New Testament. We have no space for that number but we list five.

### **1. Body of Christ**

Although there are hints elsewhere in the New Testament, it is in the Pauline letters that the Body of Christ becomes so important an image of the church. It is closely related to Paul's idea that Christians are 'in Christ'. In our individualistic age it is hard for us to grasp the idea of corporate personality that this implies. It signifies that the individual Christians who come together in the assembly of the church are one person, one body in Christ; that the risen Christ lives in us a corporate body; that there is an identity between the risen Christ and his church. It is a picture of a living organism, not of a human organisation.

Paul points out that this has implications for the members of the Body. We are dependent on Christ and also on one another. We have different functions in the Body, and we should respect and value all the members 1 Cor. 12; Romans 12 If one member suffers, all the others suffer too. In the later Pauline letters, Ephesians and Colossians, this image is developed and Christ is called the Head of his Body, the church. He is the source of all bodily growth and, here the metaphor breaks down, all the parts of the Body grow up into maturity in him, Ephesians 4. Just as it was God's plan that his purposes would come to maturity in the one man, Jesus Christ, so it is his plan that God's fullness will fill his Body the church, until all things grow into maturity and into a unity with God, Ephesians 1.

The agent or instrument of God's purpose is the church, the Body of Christ, whose task is a cosmic one.

**'that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places'**

*Ephesians 3:10*

The church is dependent on Christ and the members are dependent on one another, as Christ and his members work together in organic harmony to fulfil God's plan for the world. It is not surprising that this image of the church as the Body of Christ has been built on in later generations.

**Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work today;**

**He has no feet but our feet to lead men in his way.**

**Christ has no lips but our lips to tell men how he died;**

**He has no help but our help to bring them to his side.**

St Theresa of Avila

## **2. People of God**

The Body of Christ was the dominant image of the church in Anglican and Roman Catholic thinking in the first half of this century. In the 1960s, however, the Second Vatican Council gave pride of place to the image of the church as the People of God.

This image is closely linked with the word 'church' (ecclesia), which, as we have seen, was used of the People of Israel, the People of God of the Old Testament. We have explored this image earlier in this unit. It allows a greater distinction between Christ and his church than does the image of the Body. Moreover the word 'people' immediately evokes thoughts of personal responsibility and personal relationships within a community.

## **3. The Bride of Christ**

The picture of the church as the bride of Christ is also inherited from the Old Testament where Israel was sometimes spoken of as God's bride, especially in Hosea where the bride was often spoken of as unfaithful. In the Gospels the arrival of God's Kingdom is pictured as the Bridegroom coming to marry his People. The image is applied to the local church in 2 Corinthians 11:2

It is also used in Ephesians of the church in general.

**'Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing'**

*Ephesians 5:25-2*

The image expresses the church's love responding to the prior love of Christ, and, following the social context of the day, speaks of dependence and submission without absorption.

Because of the Old Testament background it speaks of a faithless bride being won to purity and faithfulness, cleansed in baptism, until at the end of time the marriage feast is celebrated when the bride, New Jerusalem, comes down from heaven, Revelation 21:2 and 9.

Because the image of the marriage feast represents and looks forward to the final celebration of God's rule and Kingdom, the image of the church as bride comes close to equating church and Kingdom at the last day. However, because of the image of Israel as a faithless bride in the Old Testament, it also carries an image of a church which is at present imperfect, and needing cleansing in preparation for the completion of God's purposes, the marriage supper of the Lamb and the consummation of the Kingdom. The church as yet is only an imperfect and provisional embodiment of the perfect Kingdom of God.

#### 4. Household of God

There is a cluster of images picturing the church as a household, house, or Temple. According to John's Gospel Jesus himself prophesied 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up' John 2:19. The evangelist explains that Jesus spoke of his risen body.

The First Letter of Peter elaborates the theme by calling Christ a 'living stone' and appealing to his readers to be built together with that stone into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices' 1 Peter 2:5.

The Letter to the Ephesians calls the readers:

**'members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the corner-stone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; hi whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit'**

Ephesians: 2:19-22

In these varying pictures we are shown the risen Christ as the new Temple, taking the place of the Temple at Jerusalem, and also his disciples being built into this Temple with him.

But the picture of the building or house easily slips into the picture of the household and the differing servants or ministers who keep it going. The passage from Ephesians quoted above immediately leads into a reference to Paul as a steward in God's house and minister of the Gospel, and then to a reference to God as the Father of the family.

This reminds us that we cannot separate the image of the church in the New Testament from the duty of varying ministers or stewards whose task it is to build up the church, Ephesians 4:12 The pattern of this ministry is the pattern of service laid down by Jesus himself at the Last Supper when he washed his disciples' feet, John 13:5. This pattern is not of a leadership by domination, but of a leadership by service. 'I am among you as one who serves'. Luke 22:27, says Jesus. In the Greek 'one who serves' is *diakonos*, a deacon.

#### 5. Servant

This picture of Jesus as a servant had led in the last twenty years to the development of a picture of the church as a Servant to the world. This picture was painted, for example, in 1968 both by the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Uppsala and by the Second Conference of Latin American Roman Catholic Bishops at Medellin. This picture sees the church not as standing over the world, as the mediaeval cathedrals symbolically towered over our towns in the Middle Ages. It was suggested that the church's organisation and ministry should be directed not to building up its own life, but humbly and unobtrusively to serving the needs of the world. The shape of the church should be the shape of the world's need.

It must be admitted that this image of the church cannot be read directly out of the pages of the New Testament. There the task of service (*diakonia*) is the task of the ministers of the church, and the Letters of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles suggest that their acts of service were actions performed by ministers within the Christian community. The interchurch aid

collection made by Paul among the Gentile churches was for the benefit of the poor saints in Jerusalem. However, if we think more broadly of Jesus Christ as the pattern of the church, then we see that his whole ministry was a ministry of service, healing the sick, feeding the hungry, preaching the good news, and casting out devils. This ministry he did not confine to his disciples and followers. The duty of loving and serving one's neighbours is directed to all, irrespective of colour, class or creed.

## **THE LIFE AND WORK OF THE EARLY CHURCH**

In the last unit we listed the activities of Jesus' ministry. If we go through the Acts of the Apostles we could make an almost identical list, as the early church went about healing the sick, casting out devils, preaching, teaching, gathering more disciples, praying, and some members suffering persecution and martyrdom. Such activities were promised in John's Gospel: 'He who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go the Father' John 14:12.

The content of their preaching and the nature of the young church's community life was made possible by the death, resurrection and ascension of Christ and by the gift of the Spirit. These became the pivot of the life of the church and its members. Like Jesus the early church pointed to the coming of God's kingdom, but they saw that rule as focused upon the person of Christ crucified, risen and ascended. Although at first the members of the early church in Jerusalem continued to worship in the Temple, nevertheless they also had their own specifically Christian forms of worship in their homes, Acts 2:46. New members of the community professed their faith in Christ and were baptised into his death and resurrection.

Thus symbolically new members were reborn in Christ as followers in his way of suffering and triumphant love:

**'We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life'** Roman 6:4

Also the early disciples met regularly for the breaking of bread and the prayers. This was the service of thanksgiving (eucharistia) at which the church recalled the death and resurrection of Christ in a meal of bread and wine, as at the Last Supper. In this meal the disciples ate Christ's body in the form of bread, and thus were re-created as his Body, the church. They drank his lifeblood in the form of wine, and his life flowed freshly in their fellowship. It became the custom to celebrate the Lord's Supper on the first day of the week, Acts 20:7, the day on which Christ rose from the dead. All distinctions between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, rich and poor were extinguished in this celebration. Thus their communion with Christ was re-established week by week. Thus the local church was also in communion with all other churches celebrating the eucharist.

There is one practice of the early church which is described in the Acts of the Apostles as important, and we should not shrug it off as a mere aberration. The early church in Jerusalem 'had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need', Acts 2:44 & 45 and 4:32. This was a practical expression of their total devotion to Christ and to the work of the community directed by his Spirit.

Jesus' disciples may have had a common purse during his earthly life, John 12:6 and 13:29, and so the practice of the early church may be directly traceable to Jesus. This common ownership does not seem to have been the practice of the churches founded by Paul, since 25 years later he instituted a collection in his churches for the poor in Jerusalem.

All the churches, both that at Jerusalem and those founded by Paul, exercised stewardship of their resources. As slaves, servants, children of God, all that they owned belonged to him, and it was all to be used in his service and in the service of his community, the church. Many of our churches are recovering this concept and practice today.

## **THE COSMIC CHURCH**

We have already noticed that the word 'church' was applied first to local gatherings of Christians, those in Jerusalem, those in Samaria, and those in various towns and regions up and down the eastern Mediterranean. These churches usually met in people's houses. Because the Christian church began in one place, Jerusalem, it is not always clear whether the word is being used in a specifically local sense, or in a more general sense.

However, even if the church began by being a local group of Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem, because of their union with the risen Christ, the church was also seen as having a universal, and indeed a cosmic significance. It was universal because it was to spread to all nations. It was cosmic because 'the whole creation has been groaning in travail', Romans 8:22 waiting for Christ's redemption of humanity; and because it is the church's task to make known 'to the principalities and powers in heavenly places', Ephesians 3:10 God's purpose for the world. This cosmic meaning of the church is expounded particularly in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. The principalities and powers referred to were the hierarchy of superhuman powers, some good, some bad, which exercised an influence on the world. The idea of superhuman influences, such as many of Paul's contemporaries believed in, would a few years ago have seemed totally alien to modern thought. In recent years, however, humanity seems to have unleashed powers which have gone beyond rational, human control. The crimes committed in the name of fascism and communism, the growth of inter-racial hatred in all continents, the apparently irreversible stockpiling of nuclear weapons, the intransigent, dual problems of inflation and unemployment, the uncontrolled market economy which makes the poorer nations ever poorer, the dangerous damage to the environment and pollution of the atmosphere these and many other developments are not to be mastered by the wisdom and skill of a few wise men. They require the spiritual conversion of the often seemingly faceless powers and influences which control the world.

It is these powers which are subject to Christ. It is to these powers that the church is called to preach the gospel, to make God's purposes in Christ known. This cosmic task is not the work of some hidden, spiritual elite. It is the work of the ordinary visible church in every place. The cosmic church is not something different from the local church, nor is it the sum total of all the local churches. It is Christ at work in many and various ways in Christian communities everywhere, witnessing to God's plan by word, deed and life. The local church is not merely part of the cosmic church. The whole Christ is present through his Spirit wherever a group of Christians believe and trust in God truly, share in Christ's baptism and eucharist, and bear witness to him faithfully. The local church is not just part of Christ's Body; it is his whole Body present in that place.

Paul struggled not only to develop the idea of the church both cosmic and local. He also struggled to develop and preserve the reality. He was constantly seeking to preserve and foster unity both within the local church, as in Corinth, and also between the local churches. The spiritual gifts which built up the local community in harmony were greater than all other gifts, and the greatest of all was love, 1 Cor. 12, 13 & 14. Unity was seen both as a gift of God and also as a process of growth into which the church was constantly maturing.

The gifts provided by the ascended Christ for the unity and growth of the church included:

**‘some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ’.**

Ephesians 4

## UNIT 4 - WHY DIFFERENT CHURCHES?

### A. SUMMARY OF ESSAY

Diversity in the church is essential if God's mission is to reach the diverse needs of different peoples and cultures. However, diversity can easily become division. The early church tried to avoid division by holding Ecumenical Councils in order to agree on teaching and practice. However, division occurred between the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches when they lost contact and developed in different ways. Further divisions occurred with the Reformation and the Methodist Revival, both movements aiming at the renewal of the church.

The modern ecumenical movement is trying to renew the churches and bring them together in unity. How can Christians be enriched by diversity and yet grow together in one church?

### B. SUGGESTED BIBLE READING: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

### C. SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

Are the historical reasons why our denominations have been divided from one another still valid today?

What are the continuing causes of division?

What sort of diversity enriches the church and what differences cause division?

### D. PRAYER

#### Invitation to Pray

Leader: We have gathered here to honour our God. Illumined by the Holy Spirit, we desire ardently the unity of all Christians. In confidence let us pray for the ability to witness together in the world for God and his Church.

#### Repentance

Before we can witness together we must repent of our divisions and seek mutual pardon of each other.

Lord, we have sinned against you and against our sisters and brothers.

All: Lord have mercy.

Leader: O Christ, our divisions are contrary to your will, and we have impeded our common witness to you.

All: Lord have mercy.

Leader: Lord, we have not loved you enough in our sisters and brothers, created in your image but different from us.

All: Lord have mercy.

Leader: May the Lord have mercy on us, forgive our sins and bring us to everlasting life.

All: Amen.

## **Scripture Reading**

Leader: A reading from St Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians, Chapter 1, verses 10 to 18.

## **Pause for reflection**

### **Profession of Faith**

Leader: Let us profess our shared faith in the words of the Nicene Creed:

All: We believe in one God...

### **Intercessions**

Leader: Our Father, you who know our deeds and our weaknesses, give us your Holy Spirit to enlighten us, that we may recognise the scandal of disunity among Christians, and that every heart may aspire to the unity we seek.

All: Lord hear our prayer.

Leader: You sent your Son Jesus Christ into the world to reconcile human beings with yourself and with each other. Help us to know how to work with Christ towards the achievement of a universal reconciliation.

All: Lord hear our prayer.

Leader: Christ commanded that his apostles be his witnesses before the world. Make us, too, courageous witnesses to the people of your own times.

All: Lord hear our prayer.

Leader: If we have not love among us, and if we are not united, then our witness will be in vain. Unite us in love that we may know how to witness, not just in words but also with our deeds.

All: Lord hear our prayer.

Leader: The future of the Church is in your hands. Guide it, Lord, protect it and join together its members. As for us - give us the strength to achieve, together with you, a better future for your Church and for humanity.

All: Lord hear our prayer.

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Leader: United by the theme of love for one another let us pray together using the words that Christ gave us:

All: Our Father ...

## **E. ESSAY**

### **WHY DIFFERENT CHURCHES?**

Through twenty centuries the church has told the 'Old, old story of Jesus and his love.' But that old story becomes good news only as it meets and satisfies the needs and hopes of particular people in particular places at particular times.

We saw in the first unit that different individuals, different social groups, different societies have different needs in different circumstances. To commend the Gospel the church must interpret the old story in a way that is intelligible to particular people in their specific

circumstances. More than that: it will have to relate the Gospel to the particular needs and concerns, showing how attractive it is, or how challenging, or both. All this is necessary if the Gospel is to be heard, understood and accepted. A living and missionary church therefore means a diverse church, a church as diverse as the societies and cultures in which it is set.

However, there are dangers in such diverse approaches and interpretations. Diversity can easily lead to division. The church may appear to be teaching different doctrines or commending different behaviour at different times and in different circumstances. Diverse teaching already appears in the pages of the New Testament, for instance over the church's attitude to secular authority.

## **CHURCH AND STATE**

In writing to the church in Rome, where the Roman Emperor had his court, Paul commands the church to obey the secular authorities because they are appointed by God to maintain order, Romans 13:1. This attitude is maintained throughout the Pauline Epistles.

However, the Book of Revelation paints a sharply contrasting picture. Far from being God's instrument in exercising true justice, the Emperor Nero, the beast with the number 666, is the instrument of the dragon, who represents the devil, Revelation 13. The attitude to the State expressed by Paul differed from that of the author of Revelation probably because the latter was writing after the persecution of Christians by the Emperors Nero and Domitian. He knew from bitter experience that secular authorities could come under the influence of evil powers. His teaching contrasted with Paul's because his circumstances differed from his.

Christians were persecuted by the Roman authorities because they were not willing to take part in the civil religion of the Empire by worshipping at the Emperor's altar. The Gospel of Jesus was about the Kingdom or rule of God over the whole of life and not simply about the interior life of the soul. It was therefore not possible for a faithful Christian to put incense on the altar of the Emperor. The Emperor might justly claim God's authority to establish and uphold the laws of human society, but absolute authority belonged to God alone.

Persecution occurred from time to time during the next two centuries. Countless Christians died as witnesses to their faith in Jesus Christ, the 'faithful witness (martyr), the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth', Revelation 1:5. The blood of the martyrs proved to be the seed of the church, which grew rapidly after persecution.

The martyrs died in the expectation that Jesus would come soon and establish his kingdom. What actually happened must have seemed almost surprising to the Christians who survived. Thousands of Christians had perished in the persecutions. It seemed the most unequal of all history's struggles - the might of the Roman Empire against a defenceless and unresisting church. In 306AD Constantine was proclaimed Emperor of Rome by his troops in York. He marched on Rome taking the Cross as his standard. In 313AD he declared Christianity a permitted religion, and was later himself baptised. As the dying Emperor Julian said fifty years later, 'Thou has conquered, O Galilean'.

The transformation in the church caused by this event can scarcely be over-emphasised. From being the persecuted underdogs of society, Christians soon found themselves in positions of authority. From being a series of local communities, holding aloof from society at large, the church became an important ingredient in the mortar that preserved the Empire and its civilisation from pagan barbarians. From being a prophetic community looking for the return of the Messiah, the church became one of the valued pillars of imperial Rome. It has been said that when Constantine took up the Cross, the church laid it down.

In this victory therefore were hidden the seeds of compromise and possible defeat. As the Empire and gradually also the surrounding pagan nations became Christian, so the church ran the risk of succumbing to one of the temptations which faced Christ in the wilderness - that of using worldly power to its own advantage. Christianity ran the risk of becoming pagan.

After Constantine, more and more government offices passed into the hands of Christians who found themselves exercising responsibility and power for which Christian teaching had not prepared them. It was all too easy to adopt the prevailing secular or pagan standards. The Emperors interfered in the affairs of the church. Church leaders sometimes intrigued with the civil power to obtain advantage over rival parties in the church.

## **CHRISTIAN DIVISIONS**

As early as the time of Paul the Christian church was threatened by divisions, 1 Cor. 1:10-13 and 11:18; James 2:2-4; Galatians 2:11-13. Some were caused by support for different leading personalities; some by different teaching; some by allowing worldly distinctions between rich and poor to enter the church. Christian divisions soon became realities. The Gospel was preached in new cultures. New questions were asked about the Christian faith, and differing answers were offered. Different Christian groups took different attitudes to those who gave way under persecution; some received them back into the church, while others were more strict. By the time of Constantine there were fundamental differences of belief and practice in the church, and he set about trying to reconcile them. He it was who summoned the first ecumenical Council to Nicaea in 325AD.

Six further Ecumenical Councils followed. The decisions of these Councils are still recognised as authoritative by Orthodox, Roman Catholics and most Protestants today. They tackled disputed points of Christian teaching. Was Jesus Christ divine? Was he fully human? Is the Holy Spirit a divine person? The church gradually discovered and settled the standards by which orthodoxy was to be judged. These standards, and especially the Nicene Creed, were settled and affirmed by the Ecumenical Councils. Sometimes differing Christian groups were reconciled as a result. Sometimes they were not, and then even large groups of Christians were separated off from the main body of the church.

## **EAST AND WEST**

The Roman Empire split in two, one half centred in Rome, and the other centred in Constantinople. As the centuries passed the Eastern Christians, centred in Constantinople, and the Western Christians, centred in Rome, grew apart. The Empire lasted longer in the East and Constantine's successors as Emperor retained a strong influence, some would say domination, over the church. The Eastern Church spoke Greek. The Western Church spoke Latin. When Rome fell to the barbarians the Western Empire looked to the church for some stability; and the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, increased not only in spiritual status, but also acquired political influence and power.

Everywhere in East as well as West, the Church of Rome enjoyed a special prestige among Christians. This was no doubt primarily for two reasons. Tradition had it that both Peter and Paul had been to Rome and indeed had been martyred there, and therefore the reliability of its traditional teaching was especially important. Indeed throughout the early centuries its witness remained strong and reliable, and it supported other weaker or less securely orthodox churches. The second reason for Rome's prestige was that the city had been for centuries the secular capital of the Empire.

The crucial question for later history - whether Rome's primacy, and hence the Bishop of Rome's primacy, was simply one of honour or whether the Bishop of Rome had legal power

over other churches - took some time to emerge clearly. By the middle of the fifth century AD the Roman Church had established a primacy of right and jurisdiction over other churches in the West, based upon the promises to Peter recorded in the Gospels, Matt. 16:18; Luke 22:32; John 21:15-17. Pope Leo the Great, who was Bishop of Rome from 440 to 461 AD, taught that these Gospel texts should be applied not only to Peter, but also to his successors as Bishops of Rome. Moreover, he taught that, unlike other bishops, the Pope of Rome as the church's divinely appointed mouthpiece had full power extending over the whole church.

Was such teaching ever acknowledged in the Eastern Church? Even when the great patriarchates of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem emerged in the fourth and fifth centuries, throughout the East Rome was always seen as pre-eminent. By and large, however, Eastern theologians regarded Rome's pre-eminence as one of honour rather than of legal power. Peter was seen clearly as prince of the apostles, yet his apostleship was not different in kind from that of the others.

The Orthodox Church in the East and the Catholic Church in the West grew apart from each other. They ceased to meet in Council. They faced different questions and came to different solutions of different problems. The West added the words "...and the Son" (*filioque* in Latin) to the Nicene Creed without consulting the East. To most Eastern theologians even today to say that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son implies a division in God and so is horrifying. The separation between East and West became worse in 1054 AD when the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople excommunicated each other.

It was made far worse one hundred and fifty years later when the Western crusaders failed to rescue the Holy Places from the Muslims, turned aside, attacked Constantinople with its Eastern Orthodox Christians, and established a Latin Patriarch there.

The Eastern Orthodox Church does not acknowledge the Pope of Rome as having more than a seniority of honour among the Bishops. For the Eastern Orthodox there are several independent churches, such as the Greek Orthodox Church and the Russian Orthodox Church, using different languages for worship, living harmoniously and in communion with one another under the leadership of various Patriarchs, the senior of whom is the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. In recent years particularly the Orthodox Churches have suffered much persecution from different governments, bearing a quiet witness to Christ through faithful worship and family devotion.

## **THE WEST IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

Throughout the Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church was a unifying force in Western Europe. The Papacy brought about a growing uniformity in church organization and worship. It harnessed the fruits of original missionary enterprise, such as that of the Celtic monks in Britain, bringing their practices into line with that of the Roman Church. It also harnessed the reforming tendencies of the later religious orders, ensuring that their gifts remained within the Catholic Church, and did not cause a new sect or heresy. When, however, such sects or heresies did appear in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the church called for a crusade against them, established the Inquisition, which consigned them to torture and death, in order to save their immortal souls and the souls of those who might otherwise be lost in heresy.

People's loyalties tended to be either local, or to Christendom as a whole. Latin, the language of the church's worship, was understood everywhere in the West, and the Pope exercised a spiritual authority which transcended national boundaries. Indeed it was only towards the end of the Middle Ages that people began to identify themselves with the emerging nations of Europe. The kings of these nations often quarrelled with the Pope, but they dared not quarrel

too long, for this was an age of faith. The Pope could excommunicate kings, endanger their immortal souls, and release their subjects from their oaths of loyalty.

It is significant, as we noticed in the last unit, that the Roman Catholic Church is organized internationally, under the jurisdiction of the Pope, and locally in dioceses under the jurisdiction of the bishop, but not primarily nationally. This is because of its belief in the universality of the church, and also because a key period in its development took place within the Holy Roman Empire before the rise of modern nation states.

## **THE REFORMATION**

By contrast the Reformation occurred with the rise of the nation state, and it is not surprising that Lutheran, Anglican and many Reformed Churches were organized within national boundaries. It coincided with a new approach to learning and a greater emphasis on the importance of the individual person.

The Reformation was basically a religious movement. All serious churchmen at the beginning of the sixteenth century agreed that reform in the church was very necessary. The papacy was in disrepute; many clergy and monks seemed to be more interested in worldly affairs than in spiritual values. But why should a movement for reform in the church lead to divisions? There were many factors involved and they were certainly not all religious in origin. One important factor was the growing nationalism of the period which we have already mentioned.

When Martin Luther made his famous protest against the sale of indulgences in 1517, he was inspired by profoundly religious motives. As a monk he had striven as hard as he could to earn his salvation, but nothing he could do relieved his sense of guilt and sin. Then the words of the Epistle to the Romans, 'the just shall live by faith', brought him sudden light and hope. He needed only to respond in faith and trust. Salvation was not won by human effort; it was a free gift of God, who had saved us through Christ's death and resurrection. He interpreted the rest of Scripture in the light of this profound truth.

It was his sense of need for faith that made Luther so shocked at the sale of indulgences, a practice which often left the impression that forgiveness for sins could be bought for money, although this was not the official teaching of the Catholic Church. Luther was at first convinced that the Pope could not be aware of the teaching and practices which were going on in his name, but he was to discover that the Pope was more concerned with raising money for the building of the new St. Peter's at Rome than with the methods of raising it. At Rome Luther's demand for reform was not taken seriously; Luther's attitude hardened and he began to attack not only the Pope and the current church practices, but also the structure and teaching of the church.

Because of the printing press, Luther's ideas were able to spread more quickly than those of any reformer before him. In Germany Luther began to be regarded as something of a hero. The Elector of Saxony and other German princes began to see that they could use Luther's popularity in their attempts to weaken the authority of the Holy Roman Emperor, their overlord. Thus Lutheran 'Churches' grew up based on the authority of the Bible and supported by the 'godly prince', whose authority in church affairs Luther also came to accept. When the Emperor tried to restore Catholicism throughout his territory, the Lutheran princes revolted and were finally strong enough to compel the Emperor to accept the principle that in each state the ruler should determine the religion of the people.

Once Luther had broken with Rome and his supporters had become a force to be reckoned with, divisions within Christendom became thinkable. In the city states of Switzerland there were a number of reformers, the most notable being John Calvin of Geneva. Besides giving

Protestantism a carefully worked out theology, he gave it a strong organization, and it was the Calvinist, Reformed or Presbyterian form of Protestantism which took root in Scotland under the influence of John Knox. The Presbyterian Church of Scotland is the most dominant church in that country today. Different Protestant groups disagreed on doctrine, interpreting the Scriptures differently, though all alike claimed to base their teaching on the Bible. Some of the more extreme Baptists and Independents were condemned by Lutherans and Calvinists as strongly as they themselves were condemned by the Catholic Church.

Gradually certain ideas and practices came to be labelled Catholic and others Protestant, and each side in defending its own ideas tended to push them to extremes. Because Luther had stressed faith, Catholics stressed the need for good works. Whereas Protestants stressed the authority of the Bible, Catholics stressed the authority of the Pope and of the church tradition. While the Reformers stressed the 'royal priesthood of all believers' and called their clergy 'ministers,' Catholics held to the idea of the priest as a 'father in God'. Protestant ministers could be married, as could Orthodox priests, but Catholic priests remained celibate. Above all it was in worship that people felt and expressed their differences: while Protestants called the Eucharist 'The Lord's Supper' and stressed the idea of a memorial meal, Catholics spoke of the 'sacrifice of the Mass', stressing the Real Presence of Christ and insisting on the term transubstantiation to describe the fundamental change in the bread and wine. The Reformers thought services should be held in the language of the people, and concentrated on Bible reading, hymns and sermons; Catholics kept to the use of Latin and for them it was the Mass above all that mattered.

Religious belief came to be determined as much by opposition to the views of others as by positive Christian insight and truth. Faith became polemical.

## **IN ENGLAND AND WALES**

Across the English Channel the Reformation had a different, and at times, complex character. King Henry VIII split with Rome in 1534, declaring himself to be supreme head of the church in England. The church under Henry, the later Tudors and the early Stuarts, was more or less Protestant or Catholic, depending largely on political factors. Eventually the Church of England became the church of the majority and the established church in England, retaining many of the ancient church's characteristics. Those who preferred to follow the teachings of the continental reformers formed the Congregationalist and Presbyterian Churches and the followers of the more radical reform became the Baptist Church.

## **REVIVALS**

The eighteenth century, when many of the traditional churches were at a low ebb, saw the rise of Methodism in England. Under the leadership of John Wesley it commenced as a revival movement within the Church of England but it eventually split from Anglicanism and became the largest Free Church in England and one of the larger Protestant denominations in the world.

A further revival in the nineteenth century in England saw the Salvation Army come into existence. Having no sacraments this body would not call itself a church, but it has devoted itself to preaching the Gospel and improving the social conditions of many of the poorest in our society.

## **AUSTRALIA**

The Christian church came to Australia with the first fleet in 1788. The Reverend Richard Johnson of the Church of England was the chaplain to the convicts and their keepers. He

provided worship services which all the convicts were obliged to attend despite the fact that many of them were Irish Catholics.

The Anglican Church of Australia is a daughter church of the Church of England. In the beginning of the colony it was taken for granted that although the Church of England was not formally established by law, as it was in England, the relationship between the Church in Australia and the government would be much the same as it was in England. As time went by, however, the Church of England in Australia realized that it could not enjoy the advantages of establishment and it became regarded as one among several Christian denominations in this country. Because of the inherited churchmanship differences in Anglicanism one of its marked features in Australia has been a slow development of a distinctive church life and identity. It wasn't until 1962 that it achieved full legal independence from the Church of England. In 1981 it was officially designated the Anglican Church of Australia.

The first Roman Catholic service in Australia took place in 1803 when the Reverend James Dixon, who had been transported for participating in the Irish rebellion of 1778, was allowed to celebrate Mass for the Irish convicts. It was not until 1820 that two priests, John Terry and Philip Connolly, arrived in Sydney officially to minister to Roman Catholic in the colonies. The Roman Catholic Church in Australia has been greatly influenced by Irish Catholicism, not only because many of the convicts had been transported from that country, but also because many of the priests who came to minister to the Catholics came from Ireland. A high proportion of the post war immigration however came from traditional Roman Catholic countries on the continent and consequently the Roman Catholic Church in Australia has become culturally more diversified. In the last few years it has become the majority church in the country.

The Uniting Church in Australia, the third largest church in the country, came into existence in 1977 as a union of the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. Some Congregations of the Congregational Union and the Presbyterian Church chose not to unite and so the Congregational and Presbyterian Churches continue in Australia. These Protestant churches each had its own history. Presbyterians came to Australia from Scotland where the Reformed church which John Knox had modelled on Calvin's church in Geneva had become the established church. Congregationalism had begun in England as a more radical reform. They wanted a more simple form of church life based on the New Testament and they rejected the old church structures many of which the Church of England continued to use. By the end of the first half of the nineteenth century the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational Churches were established in each of the Australia colonies. Lay leaders from among the free settlers had initially lead groups of worshippers and the groups were soon supported by ministers sent out to Australia by the mother churches in Great Britain. National churches were established just after the turn of the century, the Presbyterian Church of Australia in 1901 and both the Congregational Union of Australia and the Methodist Church of Australasia in 1904.

The first Lutherans emigrated to Australia in the 1830s to escape religious persecution by the king of Prussia. They settled in rural areas throughout Australia such as the Barossa Valley in South Australia and were gradually joined by other Lutheran immigrants. For many years they remained a rural, self-contained fellowship. However, in more recent times Lutherans have moved to the cities and have established churches which seek to serve all people in the community. The influx of Lutheran migrants of many nationalities has made people aware of the international character of the Lutheran faith. Many ethnic communities have retained ties with their homeland churches. Doctrinal issues split the early Lutheran settlers in 1846, and

division continued until 1966 when the two former Lutheran churches reached a doctrinal agreement and merged into the Lutheran Church of Australia.

## **MODERN ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT**

As we have seen, reformation and revival have usually led to further divisions among Christians. Although leaders of renewal movements have not intended to break the unity of the Church, their enthusiasm, faced sometimes with intractable conservatism, has resulted in division. What makes the ecumenical movement of the twentieth century almost unique in church history is that the attempt to renew the church has had as one of its specific objects the reunion of the church. The word 'ecumenical' means 'concerning the whole inhabited world'.

This movement grew out of the evangelical revival. It is significant that it was from the evangelical, Protestant world, which in earlier centuries had been ready to break the unity of the church for the sake of what it saw to be the demands of the Gospel, that concern for reunion grew. First of all it was a concern for Protestant unity, as when the Evangelical Alliance was formed in London in 1846, and the National Free Church Council at the end of the century.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Anglicans were also drawn in. The enthusiasm, which drove missionaries overseas to convert the whole inhabited world, led them to co-operate with one another. It also brought them back to a missionary conference in Edinburgh in 1910. There, Protestant and Anglican church leaders and missionaries debated their failures in missionary work. They realised that one of the hindrances to the Gospel was that Christians were divided. They were preaching a Gospel of reconciliation in Christ, and they were doing it as rival bodies working in competition with one another. The Edinburgh Conference took further moves away from competition in mission and towards co-operation, and the International Missionary Council was born. However, some of those present in Edinburgh realised that co-operation was not enough. What was needed was the recovery of the complete unity of the church. They worked for the establishment of what came to be called the World Council of Churches in 1948.

Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant Churches have worked alongside one another in these bodies. As yet the Roman Catholic Church is not a member of them.

However, the Roman Catholic Church formally committed itself to sharing in the modern ecumenical movement with the publication by the Second Vatican Council of the Decree on Ecumenism in 1964. Its text begins as follows:

“The restoration of unity among all Christians is one of the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. Christ the Lord founded one Church and one Church only. Nevertheless many Christians' Communion claim to be the true inheritors of Jesus Christ. All indeed, avow that they are followers of the Lord, but they are divided in their convictions and go their different ways, as if Christ himself were divided. Such division is clearly contrary to Christ's will. It is a scandal to the world and a hindrance to the sacred task of preaching the Gospel to every creature.”

A few years after this Pope Paul VI and the Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople solemnly removed the mutual excommunication which had stood between Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism for nine hundred years. This did not mean that the two churches were now in communion with each other, but it did signal the end of centuries of hostility.

## **GROWTH TOWARDS UNITY**

All the major churches are now committed to working for Christian unity at every level of the life.

On the world scale the member Churches of the World Council of Churches, together with the Roman Catholic Church, have recently been represented in a study of three matters which have been traditional causes of division, and the World Council of Churches has published the report under the title of **Baptism, Eucharist & Ministry** WCC, Geneva, 1982. Although this report does not show complete consensus, it does point to a growing convergence on these three matters.

The World Council now has a group considering the Apostolic Faith. A united church must be rooted in agreement on its fundamental faith, and so this group is going back behind the centuries of division to the first Ecumenical Councils. How can we confess that same faith together today in terms which the world can understand?

The method of these studies is totally unlike the way our ancestors did theology after the Reformation. Our ancestors tended to begin with a denominational or confessional statement, and then developed it in a polemical way to show how different they were from other denominations. These studies begin with Scripture and the early Fathers, and attempt to discover the faith of the church as it has developed through the ages. They see Tradition not as static and unchanging, but as developing to meet new questions and challenges. In this development they claim to discern ways in which our previously separated and mutually hostile traditions are now converging.

In addition to Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry and following its methods, there have recently been published a large number of reports in each of which two worldwide churches have examined together their points of doctrinal agreement and disagreement.

The great example of church union in our country is the Uniting Church in Australia which is one of a relatively small number of organic unions in the world in recent times. Most of the Australian churches have national ecumenical affairs committees which promote the concept of Christian unity among their own membership, and work to forge links with other churches. There are dialogues between some churches at the national and local levels. The national dialogue between the Lutheran and Roman Catholic Churches produced in 1985 the significant report on the eucharist titled "**Sacrament and Sacrifice**". On the local level, the Brisbane based Christians in Dialogue Program has over recent years successfully involved many small groups of Christians from a number of churches in dialogue and prayer. The antagonism and competition which for so long characterised relationships between the churches in Australia has been replaced, for the most part, by friendship and cooperation. The national heads of many Australian churches have been meeting since 1985. In the bicentennial year they issued several joint statements one of which concerned the commitment of the Australian churches to continue the search for ways of promoting Christian unity.

## **WHY DIFFERENT CHURCHES?**

Most of this unit so far has been a description of how Christian divisions came about. We are now in a better position to answer the question 'Why different churches?'

There are good reasons for diversity among the churches. Effective mission demands that the Gospel should be translated into a language the people understand. It should be presented in a way that meets their questions and needs. Worship and community life should allow the people to express their particular characteristics, if it is really to enter into the depths of

personalities and society. Because of the great variety of peoples and cultures around the world, their churches are bound to have an element of diversity.

This diversity has frequently led to differences in teaching and practice. As we have seen, the early church tried to overcome these differences by bringing representatives of divided churches together in order to try to heal the existing divisions. It is important for Christians of different traditions to discuss past divisions, for their folk memories interpret the past very differently and help to perpetuate divisions. Even today the memories of Protestant and Catholic martyrs of the Reformation fester, and these memories need to be discussed if we are to heal our history.

### **WHY DIVIDED CHURCHES?**

There are clearly bad reasons for divisions between Christians. Division, as distinct from diversity, is a sin. At the risk of over-simplification it is worth examining briefly what sort of sin has caused Christian divisions. In the case of the division between Eastern Orthodox and Catholic West a major factor was that they failed to meet regularly. Their ways of worship and their teaching developed separately, and they allowed differences to grow into division. Of course political divisions made it difficult for them to meet - we are not called to pass judgment on history but we can learn from it. Apathy and mutual indifference among churches clearly is a cause of division. If we are to maintain unity, we must meet regularly and patiently sort out our differences.

In principle we have said that diversity in the church is not only acceptable; it is positively good. But how much diversity is possible before unity is threatened? To what extent do we expect a uniform expression of the faith, or a uniform interpretation of the nature of God's salvation in Christ? Do we require uniformity in worship? Do all local churches need to have the same orders of ministry? What arrangements need to be made so that differences between the churches can be sorted out?