

Antioch School *Growing Disciples*

Christian Basics 5 The Body and Mission of Christ

The Body of Christ

In John 19.30 we are told that on the cross “Jesus drank the wine and said, ‘It is finished!’ Then he bowed his head and died.”

Obviously, the statement “It is finished!” was unusually important for John. Jesus did not mean “I am finished” nor was he announcing that he had drunk the wine to the last drop, though that might have had symbolic significance. The word used in the Greek (*tetelestai*) was often used in commercial transactions with a meaning similar to our “paid in full.” Far from being a concession of defeat, it was an affirmation that his mission was accomplished, that the redemptive sacrifice was complete, that the penalty for human sin had been “paid in full.”

Now turn to the book of Acts. Luke, the writer of the gospel and Acts, was with Paul for some of his missionary journeys. Notice the change from “they” to “we” in 16.6-10 (and there are a number of other “we” passages). Acts ends with Paul in prison in Rome awaiting trial. It has been suggested that Luke-Acts was written as a brief for Theophilus as counsel for Paul’s defence. In any case, the opening of Acts clearly links it with the gospel. But notice the words, “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles he had chosen” (1.1-2 NIV).

If the gospel of Luke was about “all that Jesus began to do and to teach”, then what is the purpose of Acts? Surely it is the record of what Jesus continued to do and to teach by the Holy Spirit through the apostles – which is why the book came to be called “The Acts of the Apostles”.

And yet that can miss the mark too. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was not one of the apostles, though he was one of a group of seven who were given responsibility for distribution of food to the widows (6.1-6). Ch.8 records that, following his martyrdom, a cruel persecution began against the church in Jerusalem – “All the believers, except the apostles, were scattered throughout the provinces of Judaea and Samaria” (v.1b). (Recall that in 1.8 Jesus said they would be witnesses “in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” God used persecution to send them out of the Jerusalem ghetto into the rest of the world.) So, for the moment, the apostles remained in Jerusalem, while “the believers who were scattered went everywhere, preaching the message” (v.4).

Something very distinctive and important was happening in the life of the early church. It moved from

the priestly or clerical model of Judaism and other religions to being a movement of all the people of God, the Body of Christ.

This does not remove the need for leadership within the church and some New Testament letters (especially to the Corinthians) highlight the dangers of each individual insisting on his/her “own thing”. But, across the centuries the church has had a tendency again and again to revert to a clerical model where the “leader” doesn’t “lead” at all but expects (or is expected) to “do it all.”

Two Images of the Church

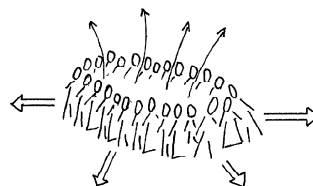
There are two images especially used in the Scriptures for the church on earth – a building and a body. The book of Revelation gives us a third – the bride (19.7) – but our attention here will be focused on the first two.

The first reference to the church is to a building. It was away up north away from the crowds, at Caesarea Philippi which was near the sources of the Jordan at the foot of Mount Hermon – this is where Jesus asked his disciples, “What are people saying about me? and who do you say I am?” After Peter’s response Jesus commended him and went on, “And so I tell you, Peter: you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will ever be able to overcome it” (Matthew 16.18).

One of the big debates over centuries is whether this means that the Roman Catholic church, supposedly founded by Peter, is therefore the only true church. What each side of this debate so often failed to consider is whether, in talking about a “building”, Jesus was essentially referring to an “organisation” at all. Of course, any human activity – even when divinely directed – will have some degree of organisation. But can that organisation ever be regarded as absolute?

Peter himself didn’t seem to see it that way when he wrote, “Come to the Lord, the living stone rejected by man as worthless but chosen by God as valuable. Come as living stones, and let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple, where you will serve as holy priests to offer spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ... You are a chosen race, the King’s priests, the holy nation, God’s own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvellous light” (1 Peter 2.4-5,9).

In the Greek of Matthew 16 there is a distinction between the word for Peter (*petros*, a rock) and the rock (*petra*, bedrock) on which the church is built. Peter



himself seems to have this same distinction in mind, seeing every Christian (himself included) as “living stones” built on the foundation of the Living

Stone, Jesus Christ himself. And he describes us as “living stones”, neither passive nor inert, who, facing inward, are priests “offering spiritual and acceptable sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ”, and, facing outward, are “chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvellous light.”

Paul, writing about divisions in the Corinthian church, uses the same image, “You are also God’s building. Using the gift that God gave me, I did the work of an expert builder and laid the foundation, and another man is building on it. But each one must be careful how he builds. For God has already placed Jesus Christ as the one and only foundation, and no other foundation can be laid” (1 Corinthians 3.9b-11). And in Ephesians 2.20-21 – “You, too, are built upon the foundation laid by the apostles and prophets, the cornerstone being Christ Jesus himself. He is the one who holds the whole building together and makes it grow into a sacred temple dedicated to the Lord.”

We notice that the building of the church is not envisaged as a kind of fortress, a place of refuge from the hostile world, a place of isolation and safety. Even in the original reference in Matthew 16 we detect a mixing of metaphors. It is not really a question of the church being proof against the “gates of Hades”, but the “gates of Hades” being unable to withstand the attack of the church!

Paul’s favourite image of the church is the Body of which Christ is Head and Lord. In Ephesians he sees the church as “Christ’s body, the completion of him who himself completes all things everywhere” (1.23).

We need a body, don’t we? We can’t work without one. And if, through some sickness, it won’t function properly or if, because of a stroke or paralysis, it refuses to respond to what we want it to do, we are in a bad way! Without a body we are not equipped for life in this world. So Paul is saying that the church, Christ’s Body, is “the completion (or fullness) of the one who completes (or fills) all things everywhere.” It is, to use a modern jargon-word, the interface between Christ and the world of people.

That is not to say that Christ does not work directly in the consciences of people through the Holy Spirit or that he may not use a whole variety of “natural” circumstances to fulfil his will. Yet take the conversion of Cornelius, for example (Acts 10). Here is this Roman captain at Caesarea who has begun to worship God, to live a life of practical help and to spend much time in prayer to God – in fact, “constantly praying” (v.2). One day something special happens. He has a vision! An angel of God appears to him! “Cornelius!” That was a startling experience for him – as it would be for us! “What is it, sir?” “Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and noticed your charitable works and I have come to announce to you this further word of good news, that you are to believe in Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all!” No! It didn’t happen that way, did it?” The actual account is “Send some men to Joppa (about 55km as the crow flies) for a certain man whose full name is Simon Peter” (v.5).

In other words, the good news of Jesus was given through a member of the Body. The same was true of the Ethiopian official – the Holy Spirit didn’t do the work independently of Philip (8.26-40). The Lord Jesus himself appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, yet here again he brings Ananias into the act (9.1-19).

One Body – Many Gifts

One of the reasons why the Body is a very special image is that it is a diversity-in-unity. My body has eyes,

ears, nose, mouth, arms, legs... The life and functioning of my body depends on this diversity. Yet the life and functioning of my body also depends on this diversity working together in unity in response to “me”.

In the Corinthian church each person was very proud of the particular spiritual gift he/she had. This led to conflict and chaos because there was no awareness of the Body. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul begins by acknowledging the variety of gifts the Spirit has given to individual members. Then he says, “Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts” (v.12). The parts of the human body need one another, he is saying (vv.14-26). Now, “all of you [together] are Christ’s body, and each one is a part of it” (v.27). As he goes on to list the gifts again, he is emphasising order and leadership in the Body. He removes any idea (clearly present among the Corinthians) that one or other of the gifts made anyone a “superior” member of the Body. “In the church God has put all in place: in the first place, apostles, in the second place prophets, and in the third place teachers; then those who perform miracles, followed by those who are given the power to heal or to help others or to direct them or to speak in strange tongues. They are not all apostles or prophets or teachers. Not everyone has the power to work miracles or to heal diseases or to speak in strange tongues or to explain what is said” (vv.28-30).

So it should never be a matter of “Look at me! I have a gift of miracles (or helps, or administration, or tongues...)!” The different gifts all have an honourable place within the Body. They complete the Body and enable the Body to function healthily. Without love, they count for nothing (13.1-3).

In chapter 14 Paul was particularly concerned about the disruption being caused by those with the gifts of prophecy and tongues. He concludes, “Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (vv.39-40 NIV).

In Ephesians 4, Paul does not enumerate all the gifts. He does emphasise, however, that “each one of us has received a special gift in proportion to what Christ has given” (v.7) – just as every part of a human body has a “gift”, the ability to function in a particular way for the benefit of the whole body. And Christ “appointed some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers” (v.11b). We can tend to see these as special “up front” leadership gifts. In a sense – as in his Corinthian teaching – these gifts do have a key role in the healthy functioning of the Body. He goes on to spell this out – “He did this to prepare all God’s people for the work of Christian service, in order to build up the body of Christ. And so we shall all come together to that oneness in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God; we shall become mature people, reaching to the very height of Christ’s full stature” (vv.12-13). Note that the “up front” gifts are for the purpose of helping all God’s people to be ready to use their gifts, not as a substitute for them. In the healthy Body all parts are functioning properly!

Romans 12 contains another section of teaching on gifts. Here Paul is counselling them to be modest in their thinking. Using the image of the Body again, he writes,

“though we are many, we are one body in union with Christ, and we are all joined to each other as different parts of one body. So we are to use our different gifts in accordance with the grace that God has given us...” (vv.5ff). Modesty doesn’t mean not using the gifts, but using them with reference to the Giver – as Paul himself illustrates in v.3a.

These three major teaching passages describe a wide range of spiritual gifts (*charismata*). Someone has counted up a total of twenty-seven gifts and concluded that, even then, we must not limit the Spirit of God!

So What is the Church?

The dictionary definition includes – “**church** n. 1. a building designed for public forms of worship, esp. Christian worship. 2. an occasion of public worship. 3. the clergy as distinguished from the laity. 4. institutionalised forms of religion as a political or social force: *conflict between Church and State*. 5. the collective body of all Christians. 6. a particular Christian denomination or group of Christian believers. 7. the Christian religion...” Our English usage has become so diverse that we can actually miss the Biblical meaning – we can fail to grasp just what Jesus was promising to build!

Essentially, in Biblical terms, the “church” is not a building, an occasion of worship, an organisational structure or denomination... This is not to say that the Biblical “church” doesn’t need buildings, worship times or organisation! Basically –

1. The church is people, the people who receive Jesus Christ as Saviour and acknowledge him as Lord.
2. The church is the community of the Holy Spirit who indwells and enables each believer and who binds the individual believers together as the Body of Christ.
3. The Holy Spirit has given believers a variety of gifts whose use will build up the other members of the Body and bring glory to God.
4. The Holy Spirit has provided for leadership in the church, not to replace the gifts of others, but to encourage, equip, interpret, facilitate and co-ordinate the gifts within the Body.
5. Christ is the Head of the Body, and the Body – in its leadership and membership – must always be in submission to his will.
6. The whole Body exists for the worship of God and for the fulfilment of Christ’s mission in the world.

For reflection...

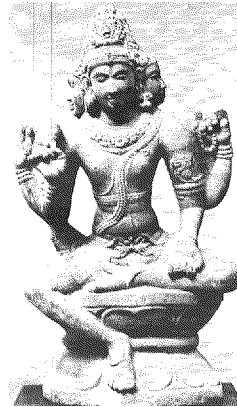
Jesus said, “I will build my church...” Peter wrote, “Let yourselves be used in building a spiritual temple...” What is this description of the church telling us about its nature and mission?

Paul described the church as “Christ’s body, the completion of him who himself completes all things everywhere.” What does it mean to us to think of the church in this way?

Why is it important to recognise that everyone has a gift and that nobody has all the gifts?

Understanding Hinduism

Hinduism is not a closed system of beliefs and practices observed by all Hindus. It is rather an extremely



complex assortment of beliefs and practices bound together by their common location on the Indian subcontinent, by their links with the social system of caste and by their acknowledgment, directly or indirectly, of the Vedic Scriptures (1200-600 BC). The name “Hindu” is derived, through the Persian, from the name of the Indus River; “Hinduism” is a European word that covers a wide range

of Indian ethnic religions. The sacred language of Hinduism is Sanskrit.

A number of Hindu offshoots have made their way to Western countries. Best known is ISKCON, International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Hare Krishna), founded in New York in the 1960s by the Vishnu yogi A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada (b. Calcutta, 1896). Other sects have included Ananda Marga and Rajneeshism. More subtle has been the influence of Hinduism through Yoga and Transcendental Meditation.

Because Hinduism is a synthesis of various ideas, influences and specific groups, it is not easy to give an overall categorisation. However, most Hindus would accept (1) the belief in transmigration, i.e. that every person lives many times on earth, in human or other form; (2) the belief that one’s status, or caste, in any given existence, depends on one’s conduct in a previous life (the principle of *karma*); (3) that man’s ultimate goal is release (*moksha*) from rebirth, and from the phenomenal world; (4) that the priestly (Brahmin) class is worthy of special reverence; (5) that the cow should be cared for and revered as a symbol of the earth’s bounty.

Beyond this point it is difficult to generalise. Many Hindus are theists, believing in one or more personal gods under such names as Vishnu or Shiva, who should be worshiped with love and devotion (*bhakti*). Others, following the philosopher Shamkara, hold the Supreme Reality to be impersonal. A few are theoretically atheists. Most would believe that God is immanent in all creation and regard all religions to be equally valid as means of access to God. This particular view has been expressed strongly by such prominent leaders of Hindu thought as Ramakrishna, Gandhi and Radhakrishnan.

The Hindu scriptures fall into two broad groups: *shruti* (revelation) and *smriti* (tradition). The former consists of the Vedic hymns, commentaries (*Brahmanas*) and speculative writings (*Upanishads*); the latter includes the two great epics (*Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*), the *Bhagavad Gita*, the law books, the later mythological writings, and the documents of the sects. The Hindu scriptures are of immense size and staggering diversity.

The three major paths to Hindu “salvation” include *karma marga* (method), the way of disinterested action; *bhakti marga*, the way of devotion, including ritualistic

sacrifice and devotion; and *jnana marga*, the path of knowledge and mystical insight.

A major issue between Hindus and Christians is the uniqueness of Christ. Because of their belief that the God-principle has been manifested many times as Vishnu, Krishna, etc., many Hindus are quite willing to accept Jesus as another such manifestation and therefore a divine teacher (*Yesuswami*), but not as a sole Saviour. For our part, we are not able to accept the basic Hindu belief in transmigration and rebirth, and insist that God is one and personal (a view held by some, but not all, Hindus).

The Mission of Christ

In Session 2, we saw that Jesus, the Son of God, came into the world for three major reasons – Revelation, Redemption and the Rule (or Kingdom) of God. At the beginning of this session, we have observed that the redemptive sacrifice was complete in his death, but that his life in the flesh was just the beginning of what he had to do in this world. We then began to think about the church as Christ's Body through which he continues to do his work within this world.

John records for us one of the appearances of the risen Jesus to his disciples. We hear Jesus saying, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you" (20.21). These words commit them to a continuation or extension of his mission.

Take careful note of the last two points in our teaching about the Body of Christ (p.3). "5. Christ is the Head of the Body, and the Body... must always be in submission to his will." In other words, we are not here to "do our own thing", but to respond to his call. He is the Head. He is the Lord. "6. The whole Body exists for the worship of God and for the fulfilment of Christ's mission in the world." It is this continuing mission of Christ through his Body that we are considering in this study.

The Great Commission

There are many things that Jesus taught during the three-and-a-half years of his ministry, all of them important for us. At the end of Matthew's gospel, however, we read the final instructions he gave to the eleven disciples. "I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth." (It is the risen, but not yet ascended, Christ who is speaking). "Go, then, to all peoples everywhere and make them my disciples: baptise them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age" (28.18-20).

In the original Greek this passage includes one imperative and three participles. The imperative is "make disciples". The participles are "going", "baptising" and "teaching". So he was saying, "Going, make disciples, baptising them and teaching them."

In common Greek usage, a "disciple" (*mathetes*) was a learner and often specifically an apprentice learning a trade. The teacher-pupil relationship was quite common in the ancient world. Jewish Rabbis gathered a group of disciples around them, so did Greek philosophers. In a general sense the word is referred in the New Testament to those who accept the teachings of others – for example, of John the Baptist (Matthew 9.14; John 1.35), of the

Pharisees (Mark 2.18; Luke 5.33), and of Moses (John 9.28).

We go back to the occasion when Jesus called the four fishermen. "Come with me," he said, "and I will teach you to catch men" (Matthew 4.18-22). With Jesus and his disciples, it was very much the apprenticeship model – not just learning ideas, but seeing them illustrated in practice, being shown the "how to." For them, "following Jesus" would mean being with him so that their lives would be changed by his personality, listening to his words so that they understood his mind, watching his life and learning how to live, seeing how he related to others and their needs – and wondering how he thought they would ever be able to do it!

As we think about it, it must have been a very daunting prospect – how can I ever be a true disciple of Jesus? It would only really come together for them after the cross, after the resurrection, after the day of Pentecost. After those events, the meaning of discipleship is redefined. Disciples are accepted by God on the basis of that redemptive sacrifice on the cross (we call this "grace", God's unmerited favour towards us), not on the basis of how well they match up to God's perfect standards (Paul develops this theme in Ephesians 2.8-10). Becoming a disciple involves receiving this grace of forgiveness and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit. A radical change begins to take place from within. As Paul puts it, "When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being; the old is gone, the new has come" (2 Corinthians 5.17). Paul is excited about it. His literal words are, "If any in Christ, new creation!" As Christian disciples, the character of Jesus comes to be worked out in our lives through the Holy Spirit working within us – what Paul calls the "fruit of the Spirit" in Galatians 5.22-23.

Notice that Jesus, in his commission, says they are to "make them my disciples". It is true that Paul can write, "Therefore I urge you to imitate me" (1 Corinthians 4.16 NIV). Or these words of encouragement in Hebrews, "We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised" (6.12 NIV) and "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (13.7 NIV). Human modelling of discipleship can be quite valuable provided it helps people to be Christ's disciples. The example to be copied is the life of faith in Christ.

And Paul's picture of the Body fits the commission well, for the original eleven were to "teach" the others "to obey everything that I have commanded you" – the commission was not just for the initial group.

Luke's record of Jesus' words makes clear to us what needed to be done now that the redemptive work was finished. "This is what is written: the Messiah must suffer and must rise from the dead three days later, and in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And I myself will send upon you what my Father has promised. But you must wait in the city until the power from above comes down upon you" (Luke 24.46-49). Jesus had done what only he could do. The next phase (which is our phase too!) was to carry this message throughout the world – "fishing for men"! People everywhere were to be

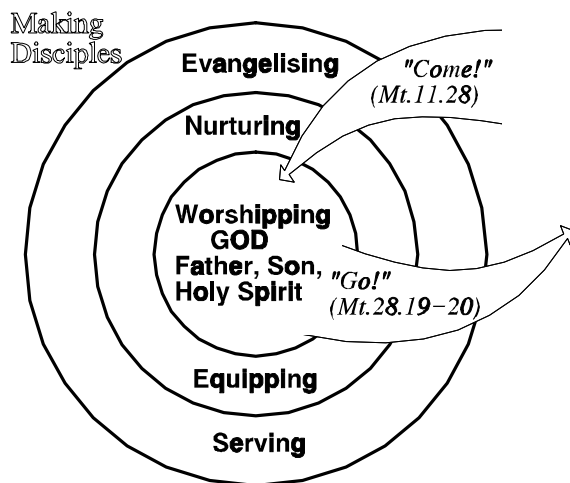
called to the two-fold turn of repentance and faith, so that they could know divine forgiveness and be disciplined, and then in turn call others... The Body, a living, growing organism, at work!

Luke also records from the late conversations of Jesus, "When the Holy Spirit comes upon you, you will be filled with power, and you will be witnesses for me in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1.8).

Understanding our Mission

Jesus didn't give instructions as to when the Body should gather together for worship, for how long, how many (and what types of) hymns... Nor did he say we must have Sunday Schools, Women's Fellowships, Men's Breakfasts, Coffee Shops, Kid's Clubs... And should church government be episcopal, presbyterial or independent? Neither Jesus nor the New Testament writers give us much help here.

We have, in fact, been left to work out (in consultation with our Lord in prayer, of course!) these kinds of details ourselves in the light of what is culturally appropriate in keeping with our mission. It is simply not good enough to say, "I like Communion done this way" or "I have no time for that kind of music" or "We have had this kind of activity for over a hundred years and it must be preserved at all costs." As individuals and as congregations, we need to begin to think and act missionally.



I believe that this visual helps us to draw together the various elements of our mission.

God himself – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is right at the centre of the life of the Body. It exists **for** him, to do his will. It exists **because of** him, because of his love, because of his redemptive action, because he calls people to himself and is the Head. It exists through him, since he leads it and empowers it for action. This relationship to God is crucial to the existence and life of the Body, so worship is our central and basic activity. Any activity from which God is excluded cannot be an activity of the Body.

The task of the Body is to make disciples. We can never develop the "club mentality" – the attitude that is concerned mainly to preserve our structures and look after ourselves. Think of the believers before Pentecost (Acts 1.12ff). There were a hundred and twenty of them and twelve leaders. What an effective club they could have been! They would have had "deep and meaningful"

times together. But they accepted the imperative to "Go!" and that would mean an extra 3000, 5000 – in fact new people being added every day (2.47b)! An important part of our life together is preparing us for our task ("facing outward", as we put it on p.2).

We go, of course, because people need to come. Jesus says, "Come to me, all of you who are tired from carrying heavy loads, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and put it on you, and learn from me, because I am gentle and humble in spirit; and you will find rest. For the yoke I will give you is easy, and the load I will put on you is light" (Matthew 11.28-30).

This "going out" and "bringing in" is vital to the whole task of making disciples. When a congregation ceases to have this as its outlook and motivation, it ceases to be a Body of Christ. Jesus said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19.10). His command is that "repentance and forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations" (24.47). If we are not actively doing that, we are not responding to the Head – we have ceased to be his Body!

We noted in the "Extra!!!" section of Session 2 notes that Jesus is "good news" for everyone in the world. Understanding that is very important for our sharing the good news (evangelising). The two-fold turn of repentance and faith are the human response to the call of Christ to "come".

Notice in Acts 1.8 (and in Luke 24.48) that Jesus says that we will be witnesses, not that we will "do witnessing". Every believer is a witness. Some will have a particular gift of evangelism, but all of us must "be ready at all times to answer anyone who asks you to explain the hope you have in you" (1 Peter 3.15b).

Sometimes we have thought of evangelism as getting in a Billy Graham (or Newman) every few years to do a burst of it on our behalf. But the effectiveness of such "campaigns" depends very much on whether evangelism is part of the on-going life of the congregation or not, whether it is part of the congregational life-style. Are we really committed to this business of "making disciples"?

Discipling people to Christ is not simply bringing people to a point of repentance and faith and leaving it at that. Discipling involves a great deal of nurturing. The Uniting Church's *Regulations* describe the Elders' role as including

"(a) sharing with the Minister(s) in building up the Congregation in faith and love;

(b) nurturing the members and adherents in their growth in grace" (3.1.9).

While we note this specific role, it is essential that the whole Body recognise that this nurturing is important for growing disciples. And, while there is need at the beginning of the Christian life to establish principles and habits that will lead to growth, spiritual growth should continue right throughout our life.

This nurturing will include specific instruction and encouragement regarding the Word of God, prayer, the development of the spiritual life, discovery and use of spiritual gifts, incorporation and involvement in the life of the Body.

Notice that we have talked about "incorporation" here. Sadly, some evangelistic programmes have not grasped the importance of the life of the Body and have

only been concerned to “win people for Christ” or “get people saved.” The movement of people towards Christ and salvation is not complete until they are actively participating in a particular Body of the Lord’s people.

Closely linked to nurturing is equipping. It represents the “going” (and doing) side of nurturing. Training gifts and developing skills both for ministry to others within the Body and for reaching out in caring service to others beyond the Body. Some people are inclined to think that “a gift is a gift and is mine to use”. But, as we have seen, gifts are given for building up the Body and, as such, need to be received, trained and co-ordinated for the health of the whole Body.

Closely linked to evangelising is servicing. Some of this will be within the Body. But a large measure of it will take place outside the Body. Our servicing is evangelism in practice. It gives credibility to our evangelising. Many people will never be able to hear the good news in words until they have seen it in practice.

It has become fashionable in recent times to speak of “unconditional love”. There is a very real danger that this will become “non-directional love”. Think about what Paul wrote, “God has shown us how much he loves us – it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!” (Romans 5.8). God didn’t say, “Love me first and then Christ will die for you.” His love was “unconditional”. But it wasn’t “non-directional” – Christ died for the very purpose of drawing people back into the family of God. And God, who is at the heart of the Body’s life, earnestly desires, through our servicing and evangelising, to gather people in, to make them disciples too. But, like the Lord of the church, we are still to care for people even when the desire behind our caring is rejected.

I am not suggesting that this visual exhaustively sets out all of the Body’s life and mission. It is, however, helpful in relating the most vital elements to one another.

One of the problems we can have in the church is that activities are started with good “missional” reasons (in other words, the people who start them are concerned about some aspect of making disciples), but then many years later they are continued for “traditional” rather than “missional” reasons (in other words, they have ceased to fulfil any role in the task of making disciples). It may be that such an activity should be dropped, or that its strategy should be evaluated and redirected in the light of our mission.

In the earlier part of this session, we were thinking about the variety of gifts within the Body. Some gifts relate to distinct aspects of our mission. Other gifts are given for several parts of the mission. We should expect that the Spirit has provided all the gifts needed for the health of the Body’s life and for the effective fulfilment of the Body’s task.

“The Uniting Church affirms that every member of the Church is engaged to confess the faith of Christ crucified and to be his faithful servant. She acknowledges with thanksgiving that the one Spirit has endowed the members of his Church with a diversity of gifts, and that there is no gift without its corresponding service: all ministries have a part in the ministry of Christ” (*Basis* para 13).

What are your gifts? What is your particular ministry within the one mission of the Body of Christ?

For reflection...

How does the life of our congregation [and our shared life with other congregations] relate to the Great Commission?

If there is a big discrepancy, how can we begin to change?

- In what particular aspect of the life of the Body is the Lord calling me to special ministry?

John Calvin (1509-1564)



John Calvin was born on 10th July 1509 in Noyon, Picardy, some seventy kilometres north-east of Paris, the second son of Gerard Cauvin (Calvinus was the Latinised form of his name) and his wife Jeanne la France of Cambrai.

John was religiously inclined from an early age, and his father, a diocesan legal official, sent him to Parish University to take an arts degree in preparation for the priesthood. By John’s graduation, however, his father had changed the plan and directed his son to Orleans University for legal studies.

Then came John’s “sudden conversion” from papist prejudice to Protestant conviction, and this brought with it a spiritual quickening that made legal studies seem tame and dull by comparison with Scripture and theology. Soon Calvin was preaching, teaching, and pastoring informally among his peers, though his wish to enjoy a life of a leisured, learned, quiet-living Protestant Erasmus remained – as he wrote later, “literary ease, with something of a free and honourable station.” In 1532 he produced a commentary on *De Clementia* of Seneca, a Stoic philosopher believed at that time to have had Christian sympathies. Calvin hoped that this would establish him as a humanist scholar. But this was not to be.

In 1534 the French Protestants were posting placards in the major towns attacking the Roman mass. Official persecution then threatened, and Calvin moved to Basel, where in March 1536 the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* appeared. In the Preface, addressed to the King of France, Calvin stated, “My intention was only to furnish a kind of rudiments, by which those who feel some interest in religion might be trained to true godliness.” His Preface was a fine apologia for the Protestant faith, and the six catechetical chapters into which his 516 small-format pages were divided (on the Law, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, the dominical sacraments, false sacraments, and Christian liberty) were brilliantly written. The work was an immediate success,

and it was as a distinguished young Protestant author that Calvin arrived in Geneva five months later.

In fact Calvin was on his way to Strasbourg when someone recognised him and took him to meet one of the leaders there, William Farel. Farel told Calvin he must stay and help, and when the latter pleaded other plans, he replied, “You are following only your own wishes, and I tell you, in the name of God Almighty, that if you do not help us in this work of the Lord, the Lord will punish you for seeking your own interests rather than his.” So Calvin stayed and continued his Geneva ministry without a break (apart from three years of banishment between 1538 and 1541) till his death in 1564.

Calvin’s goal in Geneva was a teaching, nurturing church, embracing the whole of society, and honouring God by orthodox praise and obedient holiness. There should be daily gatherings for psalm singing and expository preaching, monthly administration of the Lord’s Supper (Calvin wanted this weekly but could never secure it), and an autonomous ecclesiastical court for censuring, and if necessary, excommunicating delinquent members.

Bible-centred in his teaching, God-centred in his living and Christ-centred in his faith, he integrated the confessional emphases of Reformation thought – by faith alone, by Scripture alone, by Christ alone, for God’s glory alone – with clarity and strength. He was ruled by two convictions – that God is all and man is nothing; and that praise is due to God for everything good. Both convictions permeated his life, right up to his final direction that his tomb be unmarked and there be no speeches at his burial, lest he become the focus of praise instead of his God.

In the *Institutes*, Calvin uses the Biblical theme of the knowledge of God. Knowing God is religion, and what is known about God is theology. Both theology and religion are to be learned and taught from God’s own teaching, i.e. from Holy Scripture. To know God means acknowledging him as he has revealed himself in Scripture and through Christ, worshipping him and giving him thanks, humbling oneself before him as a sinner and learning from his Word, loving the Father and the Son for their love in adoption and redemption, trusting the promises of pardon and glory that God has given in Christ, living in obedience to God’s law, and seeking to honour God in all human relationships and all commerce with created things. This knowledge of God comes from the Holy Spirit, speaking in and through the written Word and uniting us to the risen Christ for new life.



Extra!!! A Sacrament? What’s that?

The Latin word, sacramentum, was used in the Vulgate to translate the Greek word, mysterion, rendered “secret plan” in the Good News Bible in such passages as Ephesians 1.9. The secular use of the word included the oath of allegiance made by a Roman soldier to the Emperor.

In all its life and witness, the New Testament church gave prior place to preaching through which, it recognised, Christ brought people back into fellowship with himself and enabled them to share in the benefits of his death and resurrection. It also recognised, however, that he meant the Word to be accompanied by baptism and the Lord’s Supper. So it gave both these ordinances a special place in its life as continuing permanent signs attached to the Word.

In later days these two ordinances came to be called “sacraments.” In the thinking of the ancient church there was only one sacrament or mystery – that of Christ himself. Baptism and the Lord’s Supper were called “sacraments” because they were means or signs, pointing people to this union of God and man through the atoning death and resurrection of Christ. The sacraments were regarded as effecting nothing more than the Word itself effected when it was received by faith.

“The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in the two visible acts of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. He himself acts in and through everything that the Church does in obedience to his commandment: it is he who by the gift of the Spirit confers upon men the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is he who awakens, purifies and advances in men the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted” (Basis para 6).

- **Baptism** is a sign of a person’s reception into the visible Body of Christ.

In understanding baptism, we need to think back to the Old Testament and the old “covenant” or agreement that God made with his people. The sign of that old covenant was the circumcision of each male child on the eighth day (Genesis 17.1-14). That wasn’t the end of the matter, though there were some of God’s people who tended from time to time to think it was! At the age of thirteen, a boy became of age (the Bar Mitzvah ceremony). From that age the boy was regarded as a responsible member of Israel and could make vows, become a member of the synagogue and be recognised as legally responsible. We recall the account of the boy Jesus at the age of twelve remaining behind in the Temple in Jerusalem (Luke 2.41-50).

By its nature an unrepeatable act, circumcision was not a guarantee of a person’s right relationship with God. Jeremiah, for instance, called on the people to “circumcise yourselves to the Lord, circumcise your hearts...” (4.4 NIV, cf Leviticus 26.41 NIV). He complains that “their ears are uncircumcised so they cannot hear” (6.10b NIV margin). In the New Testament, we find Stephen accusing the members of the Jewish Council, “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears” (Acts 7.51a).

The practice of baptism arose among the Jews as an additional requirement for Gentiles who wished to become part of the Jewish community (such people were called “proselytes”). They had to be circumcised and baptised.

What John the Baptist did was quite radical – he was calling on Jews to repent and be baptised (Luke 3.3). The

disciples of Jesus evidently followed a similar practice (John 4.2).

The characteristic baptism of Jesus was not water-baptism at all, but Spirit-baptism (Luke 3.16), since his ministry brought the possibility of a whole new life in the Spirit, the new birth (John 3.1ff).

The Great Commission (Matthew 28.18-20) includes reference to baptising (with water) as part of the process of “making disciples.”

There are 28 references to Christian baptism in the New Testament. Fifteen of these are in Acts and describe occasions of baptism. We note the association with repentance (2.31), with faith (8.12-13), with the gift of the Holy Spirit (10.47-48), with cleansing from sin (22.16). Whole households and families were baptised (16.15,33).

The references in Paul’s letters indicate clearly that the apostle saw his own mission as “telling the Good News”, not baptising (1 Corinthians 1.13-17). In Romans 6.3-4, he describes baptism as a sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ (also Col.2.12). In Galatians 3.27 he speaks of baptism as being “clothed with the life of Christ”.

Some churches only practise believer’s baptism, i.e. they only baptise persons who have first come to a conscious faith in Christ. “The Uniting Church will baptise those who confess the Christian faith, and children who are presented for baptism and for whose instruction and nourishment in the faith the Church takes responsibility” (**Basis**, para.7). We do this on the basis of God’s covenant and the parallel of circumcision (note the reference in Colossians 2.11). Such covenant understanding most likely underlay the household and family baptisms mentioned above. In missionary situations there is naturally (as in Acts) a predominance of adult baptism. We need note what Jesus said about children and the Kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19.13-15) and Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 7.14 about children of believers.

We need to be careful not to confuse what baptism signifies and what it confers. It acknowledges a person’s place within Christ’s people, but does not confer salvation and regeneration, nor does it guarantee eternal life to either a child or an adult. The sign of baptism, whether child or adult, is only conferred once. All churches accept it as unrepeatable.

- **The Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion** is a sign of Christ’s abiding presence among his people and of the nourishment he continues to give us through his completed redemptive work.

This sacrament was instituted by Jesus at the last meal with His disciples in the upper room. The earliest written record may be in 1 Corinthians 11.23-26.

It is helpful to compare the Lord’s Supper with the Jewish Passover Feast. The first supper was in fact an addition to such a feast. Some scholars believe from careful study of the four Gospels that the meal of Jesus with His disciples was a Passover held in anticipation and that Jesus in fact died at the very time that the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in readiness for the Feast (see 1 Corinthians 5.7).

The old Passover feast was a memorial of deliverance from slavery in Egypt and was a perpetual sign and renewal of God’s covenant (see Exodus 12.21-28).

“The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ signifies and seals his continuing presence with his people in the Lord’s Supper or the Holy Communion, constantly repeated in the life of the Church. In this sacrament of his broken body and outpoured blood the risen Lord feeds his baptised people on their way the final inheritance of the Kingdom. Thus the people of God, through faith and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit, have communion with their Saviour, make their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, proclaim the Lord’s death, grow together into Christ, are strengthened for their participation in the mission of Christ in the world, and rejoice in the foretaste of the Kingdom which he will bring to consummation” (**Basis** para 8).

We note that Paul, in quoting the words of institution, was very concerned that dishonoured the Body – they had no care for the other members of the Body (1 Corinthians 11.26-34). The Body of Christ, as we have described it in this session, can only exist because of the body and blood of Christ given for us.

Next week: Christian Values

- Exodus 10.1-17
- John 4.21-26
- Ephesians 4.1-4
- Matthew 19.1-12
- Matthew 22.15-22
- Malachi 3.8-10
- Colossians 3.5-17