

# A STUDY PAPER PREPARED FOR THE ILLINOIS CONFERENCE OF CHURCHES

My comments are created in the mixture of my experiences and studies. My ecclesiological experience began in a large [for it's day] American Baptist Church. As a very young person dropped off at Sunday School and occasionally joined by my parents in worship, church was curious and pretty much irrelevant.

## PURPOSE

As I entered elementary education, I was enrolled in a Roman Catholic school where church became something more serious. During the week, I began to understand that I was guilty of "sin, a rebellion against God" <sup>1</sup> which results in "consequences from which one must be purified. To begin with, sin involves deprivation of communion with God. To the repentant sinner, however, God, in His mercy, grants pardon and remission of the 'eternal punishment' it would bring .... {this purification must take place} either here on earth or after death in purgatory. This purification cleanses the sinner from the 'temporal punishment' of sin and removes whatever still impedes full communion with God and with other believers." <sup>2</sup> The remission of sin is "the privilege of the church, which authoritatively dispenses and applies the treasury of the satisfaction won by Christ and the saints." In order for remission of sin to occur, forgiveness must be truly granted. Even in my simple understanding I learned that the church is the instrument or agency of God on earth and you don't want to experience what comes from disrespecting the church [*usually administered through a nun with a wooden ruler*].

My models on Sunday taught a different ecclesiology. "Churches are evaluated on the basis of what they can offer us by way of inspiration, warm feelings, or entertainment. It is our custom to regard the churches not as centers of interpersonal relationships under the Word of God but as sanctified emporiums competing with weekend camp trips, Little League baseball, and television for the free time of the people." <sup>3</sup> Church is about me more than about God.

In time I was lead to I Peter 2:9 and the foundational theology of the priesthood of all believers. This has deep meaning for me and those of the "free Church" traditions. However, I observed that "Church has its place and so do our fellow believers; but since we are our own priests, these are not of utmost importance to us and must take back seat to our individual dealings with God." <sup>4</sup> The true guiding principle of church life was that "They are places of cooperation where we must be quite careful not to step on anyone's toes lest that person flee to the church down the block." <sup>5</sup>

Thus, by early experience and later clarified by personal study, I begin by saying that, like many English words, "church" can mean different things to different people. This paper is a commentary on the concept found among what Protestants refer to as the FREE CHURCH tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> MINISTRY: INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR CLERGY. November 2000 p.12

<sup>2</sup> MINISTRY: INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR CLERGY. November 2000 p.12

<sup>3</sup> CHRISTIANITY TODAY. October 26,1973, p. 4

<sup>4</sup> CHRISTIANITY TODAY. October 26,1973, p. 4

<sup>5</sup> CHRISTIANITY TODAY. October 26,1973, p. 4

## DEFINITIONS:

- #1 The word "*church*" is often distinguished under two banners: big "C" and little "c". The first banner, [Church] denotes the universal body of believers who Jesus the Christ calls His own and often raises the debate only of the temporal question of whether or not to include the saints who share with Christ in heaven. This is the common meaning when we say: "I am a part of the Christian Church" or when we join in the Apostles' Creed and say we are part of the Holy Catholic Church (capital "C", rather than small "c")."
- This use of Church expresses the integral unity stated in Ephesians 4:4-6; that is: THERE IS ONE BODY, ONE SPIRIT, ONE HOPE, ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM. It often designates the focus of Jesus' prayer in John 17:21.
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- #2 The second banner [see above] is church with a little "c". Normal usage applies this label to a local and specifically designated congregations or distinct group who would claim to follow Jesus. Such a definition points toward; i.e., the church across the street, or the church that produced a TV broadcast, a house church, storefront church, or my friend's church, etc.
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- #3 There is a third application of the word "church" as used in the secular world. Popular usage often refers to a geographically located place of worship and/or ministry as the church. So we hear: "I am going to the church." or, "Oh, that's the church at 9<sup>th</sup> and Elm Streets."
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- #4 A fourth use of the word "church" brings our focus to an institution. "It denotes an organization when we say "I belong to such and such a church." It denotes a denomination when we say "I belong to the American Baptist Churches in the USA."
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- #5 "Church" can also refer to an activity. It denotes a service of worship, as in when a camper writes home and says "we had church this morning." Or we leave Sunday Bible School and say we are now "going to church."
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I have used the word 'church' in all of these ways. However, when I consider "The CHURCH", I do not focus on the theological Universal Church, nor locally identifiable organization of believers, nor the physical structures of buildings, nor the large body of like-minded believers who rally under a common name, nor the common Sunday activities of Christian Education and worship. I have in mind something more dynamic than these.

For me, "The CHURCH" is believers intentionally gathered to collectively share in and with Jesus Christ [Matthew 18:20]. In spite of the American John Wayne concept of the independent, all-sovereign self boldly facing all situations with grit and a Bible, as people respond to the call of Christ, God does not commission them to be isolated "Lone Rangers", free floating disciples. Rather, they are formed into a body of believers, a congregation, a church.

The CHURCH can gather any place, at any time, for any number of activities - as long as there is an intention to share the experience with and serve along side of Jesus. The CHURCH is believers intentionally gathered to collectively share in and with Jesus Christ [Matthew 18:20]. It is impossible to have The CHURCH without disciples coming together [Hebrews 10:25].

However, not every gathering of people using the name of Christ is "The Church". Sitting together at a ball game, attending a wedding reception, visiting the City Council meeting such gatherings CAN BE THE CHURCH if the participants are aware of and intentionally seek the presence of God in their midst. But being Christians in the same locale does not automatically make it The CHURCH.

Neither does "The CHURCH" automatically exclude those who call themselves by another institutional name. Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Campus Crusade, and Fellowship of Christian Athletes who gather in one place to worship, praise, and be encountered by Jesus are THE CHURCH.

The two essential elements of "church" are the presence of Jesus AND disciples intentionally seeking a live and present relationship with Him. Without recognizing the presence of Jesus, whether universal Church or local church, it is an institutional creation of man; it is just another building, or property to maintain. Without His dynamic/living/moving/active presence, it is just one more activity that I am obligated to attend and leave as quickly as I can possibly escape. Without recognizing the gathering of believers we have a theory with no embodiment.

For me, "The CHURCH" is believers intentionally gathered to collectively share in and with Jesus Christ (Matthew 18:20). It is people, but it is also more than merely a body of believers who have banded together to accomplish common aims and objectives. A collection of individuals who come together because we are like-minded is a political party, or the Elks club - not a church. In the Body of Christ there is often precious little uniformity.

The CHURCH is comprised of flawed human beings [Romans 3:23] struggling toward an ideal [Philippians 3:14]. Such a gathering of believers is always in process. John 1:12 states that any who are in Christ are given the right/power to BECOME the children of God. Becoming is a process word. Something has already taken place but its fullness is not yet realized.

Ephesians 2:22 says: "IN HIM YOU TOO ARE BEING BUILT TOGETHER TO BECOME A DWELLING IN WHICH GOD LIVES BY HIS SPIRIT." *ARE BEING BUILT* denote in the process of becoming. *TO BECOME A DWELLING* denotes not yet but in the process. It reminds me of a wedding. No matter what the intent is, as they stand at the altar and the pronouncement of the marriage rings forth, the Bride is not a wife nor the Groom a husband - not until they have lived together for a time. A legal and technical application may take place at the celebration ceremony, but the true wife and husband have only begun the process that may never be complete but is always in the process of becoming.

Thus any definition of The CHURCH can only be an approximation, a descriptive imagery, an allusion which illustrates for the present but must grow and expand as the church moves closer to becoming what God intends for us to be. As imprecise as they are, consider the following as leading toward understanding The CHURCH among those of the FREE CHURCH tradition. Remember that they are given as descriptive imagery and should not be pressed too literally.

Here I will speak as a life long Baptist by choice. After being courted by other denominational leaders and doing my own diligent study, I made a conscious choice to continue as a Baptist as a conviction, not as a force of habit or under pressure of family or culture.

#### ALL BAPTISTS ARE DEMOCRATS

The founding principle of the Democratic Party was "one man - one vote". Leaving the nuances of the political theory to other debates, the idea is that every citizen is equal to every other citizen.

In *direct* democracy, each person goes to a town-hall meeting to represent his/her own point of view. Citizens went, expressed their opinion, and voted. Most accepted the decisions of the majority as promoting the common good, whether they personally agreed with the decision or not.

Based upon I Peter 2:9, Baptists understand The CHURCH to be composed of believers who have equal privilege and responsibility in the Body of Christ. We are all part of the royal priesthood. Seeking to understand the mind of Christ for the common good, we accord an equal vote to all members of the Body of Christ.

Human nature not having been completely transformed, in practice some voices in the congregation may be given more credence than others. However, each believer has the same access to the mind of Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit. Each has the same duty to present the living Word of God to the Body as God gives it to them. And each has the same responsibility to draw all men into the presence of Jesus.

Pastor, Deacon, Trustee, mature saint, and newly born again believer have equal say in the life of the congregation. Because where two or more are gathered in His name Jesus is literally present, matters of our common life are brought under the final authority of the congregation and majority rule prevails.

The role of prophet and special messenger from God is still accepted within our common life, but all matters are held up to scrutiny from God's Word as understood through a democratic process. All are God's chosen people.

#### ALL BAPTISTS ARE REPUBLICANS

As America grew, the strict democratic principle began to falter under the sheer weight of the expanding population. It was no longer practical to gather in the town square and debate every detail of the common good. Thus was born the Republican Party. Its guiding principle was elected representation.

In *representative* democracy, the interests of individual citizens are brought by one person elected to represent others' voices and opinions, not merely his/her own. This representative is charged with (1) keeping the congregation informed and aware of the kinds of issues being discussed; (2) listening carefully to the congregation's members and bring to the table every opinion from the membership; (3) discerning wisdom from all the opinions they hear; (4) and arriving at a consensus decision that reflects as much of the wisdom of the various points of view as is possible.

Leaders are thus to be elected because they represent the mind of the electors. But in addition, elected leaders are to be selected from those who have the habit and experience of seeing, hearing, and following the leading of God in our midst. The Church Board, then, having heard the desires of the people and having sought the mind of Christ, makes decisions on behalf of the congregation. Matters of deep concern or when a consensus cannot be reached, are brought to the whole gathered "democratic" body.

#### ALL BAPTIST ARE INDEPENDENTS

Believing in and experiencing the presence of Jesus in the midst of the congregation, Baptists do not recognize any authority outside of the congregation. God's grace mediated through the Bible and the congregation is sufficient for all of the needs of the congregation. As such no "outside" authority directs the common life of the local church.

Even as Jesus declared that all authority was given to Him [Matthew 28:19], He then conferred that authority upon His disciples. The keys to the kingdom were given to the church built on faith typified by Peter [Matthew 16:17-19].

#### ALL BAPTISTS ARE ASSOCIATIONAL

Until recent history, the local church seldom had the resources to bring the vision from God to completion. Therefore, Baptist churches gather together in voluntary association to achieve together what they cannot do alone. Historically this began in a desire to educate men for the pastoral ministry. Later, it was the support of missions and other endeavors.

Just as no purely private relation to Jesus Christ exists, neither does one local church comprise the totality of the Kingdom of God. Both in the life of a disciple and the realm of The CHURCH self-reliance is actually antithetical to biblical living. In Christ, we are interdependent rather than self-reliant [I Corinthians 12:12-28].

The comments contained herein are presented to stimulate a dialogue that will continue to grow and expand my understanding of a living, moving, Body of Christ which we call The CHURCH.

presented by Dr. John Charlton III, RA., M. Div., D.Min. Serving God as an American Baptist pastor since 1968 JUNE 2007