

## Chapter One

# The Supernatural Christian Community and the Problem of the Church

In his classical work – *Institutio Christianae Religionis* – which has probably exercised a greater influence than any other writing upon the theology of Protestant Christianity, Calvin does not begin his teaching concerning the Church until the last and fourth book, that is, not until he has in his third book discussed the dogma of justification by faith. This order of treatment, which has subsequently been adhered to by all reformed theology, is not self-explanatory nor is it lacking in significance. It is both an expression and a cause of that Protestant individualism which is so often deplored. Certainly Calvin decisively repudiates the crass individualism which interprets the Church merely as a sum of individual believers, and he appropriates the expressions of the most ancient Church Fathers to the effect that the Church is “*omnium piorum mater*”(1) and “*extra ecclesiam*” is “*nulla salus*”(2).

These phrases, however, suffice at most to conceal, but not to overcome, the fundamentally individualistic outlook which determines Calvin's conception of the Church; for in reality, and in the last analysis, Calvin means by the Church simply the *ecclesia invisibilis*. The visible Church, on the contrary, is relegated by him to the dubious category of *externum subsidium fidei*, of an “external means of salvation”(3). Now the idea of the invisible Church is foreign to the New Testament, while the interpretation of the real visible Church as a merely external means of salvation is not only foreign to it but completely impossible. Never did it occur to an apostle that the *Ecclesia*, the fellowship of Christian believers, the true people of God

of the New Covenant, might be regarded simply as a means to an end, and even at that a purely “outward” means.

Such an understanding of the Church seems to all catholic-minded thinkers a horrible blasphemous heresy, and therefore they are compelled to condemn as such Protestantism as a whole. Must we not say that they are right from the standpoint of the New Testament? Perhaps both parties, Catholics – and I do not mean primarily *Roman* Catholics – and Protestants are right and wrong at the same time. Certainly – from the point of view of the New Testament, of what is there called “*Ecclesia*” and of what the *Ecclesia* understands itself to be – the thought of Calvin, that the Church is an external support for faith, is utterly unintelligible. The New Testament *Ecclesia* realizes that it is the Body of Jesus Christ, that it is divine revelation and salvation in action, therefore never to be thought of as a means to an end, but as an end in itself, even if as yet only an adumbration of a yearning for the consummation which shall be in God’s good time. But the thought of Calvin which within this context seems unintelligible becomes immediately all too plain as soon as we translate “*Ecclesia*” by “Church”, and in so doing think of the institution with all its paraphernalia without which the historical Church is simply inconceivable. The Catholics are right: the *Ecclesia* of the New Testament is no *externum subsidium fidei*, but the real thing. The Protestants are right: what the Church has become as a matter of historical fact is not the real thing, but something which may very fittingly be understood as a means to an end.

The *Ecclesia* of the New Testament, the fellowship of Christian believers, is precisely *not* that which every “church” is at least in part – an institution, a something. The Body of Christ is nothing other than a fellowship of persons. It is “the fellowship of Jesus Christ”<sup>1</sup> or “fellowship of the Holy Ghost”,<sup>2</sup> where fellowship or *koinonia* signifies a common participation, a togetherness, a community life. The faithful are bound to each other through their common sharing in Christ and in the Holy Ghost, but that which they have in common is precisely no “thing”, no “it”, but a “he”, Christ and His Holy Spirit. It is just in this that resides the miraculous, the unique, the once-for-all nature of the Church: that as the Body of Christ it has nothing to do with an organization and has nothing of the character of the

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1. 1 Cor. 1:9.

2. 2 Cor. 13:13; Phil. 2:1.

institutional about it. This is precisely what it has in mind when it describes itself as the Body of Christ.

At the beginning of the history of the *Ecclesia* stands the mystery of Pentecost. When Christianity classifies the feast of Pentecost with the other great feasts, with Christmas, Good Friday and Easter, each of which reminds us of one of the solemn mysteries in the story of our redemption – the Incarnation, the Atonement, and the Resurrection – it wishes to teach us thereby that the outpouring of the Holy Ghost likewise (and that means the rise of the *Ecclesia*) is one, and, in fact, the last of the great saving miracles in the process of revelation. The outpouring of the Holy Ghost and the existence of the *Ecclesia* are so closely connected that they may be actually identified. Where the Holy Ghost is, there is the Christian communion. And the Holy Ghost is not otherwise there than as the Spirit given to the community. Therefore the community as bearer of the Word and Spirit of Christ precedes the individual believer. One does not first believe and then join the fellowship: but one becomes a believer just because one shares in the gift vouchsafed to the fellowship.

It is idle to ask which comes first, the egg or the hen, for both points of view are true. But the question whether the word of Christ or faith comes first admits of no discussion, for faith is the response to the word of Christ. This word is entrusted to the keeping of the Christian fellowship, not, however, as an abstraction, but as the Word of the living Christ, who abides in the fellowship through the Spirit. Therefore the fellowship of Jesus precedes the individual believer as the *mater omnium piorum*. Only by taking this insight seriously can we transcend both Protestant individualism and Catholic collectivism. For the Church is neither a *numerus electorum*, a totality of believers, nor is it a sacred institution, but it is the Body of Christ, consisting of nothing but persons: of Him who is the Head and of those who are members of His Body.

The *Ecclesia* is what it is through the presence of Christ dwelling within it. He is present with it through His Word and His Spirit – “the Spirit of truth which shall lead you into all truth”<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, because the Holy Spirit is the very life-breath of the Church, the Church participates in the special character of the holy, the numinous, the supernatural, in the hallowing presence of God: for that reason the Christian society itself is a miracle. It is therefore in point of fact

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3. John 16:13.

unintelligible from a purely sociological standpoint (K. L. Schmidt)<sup>4</sup>. For it is in fact intelligible only from the standpoint of the Christ who dwells within it and determines its life. And so because it is itself the “temple of the Holy Spirit”<sup>5</sup> it is in its very essence the sphere of the holy and needs no temple. The fact that it is both *koinonia Christou* or *koinonia pneumatos* and “fellowship one with another”,<sup>6</sup> thus combining the vertical with the horizontal, divine with human communion<sup>(4)</sup> – that fact constitutes its entirely characteristic, its utterly unparalleled life.

The togetherness of Christian men is thus not secondary or contingent: it is integral to their life just as is their abiding in Christ<sup>(5)</sup>. But this fellowship of the society does not exist independently and in its own right: it flows from communion with Christ. For this reason we may see how impossible it is to describe the Church as a means to a higher end. The fellowship of Christians is just as much an end in itself as is their fellowship with Christ. This quite unique meeting of the horizontal and the vertical is the consequence and the type of that communion which the Father has with the Son “before the world was”;<sup>7</sup> in the supernatural life of the Christian communion is completed the revelation of the triune God, and the Church has therefore done right to order the celebration of the Holy Trinity on the Sunday after Pentecost. For the very being of God is *Agape* – that love which the Son brings to mankind from the Father, and it is just this love which is the essence of the fellowship of those who belong to the *Ecclesia*. Hence this love is called the “bond of perfectness” of the *Ecclesia*.<sup>8</sup>

In the *Ecclesia* lies the answer (though of course even there it is tainted with the imperfection which clings to everything human) to the two fundamental questions with which humanity is confronted, the question of truth and the question of human fellowship. Here we see *the* truth which is a fellowship and *the* right relation of men with one another arising from the fact that their life is rooted in the truth. The truth is the love revealed in the Son as the image of the Father and the ground of all that is: and this very love is the being of that society

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4. See note 5.

5. 1 Cor. 3:16: 6:19.

6. 1 John 1:7.

7. John 17:5, 24.

8. Col. 3:14.

which was founded by Jesus Christ and whose life is continuously inspired by Him. By this shall men know that its members are His disciples. One dwells in this love through faith, and through faith one participates in the fellowship. But a man cannot acquire this faith except in so far as through love he inheres in the fellowship. Truth and fellowship are here one and the same thing.

God has not revealed abstract neutral truth or truths, a dogma or dogmas, supposedly committed to the keeping of the Church as a *depositum fidei*, as something which the latter *credendum proponit*<sup>(6)</sup>: but God has revealed *Himself* in Jesus Christ in the personal presence of Immanuel, of the Word made flesh. The *fact* that God has revealed Himself and *what* He has revealed are therefore one and the same thing: namely, the truth that His very nature consists in His communicating of Himself in love, in His self-donation for man, in His *Agape*. Thus one cannot enter into His self-revelation merely by believing in a dogma, but only inasmuch as one has communion' with Him through the Son, and therewith ceases to be an isolated individual. In so far as one learns to know God, who gives Himself for us and wills to dwell with us, in so far as one learns to know Him in such wise that to know Him and to dwell with Him are one and the same, one is brought into the life of self-impartment for, and communion with, mankind. Fellowship with Christ and fellowship with men are correlative, the one cannot exist without the other.

Communion with God which is not also communion with man is a false attitude – all such a-social mysticism is wrong: equally false however is a communion with mankind which is not also and primarily a communion with God – that is to say, all irreligious or godless communism is wrong. Jesus Christ is the Truth and as such He founds a communion of God and man which puts an end to all isolation. Therefore Christian truth can be apprehended only in the Christian fellowship. The *Ecclesia*, the Christian society, thus itself belongs to the substance of the revelation and constitutes the true end of the latter. Walking in the light of the revealed truth and walking in the fellowship which that truth has brought into being are inseparably bound up. Consequently it is impossible to consider communion with the *Ecclesia* as a means to an end; it must be realized that it is the end itself, though in its earthly form; this final goal of the *Ecclesia* is still imperfectly attained.

We may conclude that the thought of the Church as a mere means of salvation would never have occurred to Calvin, had he

not read into the idea of the New Testament *Ecclesia* the image of the institutional Church as it has historically developed. In this, however, he does not stand alone: Catholics before and after him and Protestants of all shades of opinion contemporaneous with him have done likewise. What divides them is simply this, that from this erroneous identification they have drawn different conclusions. Because the *Ecclesia* of the New Testament is an end in itself and not a means to an end, the Church is an end in itself and not a means to an end – say the Catholics. Because the Church is an external institution and not the movement of salvation itself, it cannot be an end in itself but only a means to an end – so say the Protestants: but both parties err in that they understand the *Ecclesia* of the New Testament to be the historical Church. The latter is rather something which has arisen, in the course of a long and complicated history, through a process of development, transformation and retrogression, out of the New Testament *Ecclesia*. That in view of these various historical manifestations which go by the name of “church”, one may, indeed must, arrive at the conclusion that the Church is only a means to an end, a means of salvation, but not the reality of salvation itself – all that is not only understandable but correct. Hence arises, however, the difficult problem of the Church, which resides in the ambiguous relationship between the New Testament *Ecclesia* and the institutional church known to history. For of this church – whichever of its historical forms we may be considering – it cannot be said that it is a pure communion of persons. Much rather is it of the essence of this entity, the Church, that it is not only “church” but a thing, an institution.

Of all the great teachers of Christianity, Martin Luther perceived most clearly the difference between the *Ecclesia* of the New Testament and the institutional church, and reacted most sharply against the *quid pro quo* which would identify them. Therefore he refused to tolerate the mere word “church”: he called it an “obscure ambiguous” term<sup>(7)</sup>. In his translation of the Bible, he rendered the New Testament “*Ecclesia*” by “congregation”, and in his catechetical writings he paraphrased the *credo ecclesiam* with “Christendom” or Christian Community<sup>(8)</sup>. He realized that the New Testament *Ecclesia* is just not an “it”, a “thing”, an “institution”, but rather a unity of persons, a people, a communion, and as he had a thorough knowledge of his New Testament he knew and emphasized that in it the *Ecclesia* is often spoken of where the actual word is not used: the equivalent

expressions, however, are always of a personal nature: the Israel of God, the seed of Abraham, the elect priestly race, the people for God's own possession, etc. The word *Ecclesia* itself, however, means congregation, people of God<sup>(9)</sup>.

Strong as was Luther's aversion to the word "church", the facts of history proved stronger. The linguistic usage of both the Reformation and post-Reformation era had to come to terms with the so powerfully developed idea of the Church, and consequently all the confusion dependent upon the use of this "obscure ambiguous" word penetrated Reformation theology. It was impossible to put the clock back by one millenium and a half. The conception "church" remained irrevocably moulded by this historical process of 1,500 years, as a result of which the "*Ecclesia*" – a communion of persons – had been transformed into an institutional "church", and indeed into that particular church in which the momentum of institutional development had reached its climax, that church which interprets itself in a severely institutional sense, viz. the Roman church. The whole history of the Roman church is the history, carried to its remotest consequences, of a progressive, consistent, and complete institutional distortion, or more precisely, legalistic distortion. The Roman church understands itself – since the *Vaticanum* and *Codex juris canonici* of 1918 there can be no more doubt about it – in the sense of the sacrosanct Canon Law. In the *Vaticanum* and the *Codex juris canonici*, everything which the church is, has, and gives, is brought under the heading of Canon Law; even the definition of dogma is part and parcel of the papal *potestas jurisdictionis*. Here it may be 'seen how the movement, which began at the close of the first century, has reached its ultimate term: the replacement of a communion of persons by the legal administrative institution<sup>(10)</sup>.

If the church is an institution – and in some sense all who use the word "church" mean this<sup>(11)</sup> – then Rome is the most churchly church, the norm of ecclesiastical life; for in her the institutional distortion of the *Ecclesia* is completed, and in her alone. If by the word "church" one means something other than Rome<sup>(12)</sup> then one must be sure to analyse radically this different conception: then one may not translate "*Ecclesia*" by "church", nor may one desire to set up a "church" in the Name of Jesus. One must then recognize that the *Ecclesia* of the New Testament, the Christian fellowship of the first Christians, was not a "church" and had no intention of being a "church".

The example of the Roman church – the fully churchly “church” – shows us negatively what the New Testament exhibits positively. The *Ecclesia* as *koinonia Christou* and *koinonia pneumatos*, as the Body of Christ, is a pure communion of persons entirely without institutional character.

Since Augustine<sup>(13)</sup> but especially since the time of Zwingli and Calvin, with the growing realization of the discrepancy between the New Testament *Ecclesia* and the historical “church”, quite useless attempts have been made to elucidate the relationship between the two quantities by drawing a distinction between a visible and an invisible church. This expedient is of no avail simply because the invisible church is not a fellowship but a *numerus electorum*, hence a fundamentally individualistic conception: but no more is the visible church a fellowship; it is rather an institution, a collective, hence an external, means of help. Both the one and the other fail to tally with what was intended and realized in the New Testament: the communion of the fellowship with Christ which as such meant also the communion of the members one with another.

For centuries now in the sphere of Protestant theology this desperate expedient has been vainly used in the attempt to explain the disparity between the actual churchly institution and the New Testament idea of the *Ecclesia*. But these twin conceptions, so far from clarifying what was intended, have served but to increase the confusion. The insistence upon identifying the specific historical reality called the “church” with the *Ecclesia* of the New Testament has effectively prevented a solution, while the fatal idea of the invisible church has perforce served to make impossible a true insight into the nature of the problem.

This insight – which an unprejudiced study of the New Testament and the crying need of the church have helped us to reach – may be expressed as follows: the New Testament *Ecclesia*, the fellowship of Jesus Christ, is a pure communion of persons and has nothing of the character of an institution about it: it is therefore misleading to identify any single one of the historically developed churches, which are all marked by an institutional character, with the true Christian communion. Not until this view has been explored from every angle may one proceed to the second question: in what relation do these various historical institutions called “churches” stand to the *Ecclesia*, the fellowship of Christ, and in the light of this norm, what is their



value and their mission? The consideration of this problem will determine the course of our inquiry.

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