

## Chapter 3

# The Primitive Christian Ekklesia and the Pauline Idea of the Ekklesia

The objection which necessarily thrusts itself upon us as a result of the picture drawn in the preceding pages is this: this Ekklesia never existed, it is an ideal picture. Granted that this picture is one-sided and does not take into account the human weakness, the all-too-human element, which was there even in primitive Christian times. The question is only whether the author is to be blamed for this idealization, or whether it is what Paul in fact *teaches* about the Ekklesia. The Christian communities of Corinth, Philippi, Colosse, etc., which Paul knows intimately, are doubtless not ideal fraternal fellowships. And yet Paul's teaching on the Ekklesia is the same as ours. Is then his concept of the Ekklesia a Platonic idea, an ideal of which the reality comes far short? No, the Pauline teaching about the Church is not a Platonic idea, but a concept of faith which has its basis in the encounter with the historical Christ, and therefore has a wholly different dialectic from that of idea and experience.

The case here is the same as that of the Pauline concepts of love, the new man, and faith, which all arise within the same fundamental context of the revelation in Christ. For example, the love which Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13—is this an ideal or reality? It is in the first instance something which Paul has experienced in the Ekklesia and has recognized as a necessary consequence of faith in Christ. This love is a reality, a new life in the Ekklesia. But this love is nowhere completely and unchallengeably dominant in the Ekklesia. The new life is at war with the old. Faith in Christ has continually to defend itself and to assert itself against sin. For all that, just as surely as faith is a reality in the Ekklesia, so surely love and brotherhood are also a reality. When Paul teaches, he teaches the implications of faith in Christ. But since faith itself is always only coming into being, so also the Ekklesia is always only coming into being, not only in its outward expansion but in its spiritual and physical being. Yet a distinction is to be made between the Pauline form of the Ekklesia and its other primitive Christians forms.

## **(1) The Different Forms and Conceptions of the Ekklesia in Primitive Christianity**

The first point to note is that, in spite of the different tendencies in primitive Christianity, the Ekklesia was always conscious of its unity, even its identity in the different types of congregation and was also able to protect this identity against all divisive tendencies. In particular Paul was never in any doubt that the Ekklesia owed its existence to the mother community of Jerusalem. He acknowledged “the twelve” as original Apostles, as those who by their witness to the Resurrection had founded the Ekklesia. Even the sharpest contention with them<sup>1</sup> could not impair this fundamental conviction and attitude. Even though we may not be able to square the Lucan narrative with its account of the Apostolic Council, which glosses over the actual conflict, with the older and authentic account of Paul, and therefore are unable to give full credence to the picture of the Ekklesia as represented in Acts, yet it remains true that the original Apostles and Paul were reconciled, and at the end gave each other the right hand of fellowship. For faith in the Lord Christ as the living Lord of the Ekklesia was common to them all; and common also was the faith that with Him the new age of salvation had dawned and the new way of salvation had been opened; and common, lastly, was their expectation of fulfilment in His Parousia. Further we must make clear to ourselves that the original Apostles as non-theologians were hardly so sharply conscious of the differences as was Paul the Apostle-theologian. He, however, not only saw the differences clearly, but expressed the general significance of Christ and faith with such clarity as none before him or since has been able to do.

The Christian community of Jerusalem was not the only pre-Pauline Christian community. We know of others in Palestine, in Syria, and even in Rome. But we know but little of their faith and their communal life. The description of Luke in the Acts, as we have said, does not bear a close resemblance to the facts, since we must take into account the eirenic tendency of his reporting which would tend to smooth over differences. Yet Luke seems to rely upon very old and reliable sources. Certain fundamental characteristics which distinguished these Jewish-Christian communities from the Pauline Gentile-Christian

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1. Cf. on this point the Epistle to the Galatians, especially chapters 1 and 2, in which the two conflicting conceptions (of pre-Pauline Jewish Christianity, and the new views of Paul) are reflected, and are much more clearly recognizable than in the harmonizing account of Acts.

communities are, however, evident, and correspond to what we would have naturally expected. The primitive Christian community in Jerusalem was in the days of its first beginnings as yet hardly aware of its newness and its difference from the synagogue. It is therefore understandable that it assimilated itself in a naïve and unquestioning manner to its model, the synagogue, and took over from it its presbyterial organization. True, this happened only to a limited degree because the presence of Peter and some other members of “the twelve” made the leadership of the community from the outset by these “pillars”<sup>2</sup> seem natural. Later James, the brother of the Lord, who was one of those that had seen the Risen Lord, came into prominence as the leading authority.

The Christian community in Jerusalem had, however, a position of special privilege even among the Jewish Christian communities, a position which Paul himself acknowledged in some measure. Jerusalem was the mother-community, the parent-cell of all the later communities, and from this drew certain conclusions as to its rights; for example, the right of a certain not exactly defined supervision and the right to request, on the ground of its own position of exceptional spiritual privilege, a kind of tribute from other communities in the form of collections for the poor in Jerusalem. From the manner in which Paul at the “Apostolic Council” had to fight for the independence of his Christian communities it is clear that two different concepts<sup>3</sup> of the Church were here in conflict, a theocratic-authoritarian concept and a spiritual one which in principle excluded all legal obligation. It cannot be said that the Pauline conception on that occasion entirely won the day. The original Apostles did indeed make three concessions to Paul: that as an Apostle he had equal rights with them, that his preaching of a gospel free from the law came from Christ, and that his congregations were congregations of Jesus Christ. And yet the continuance of the conflict after this event shows that the Jewish Christian Apostles had not properly understood his doctrine of Christ and his conception of the Ekklesia; that, in fact, the treaty of peace had not been able to overcome the contradiction completely.

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2. This expression, as is well known, comes from Paul’s polemic in the Epistle to the Galatians against the Jewish-Christian conception: “James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars” (Gal. 2: 9).

3. Karl Holl’s essay *Der Kirchenbegriff des Paulus in seinem Verhältnis zu dem der Urgemeinde* (Ges. Aufs. II, pp. 44-67) is still one of the most illuminating contributions to this subject, although some of its details may have been outdated by more recent research.

On his side Paul acknowledged the minimal demands of the original Apostles, that a tribute to “the poor” or “the saints” of Jerusalem should be paid. His Epistles, especially his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, show how conscientiously he fulfilled his “agreed undertaking”, as does the fact that he endangered his life in order to bring the collections in person. The unity of the Ekklesia was saved, but the theological foundations of this unity were not deeply enough laid. And so the conflict was constantly breaking out afresh, until at last the authoritarian legalistic canonical conception triumphed over the Pauline one. In fact, it even came about that writings expressing this conception were produced<sup>4</sup> under the pseudonym of Paul and accepted into the canon of the New Testament.

## **(2) The Pauline Doctrine of the Ekklesia and the Pauline Communities as its Embodiment**

Paul was the first writer, and the only writer in the New Testament, to develop a doctrine of his own about the Church which is explicit and therefore intelligible to us.<sup>5</sup> This doctrine is very closely linked with his teaching about the work of Christ and about faith. “Ecclesiology is Christology and Christology Ecclesiology.”<sup>6</sup> But this is like what happened later to Luther in his conflict with the Roman Church; Paul was not conscious from the beginning of the special character of his conception of the Ekklesia, but he was conscious of “his gospel” and its conflict with “the other gospel” (Gal. 1: 8) by which he means the interpretation of Jewish Christianity.

The Ekklesia is for Paul the implicit consequence of faith in Christ and as such the necessary consequence of his concept of faith and his conception of Christ. The Ekklesia is the Body of Christ. This expression is of course on the one hand an inadequate figure of speech, for a body does not have persons

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4. The question whether the Pastoral Epistles came from the hand of Paul, or whether they must be regarded as pseudonymous writings of the second century, which indeed contain many genuine Pauline fragments but must as a whole be regarded as spurious, has been decided by critical scholarship, which has given its verdict in favour of the second alternative. In the light of Paul's idea of the Ekklesia we can only confirm this conclusion. The man who teaches about the Ekklesia as Paul does in the Epistles to the Romans, to the Corinthians, to the Galatians and the Philippians, cannot at the same time have taught as the Pastoral Epistles do. The reasons for this assertion of the spurious character of these Epistles are however not only ecclesiological, but also of a formal and biographical nature. Cf. on this point Eduard Schweizer, *Gemeinde und Gemeindeordnung im Neuen Testament*, 1959, pp. 67-79.

5. Cf. Adolf Schlatter, *Die Kirche des Matthäus*, 1930.

6. K. L. Schmidt, *ThWb III*, p. 515.

as its members. But, on the other hand, the expression is certainly more than a mere figure.<sup>7</sup> It might actually be said that we can only truly understand the physical organism in the light of the Ekklesia. Thus the Ekklesia would be the *authentic* organism or body, because only in its light can we understand how something invisible makes the visible parts into a unity, and how it is possible to say, “the whole has precedence over the parts”<sup>8</sup> It is Christ the Kyrios, the living and present Lord, who binds believers together. He does this through His Spirit. It is the Spirit who creates faith. “No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost” (1 Cor. 12: 3). To be sure, the converse also holds, for the other proposition is also true that as a consequence of justifying faith “the Spirit is poured into our hearts” (Rom. 5: 5). In any case, Spirit and faith form an indissoluble unity. But faith comes into being through the witness about Jesus Christ, through the Word of “reconciliation”, through the Word of the Cross. Faith is nothing but trust in Jesus Christ, in whom a new way of salvation “apart from the law” (Rom. 3: 21) is opened up. But as Christ is always proclaimed as the Lord, so faith is always at the same time obedience. Paul loves the play upon words which lies in “*hypakoe pisteds*” (the obedience of faith). We must translate it by some such term as “hearing from below”.

But what has faith or the Spirit to do with the Ekklesia? Through faith we receive the love of God as our new life. We ourselves become loving. God’s self-communication in the Cross of Christ causes the man who receives it to become on his side one who communicates himself, one whose heart has been opened for the other man, one who gives himself to him. The Holy Spirit binds us, not merely to God, but to man. Paul did not think this through in detail. He finds the Ekklesia in existence as something which results from the *kerygma* and from the reception of the Holy Spirit, and he recognizes *agape* as the necessary “fruit of the Spirit.”

Like faith, the Ekklesia comes into being as a result of the

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7. We must mention here the beautiful book by the Anglican writer L. S. Thornton, *The Common Life in the Body of Christ*, which is not so much a work of scholarship in the narrower sense as a theological meditation. Cf. also J. Robert Nelson’s good and complete survey of the investigation and discussion of the concept of the Church, *The Realm of Redemption*, Ch. 3.

8. This thought seems to contradict what contemporary biology teaches about the nature of the organism, and also what Aristotle said long ago about the organism in *De Anima*. Of course, organism can be understood without Christology. What I have said above is merely intended to indicate that the concept of organism is most clearly distinguished from a mechanism, where the thing, or rather the Person who integrates the individual with the whole, and the manner in which He does so, is known.

proclamation of the gospel. But it is equally true to say that both of them come into being as a result of repentance and obedience. Therefore *Baptism* as the outward sign of repentance is an integral part of the rise of the Ekklesia. Ekklesia happens, takes shape by necessity, where the Word of salvation in Christ is received in trust and obedience. Baptism as an act in contrast to this inner event has no *independent* significance. It merely marks on the one side the serious character and the reality of this inner event which demands to be made public, to be confessed, and on the other side it manifests the acknowledgment of its authenticity on the part of the already existing community or on the part of the man who has proclaimed Christ. Beyond this it is clear that Paul did not reflect more exactly about the origin of Ekklesia and the relationship of the obedience of faith or repentance to Baptism. There can be no question of his having ascribed any independent significance to the *act* of Baptism. Baptism is a seal which on both sides, on the part of the believer and on that of the preacher, is imprinted as “witness” of the inner event.<sup>9</sup>

Here is the link between the Ekklesia in the spiritual sense and in the social sense. In the act of Baptism there happens visibly what already has happened invisibly through the Word and faith. Inner membership of the Body of Christ becomes visible in this sign. There is no question of Paul thinking that this sign itself effects something which had not previously been effected by the Word. Baptism is not itself a factor in salvation except in so far as it is the making visible of an invisible event, the visible reception and entry into the community, and thus belongs to this inner event and constitutes its consummation. The baptized person says, “I now belong to Christ and wish also to confess my faith before the whole world.” The preacher says, “Through your confession you show that you really belong to Christ.” In this two-sided act of visible proclamation of an inner reality, the work that has already been achieved by the Word and the Spirit of Christ comes to its completion.

Since Baptism is not thought of as an agent of independent significance, any sacramental interpretation of it becomes impossible. But on the other hand it is clear that a purely interior loyalty to Christ must be considered as a loyalty which has not matured to its full reality. The visibility of the Ekklesia is surely one of its essential marks. If we belong to Christ, then we belong to the Ekklesia, just as necessarily as the reality of

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9. Cf. on this point the appendix on Baptism which follows this chapter.

faith depends on its expressing itself effectually in love. The criterion of the effectuality is identical with the reality of the event. If we forsake other loyalties we must enter into the Ekklesia, the realm where men belong to Christ. Reception into the Ekklesia is the necessary final act of proclamation, which proves its effectiveness. In this sense Word, Spirit, faith, love, Baptism and Ekklesia form an indivisible unity.

From this the conclusion follows that in the nature of things the Ekklesia is both an invisible spiritual reality and a visible social reality. The Body of Christ is at once something which can be apprehended only by faith and something which is visible even to the unbeliever as a social fact. But this social visible entity is not an institution of the nature of the Church. Rather is its social character determined by its spiritual character as a brotherhood or fellowship of love. This does not mean that it has no determined order. Every "social reality" has a definite form and therefore also a definite order. The remarkable and unique thing about the order of the Ekklesia according to Pauline doctrine and in the Pauline communities, is that this order is a spiritual and therefore not a legal one. Paul expressly says that the one Spirit gives to each member *his* position and *his* function. Since Christ the Lord rules, there are no rulers. There are indeed persons to whom, an official duty has been allocated, the *episcopoi* who are mentioned only on one single occasion by Paul. But this differentiation of the gifts of grace (*charismata*) does not create any differences in jurisdiction or rank. Paul knows nothing of Presbyterian or Episcopal Order. It was also an error to translate the word *diakonai*, the "ministries", by "offices". The Spirit does not create "offices" but "ministries". Although we must not force the figure of the Body (of Christ) and must not claim "organic structure" for the congregation, the biological concept of "function" is more apposite than the legal concept of "office". Faith in Christ gives rise to a fellowship in which men share their life, Ekklesia, but not to an institution, a Church.

Just as it is certain that Paul's conception of faith is different from that of Jewish Christianity, so it is certain that his conception of the Ekklesia is different from that of the Jewish Christianity which had taken over its Presbyterian order from the synagogue. The difference does not lie where Sohm thinks it does.<sup>10</sup> His opinion is that Paul understands the Church as an invisible entity. It lies rather in the fact that the brotherhood

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10. Cf. on this point what has been said on pp. 30-31, n. 2, about Sohm I and Sohm II.



corresponds, as a correlate, to the fellowship with Christ, and thus is not merely an object of faith but an object which, although in the last resort it can be understood only by faith, yet at the same time can be perceived by everyone. Granted that the empirical community of Corinth or Philippi is not without further qualification the Ekklesia of which Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 12 any more than the faith of the Christian dock-labourers in Corinth corresponds to what Paul teaches in the letter to the Romans about faith. But the picture which the conscientious and critical Church historian von Campenhausen<sup>11</sup> draws of the Pauline community corresponds throughout to Pauline teaching. The basic thought is that of the Body of Christ, and “the Spirit is regarded as the organic principle of the Christian community. There is no need then for any determined Church order with its regulations, its commands and prohibitions. Nor do we find in Paul regulations of this kind laid down either for the individual congregation or for the Church in general” (p. 62).

“In principle there is no leading caste in the community and even the men of the Spirit do not constitute for Paul a spiritual aristocracy” (p. 68). “The community is not regarded in Paul as a hierarchical, graduated, stratified organization however constituted, but as a homogeneous and living cosmos of free spiritual gifts, which serve and supplement each other, but whose bearers can never exalt themselves over against each other or harden themselves against each other” (p. 69).

“Here there is really almost nothing to be seen of rigid regulations or customs which would govern the meetings” (p. 69). “In Corinth there is neither in practice nor in theory room for an office like that of the Presbyterate or the later monarchical Episcopate” (p. 71). “We must not picture things as if a community without a rigid order were in Paul’s mind still incomplete and only provisionally organized and had yet to await a fully detailed constitution” (p. 74).

“The most striking trait of the Pauline picture of the community is the complete absence of a legal organization, the thoroughgoing exclusion of every formal authority within the individual community” (pp. 75-76). This is “all the more striking, since at that time at least in the Jewish Christian communities there was in all probability already a definite patriarchal office, the presbyters” (p. 76).

“Further, his conception of the ordering of the community as

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11. H. v. Campenhausen, *Kirchliches Amt und geistliche Vollmacht in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, 1953. The page numbers in brackets refer to this book.



a free fellowship which unfolds itself in the living interplay of spiritual gifts and ministries without official authority, did not at once disappear even after his death" (p. 76). As late as the first Epistle of Peter "the Church is regarded as a brotherhood". It is the elect race, the kingly priesthood, and the holy people (p. 80).

Thus, if we ask whether the Ekklesia of which Paul teaches is an ideal or a reality, the answer must be: it is both; it is what is true and real "in Jesus Christ" and thus "in faith". It is the real fellowship of real men, which Paul ever and again saw coming into being as a result of his *kerygma* about Christ. Thus he teaches what on the one hand he understands only "in Christ", and what on the other hand he has experienced as empirical matter of fact and experiences time and time again. The Ekklesia in Corinth or Philippi is the Ekklesia which he means when he speaks of the Body of Christ as a work of the Holy Spirit, as a fellowship of the Spirit whose ordering is determined only by the Holy Spirit inasmuch as the Spirit allots to each his special gift and corresponding to it his special service. There is not in addition a further "organization", for the Body of Christ organizes itself. It is just for this reason that it is called the *Body* of Christ. Above all there are no legal regulations which—as is the essence of law—might be considered to have a formal validity, so that because "it has been so laid down" things must henceforward take the course which "has been laid down". On the contrary, that is by the nature of things excluded in the Ekklesia, and so, as we saw, was in fact absent. Although the brotherhood is composed of quite ordinary men, it is not ordered by the will and the law of men, but simply and solely by the Spirit (*pneumo*), His gifts of grace (*charismata*) and His ministries (*diakonai*).

This may seem fantastic to us. We cannot repress the question: Did this charismatic order actually work? Was there not perpetual strife, or at the least uncertainty and the awkward question—what was to happen now? But this strange, this even wonderful charismatic ordering by the invisible Lord alone, did work. Precisely that is the miracle of the Ekklesia, which certainly Paul and the other Christians themselves regarded with ever renewed astonishment as a miracle. Even the worldwide scope of the Ekklesia was not able—and that is a second miracle—to call the charismatic leadership and order in question. The brotherhood in the house-community of Colosse knew itself as the same Body of Christ as it recognized in those other distant communities of Macedonia and Achaia.

When it called itself Ekklesia it did not mean to say that it was one *community*, but that it was one manifestation of the same Body of Christ which also manifested itself in Corinth, Philippi and Galatia.

The Church historian, with his eye on the later worldwide development of the Ekklesia, must indeed name this first stage, and the idea of the Ekklesia formed in it and for it, fantastic or “utopian”. “Inasmuch as all compulsion, all permanent power of command is expressly excluded, the picture of the fellowship that results, understood in the sense of a human social organization, is utopian.” “But the Church”—we would say the Ekklesia—“is for Paul not a human, natural entity, but an absolutely wonderful superhuman phenomenon.”<sup>12</sup> In this judgment of the historian, “utopian”, there lies this truth: that the Ekklesia of Paul was something *unique*. Anxiety about its continuance in the future could not arise in the mind of Paul, since he reckoned with the speedy return of the Lord and thus did not wish to build something that would last for hundreds or even thousands of years. But even if the historian, with an eye on the actual history of Christianity, calls Paul’s idea of the Ekklesia “utopian”, yet *we* shall not hesitate to acknowledge it as the necessary outcome of Paul’s understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and therefore as the necessary norm for all time of the believing fellowship of Christians, who are conscious that they have their foundation in Jesus Christ alone.

What united the Ekklesia or Church of primitive Christianity was not this Pauline understanding of faith and of Christ, but solely the common faith in Jesus Christ Himself. But as opinions in primitive Christianity diverged to some extent even in the interpretation of this faith, so of course also there was divergence in the conceptions of the Church or Ekklesia and its form. Jewish Christianity—here the New Testament scholars and Church historians are at one—never really understood Paul’s doctrine of justification; much less did it appropriate it. And when we look at the history of primitive Christianity we must call the Pauline theology also a *unique* phenomenon. The Church which rose out of the Ekklesia as early as the second century had already not only not understood it, but forgotten it. The “Church of Matthew” (Schlatter), which leaned towards Judaism and the corresponding view of the Church, was more akin to it, and also proved itself to be practically more useful. The Pauline formulations are still

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12. H. v. Campenhausen, *op. cit.*, p. 69.