

Preface

What is the Church? This question poses the unsolved problem of Protestantism. From the days of the Reformation to our own time, it has never been clear how the Church, in the sense of spiritual life and faith – the fellowship of Jesus Christ – is related to the institutions conventionally called churches. This problem has become sharper than ever as a result of the ecumenical movement; but it is in no way solved and the idea of the reunion of the churches – understood by many “ecumenicals” to be the real goal of the movement – shows as nothing else how inadequately the depth of the problem has been appreciated.

For the Roman Catholic church this problem does not appear to exist at all. Rome presents to the world the face of a church which is certain of itself. But this is only so in appearance; in reality Rome too has no ready answer to the question how the phenomenon visible in the New Testament as the *Ecclesia* is to be related to the papal church as the latter has developed in the course of centuries; and the uneasiness of those who cannot satisfy themselves with the neat formula that the one has evolved into the other is the less easily appeased the longer it lasts. In the last 50 or 100 years New Testament research has unremittingly and successfully addressed itself to the task of elucidating for us what was known as the *Ecclesia* in primitive Christianity – so very different from what is today called the Church both in the Roman and Protestant camps. It is, however, a well-known fact that dogmatists and Church leaders often pay but small attention to the results of New Testament research, and are only too ready to bridge the gulf between then and now by a handy formula such as that of development, or by appealing to the

distinction between the visible and invisible Church, and thus to give a false solution to this grave and distressing problem. But while many theologians and Church leaders are able to quieten their consciences by such formulae, others are so much the more painfully aware of the disparity between the Christian fellowship of the apostolic age and our own “churches”, and cannot escape the impression that there may perhaps be something wrong with what we now call the Church.

In the present work an attempt is made to discover the ground of this disharmony by systematically turning to account the conclusions of New Testament research in their bearing upon the problem of the Church as it confronts us today. The title of the book, *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, is equivocal. Is it a question of a misunderstanding of which the Church is guilty or of a misunderstanding of which it is the victim? Or is it that the Church itself, as such, is perhaps the product of a misunderstanding? The author is not responsible for this ambiguity; it is intrinsic, rather, to the theme itself.

It is in fact the opinion of the author that the Church itself, in so far as it identifies itself with the *Ecclesia* of the New Testament, rests upon a misunderstanding. Therefore he must be prepared for violent opposition from all those who are resolved to defend their own church as the true Church at any cost. Since for his part he does not intend to pit his views as a dogmatic system against that of any particular church, he would like to have his work understood as a contribution to the ecumenical discussion, in the course of which he is sincerely anxious to learn from disagreement. On the other hand he hopes to gain the concurrence of all those to whom Jesus Christ is dearer than their own church, and he counts with certainty upon the interest of all who wish to investigate deeply the problem of the Church. For this book has sprung from just this desire to discover the reason why since the Reformation epoch a real solution to the problem of the Church has not been found. The reader will feel, I hope, that behind it lies not merely the impulse to know, but a desire, at least equally strong, to bring into being the true fellowship of Christ.

Zurich, Easter, 1951.