



Edited by
Gerard Mannion and Lewis Mudge

THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

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The nature and history of the Christian church is of immense importance to students and scholars of theology and its related disciplines. *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church* is the definitive handbook to the study of the Christian church. It introduces students to the fundamental historical, systematic, moral and ecclesiological aspects of the study of the church, as well as serving as a resource for scholars engaging in ecclesiological debates on a wide variety of issues.

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- denominational traditions
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- methods and debates in ecclesiology
- key concepts and themes
- ecclesiology and other disciplines: the social sciences and philosophy.

Written by a team of leading international scholars from a wide variety of denominational and disciplinary backgrounds, *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church* addresses the contemporary challenges to the Christian church, as well as providing an accessible and lively resource to this changing and developing field. It is an indispensable guide to the Christian church for students of theology and beyond.

Gerard Mannion is Chair of the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network. A Roman Catholic layperson and Irish citizen, he studied at Cambridge and Oxford Universities. He has lectured at Church-linked colleges of the universities of Oxford and Leeds and was previously Associate Professor of Ecclesiology and Ethics at Liverpool Hope. Director of the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Ecclesiology, he has published widely in the fields of ecclesiology and ethics, as well as in other aspects of systematics and philosophy.

Lewis S. Mudge is Robert Leighton Stuart Professor of Theology, Emeritus, at San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, USA. He is the author of *One Church: Catholic and Reformed* (1963), *The Crumbling Walls* (1970), *The Sense of a People* (1992), *The Church as Moral Community* (1998), *Rethinking the Beloved Community* (2001), and *The Gift of Responsibility* (2008).

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First published 2008
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York, NY 10016

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007.

“To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge’s collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.”

© 2008 Editorial material and selection by Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The Routledge companion to the Christian church/edited by
Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge.

p.cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Church history. I. Mannion, Gerard, 1970– II. Mudge, Lewis Seymour.
BR145.3.R68 2008

262–dc22

2007021222

ISBN 0-203-93607-8 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 10: 0-415-37420-0 (hbk)
ISBN 10: 0-203-93607-8 (ebk)

ISBN 13: 978-0-415-37420-0 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978-0-203-93607-8 (ebk)

Dedicated to you,

Dear Reader:

May this book increase your knowledge and love of the Christian church,
whoever you are, wherever you come from and whatever your own story.

May it serve, in some small way, in furthering the ecumenical endeavour of greater
understanding, dialogue, unity and harmony amongst the one human family.

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CONTRIBUTORS

Paul Avis is an Anglican priest and General Secretary of the Council for Christian Unity of the Church of England. He is a research fellow in the Department of Theology, University of Exeter, and Director of the Centre for the Study of the Christian Church. His recent publications include *Anglicanism and the Christian Church* (2nd edn, 2002); *A Church Drawing Near: Spirituality and Mission in a Post-Christian Culture* (2003); *A Ministry Shaped by Mission* (2005); *Beyond the Reformation: Authority, Primacy and Unity in the Conciliar Tradition* (2006); and *The Identity of Anglicanism: Essentials of Anglican Ecclesiology* (2008). He is the convening editor of the journal *Ecclesiology*.

Gregory Baum was born in Berlin, Germany in 1923 and emigrated to Canada from England in 1940. Following a BA in Mathematics and Physics, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, 1946 and an MA in Mathematics, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, 1947, he achieved the DTh (doctor of theology) at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, in 1956, followed by studies in sociology at the New School for Social Research, New York City, 1969–71. From 1959–86 he was Professor of Theology and Religious Studies at St Michael's College in the University of Toronto and from 1986–95, professor at McGill University's faculty of religious studies where he is presently Professor Emeritus. The editor of *The Ecumenist*, 1962–2003, his books since 1988 include *Solidarity and Compassion* (1988); *The Church in Quebec* (1992); *Essays in Critical Theology* (1994); *The Church for Others: Protestant Theology in Communist East Germany* (1996); *Nationalism, Religion and Ethics* (2001); and *Amazing Church* (2005). He has been honoured as an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Thomas F. Best (Revd Dr), a pastor of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is Director of Faith and Order, World Council of Churches. After studies at Harvard, Oxford and in New Testament at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, Dr Best taught in the Religious Studies Department, Butler University, Indianapolis. In 1980–1 he served as Director of the Institut zur Erforschung des Urchristentums in Tübingen before joining the staff of Faith and Order in 1984, and was named Director of Faith and Order in 2005. Dr Best is the author of numerous articles on ecclesiology in the ecumenical context (including entries on Church Union in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition, and in *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 4th edition) and on worship (including articles in *The New SCM Dictionary of Worship and Spirituality* and *Studia Liturgica*).

Eddy van der Borgh, ordained a minister of the United Protestant Church in Belgium (1989) and PhD Leiden (2000), is Assistant Professor in Systematic Theology, Vrije

Universiteit Amsterdam. He has published on the theology of ministry, ecumenical theology and issues related to faith and ethnicity. He is editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Reformed Theology* and of the series *Studies in Reformed Theology*.

John J. Burkhard is a Conventual Franciscan and Professor of Systematic Theology at the Washington Theological Union where he has taught since 1991. Before that he taught for 18 years at his community's theologate of St Anthony-on-Hudson, in Rensselaer, New York. He has also taught at the Catholic University of America, St Peter's Regional Seminary in Cape Coast, Ghana, and St John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota. Dr Burkhard's writings have been primarily on the Church and ministry. In 2004, Liturgical Press published his book *Apostolicity Then and Now: An Ecumenical Church in a Postmodern World*, and his translation of Ghislain Lafont's *A Theological Journey: Theology in History and for Our Time* was published later in 2007. Dr Burkhard is currently working on a book on the Church as the Body of Christ that is tentatively entitled *The Body of Christ: An Exegetical, Historical, Ecumenical, and Systematic Study*. He regularly teaches courses on the Church, christology, fundamental theology, and the priesthood.

Mark Chapman is Vice-Principal of Ripon and Cuddesdon College, Oxford and a member of the Faculty of Theology at Oxford University. He teaches modern church history and Anglicanism and has published widely in many different areas of theology, ethics, and church history. His most recent books are *Blair's Britain: A Christian Critique* (2005), *Anglicanism: A Very Short Introduction* (2006) and *Bishops, Saints and Politics: Anglican Studies* (2007). He is also a Church of England priest.

Sophie Chirongoma, from Zimbabwe, is a doctoral student in the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and an active member of the Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians. She teaches African history, religion and culture in the Access Programme at UKZN, and has published in the field of women, religion and health in Africa.

Paul M. Collins (Revd Dr) is Reader in Theology at the University of Chichester, UK. A priest of the Church of England, he has worked in theological education for 20 years at Chichester Theological College, then at The Queen's Foundation, Birmingham and presently at the University of Chichester. His research interests include the doctrines of the Trinity, *Theosis*, and the Church and inculturation, especially in South India. His major publications include *Trinitarian Theology West and East* (2001), *Context, Culture and Worship: The Quest for Indian-ness* (2006) and *Christian Inculturation in India* (2007). The outcome of his research project in India has also recently been made available as a database on the internet: <http://inculturation.chi.ac.uk/index.cfm>. He is currently a member of the Faith and Order Advisory Group of the Church of England.

Eamonn Conway is a priest of the Tuam diocese and Head of Theology and Religious Studies at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, where he also co-directs the Centre for Culture, Technology and Values. He is author of *The Anonymous Christian – A Relativised Christianity? An evaluation of Hans Urs von Balthasar's criticisms of Karl Rahner's theory of the anonymous Christian* (1993), and has edited five other books, most recently *The Courage to Risk Everything, Essays Marking the Centenary of Karl Rahner's Birth* (2004). He currently leads a pan-European research project on 'Culture, Technology and Religion' funded by the Metanexus Institute. He has had several

publications in international journals, and has lectured in Europe, Australia and the USA. Until recently he served on the Irish Government's Information Society Commission, and was elected to the Board of Directors of *Concilium: International Review for Theology* in 2006.

G.R. Evans is Emeritus Professor of Medieval Theology and Intellectual History in the University of Cambridge and author of studies on a number of patristic and medieval authors and on ecumenical and ecclesiological problems. Her many books (to date 25) include *Problems of Authority in the Reformation Debates* (1992), *The Church and the Churches* (1994), *Communion et réunion: Mélanges J.M.R. Tillard* (with M. Gourgues), BETL, CXXI (1995), *Method in Ecumenical Theology* (1996), *The Reception of the Faith* (1997), *Calling Academia to Account* (1998) and *Academics and the Real World* (2002).

Michael A. Fahey, S.J. is Professor of Theology at Boston College (USA). He previously taught at St Michael's College, Toronto, and at Marquette University, Milwaukee. He studied philosophy in Leuven in the 1950s and in the late 1960s did doctoral studies in theology at the University of Tübingen under Professors Hans Küng and Joseph Ratzinger. He holds dual citizenship (Canada and USA). In 2005 he received an honorary doctorate from St Michael's College in the University of Toronto. From 1996 to 2005 he served as editor of the journal *Theological Studies*. Recently he was the recipient of a *Festschrift* entitled *In God's Hands: Essays on the Church and Ecumenism* (2006). His publications focus particularly on ecclesiology and ecumenism. He has served as president of the Catholic Theological Society of America as well as the American Theological Society.

Alison Forrestal is Lecturer in Early Modern Continental History at the National University of Ireland, Galway. A specialist in early modern Catholic cultural history, she has published *Catholic Synods in Ireland, 1600–1690* and *Fathers, Pastors and Kings: Visions of Episcopacy in Seventeenth Century France*. She is currently writing *Vincent de Paul: An Icon in the Making* and co-editing *After the League: Politics and Religion in Early Bourbon France*.

Kondothra M. George (Rev'd Dr) is Principal and Professor of Systematic Theology at the Orthodox Theological Seminary, Kottayam, India, affiliated to the Serampore University. A member of the Joint Working Group between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches, Fr George also served as Moderator of the Programme Committee and the Executive Committee of the WCC for a seven-year term. Presently he is also co-chairperson of the Federated Faculty for Religion and Culture in Kerala, India. A graduate in chemistry, he did his initial theological studies in India, his Master's degree at Louvain University and doctoral work – in Greek Patristics – at the Catholic Faculty in Paris and the Sorbonne. From 1989–94 he was Professor and Associate Director at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute near Geneva and also served as a member of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC. A fraternal delegate to the Asian and Middle Eastern Catholic Bishops Synod at the Vatican in 1998, Fr George was deeply involved in the Roman Catholic–Oriental Orthodox Theological Dialogue sponsored by the Pro Oriente Foundation in Vienna, as well as in the Eastern Orthodox–Oriental Orthodox Theological Commission appointed by the Orthodox Churches. His special areas of interest and publication include ecclesiology, cultural hermeneutics, eco-theology and spirituality, theological aesthetics and literature.

James R. Ginther received his PhD in Medieval Studies from the University of Toronto in 1995. He lectured in medieval theology in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at Leeds University until 2002 when he moved to Saint Louis University. He is now Associate Professor of Medieval Theology. He is the author of numerous articles on thirteenth-century theology, and a monograph entitled *Master of the Sacred Page: A Study of the Theology of Robert Grosseteste (1229/30–1235)* (2004). He also co-edited a collection of essays in memory of Walter H. Principe CSB in 2005. He has forthcoming *A Handbook of Medieval Theology* for Westminster/John Knox Press. Dr Ginther is also the Co-Director of the Institute of Digital Theology, a research institute that develops multimedia projects to support teaching and research in theological studies. He lives in St Louis with his wife, Diana, and two children.

Paula Gooder studied theology at Oxford University where she also completed her doctorate on Heavenly Ascent traditions and the writings of Paul. From there she went on to teach first at Ripon and Cuddesdon College, Oxford and then at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham. She now works freelance as a writer and lecturer in biblical studies. Her current research interests are the mysticism of Paul the Apostle, the history of interpretation of 2 Corinthians and the development of ministry and Christian community in the New Testament period.

Steve de Gruchy is Professor of Theology and Development in the School of Religion and Theology at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa and editor of the *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*. He is an ordained minister in the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA) and has served that church in various capacities, including being Director of the Moffat Mission Trust in Kuruman. He has been on working groups with the World Council of Churches, the South African Council of Churches and the Council for World Mission. His research and teaching focus on the historical and contemporary engagement of Christianity with social life in Africa. He has published widely on the South African Church struggle against apartheid and on the contemporary challenges of the Church in Africa in the post-colonial period.

Roger Haight, S.J. is a Jesuit presently teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He earned his doctorate in theology at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1973. Thereafter he taught in Jesuit faculties of theology in Manila, Chicago, Toronto and Boston. He specializes in historical and systematic theology, particularly the areas of faith and revelation, christology and ecclesiology. He has recently completed *Ecclesial Existence*, a constructive representation of the Church from an interdenominational perspective, and the third volume of his trilogy, *Christian Community in History*.

Nicholas M. Healy, a Roman Catholic, was educated in England and Canada and has his PhD from Yale University (1992). Besides articles on Rahner, Barth and other topics, he has written a book on ecclesiology – *Church, World and the Christian Life* (2000) – and one on Thomas Aquinas (2003). He is presently working on a book entitled *Stanley Hauerwas: A Very Critical Introduction* (Eerdmans). Longer term, he hopes to write a systematic theology of the Church. After 15 years teaching at St John's University in New York, Healy is now Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of San Diego, USA.

Adam Hood MA, BD, DPhil (Oxon) is Vice-Principal and Director of Research of the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham, UK. Amongst his publications are *Baillie, Oman and Macmurray: Experience and Religious Belief* (2003). Interests include the philosophical theology of John Oman and the relationship between the philosophy of mind, as found in the analytic tradition, and Christian theology. He is married with two children and includes reading and golf amongst his hobbies.

Paul Lakeland is the Aloysius P. Kelley, S.J. Professor of Catholic Studies at Fairfield University in Connecticut. His most recent books are *Postmodernity: Christian Identity in a Fragmented Age* (1997), *The Liberation of the Laity: In Search of an Accountable Church* (2003), which received the 2004 US Catholic Press Association Award for the best book in theology, and *Catholicism at the Crossroads: How the Laity Can Save the Church* (2007). He is a member of the American Academy of Religion, where he recently completed a six-year term as Chair of the Theology and Religious Reflection Section, and the Catholic Theological Society of America. He is Chair of the Editorial Board of *Religious Studies Review* and co-convenor of the independent ecumenical association of systematic and constructive theologians, the Workgroup for Constructive Theology, based in Nashville, Tennessee. He is currently at work on an edition of the selected writings of Yves Congar.

Richard Lennan is currently Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Weston Jesuit School of Theology in Cambridge, Massachusetts. From 1992–2007, he taught at the Catholic Institute of Sydney and served, from 2005–7, as President of the Australian Catholic Theological Association. His most recent book is *Risking the Church: The Challenges of Catholic Faith* (2004).

Gerard Mannion is Director of the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Ecclesiology, chairs the Ecclesiological Investigations International Research Network and is editor of the publication series of the same name. Educated at the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, he previously taught at church colleges in the Universities of Oxford and Leeds and as Associate Professor of Ecclesiology and Ethics and Co-Director of the Applied Ethics Initiative at Liverpool Hope University. A 2004 Coolidge Fellow at Union Theological Seminary, New York, with Michael Fahey he serves as founding co-chair of the ecclesiology group of the American Academy of Religion. His numerous publications include *Schopenhauer, Religion and Morality* (2003), *Readings in Church Authority – Gifts and Challenges for Contemporary Catholicism* (co-editor) (2003) and *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity – Questions for the Church in our Times* (2007). He is editor of the forthcoming *John Paul II: An Assessment of His Life, Thought and Influence* (forthcoming 2008) and also co-editor (with Philomena Cullen and Bernard Hoose) of *Catholic Social Justice: Theological and Practical Explorations* (2007) and *The Ratzinger Reader* (with Lieven Boeve, forthcoming 2008). A Roman Catholic layperson and Irish citizen, his other passions include rugby union, running and social justice.

Peter De Mey PhD, teaches ecclesiology and ecumenism at the Faculty of Theology of the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven. He is the Director of the Centre for Ecumenical Research of the same university. He is currently the secretary of the *Societas Oecumenica* (European Association for Ecumenical Research) and a member of the steering committee of the Ecclesiological Investigations Group of the American Academy of Religion.

Michael H. Montgomery has been Director of Congregational Studies and Church Relations at Chicago Theological Seminary since June 2006. He has received a BA from Coe College, 1977, an MBA from the University of Chicago, 1980 and an MDiv, 1983 and a PhD, 2003 from Chicago Theological Seminary. Montgomery also served United Church of Christ congregations in Nebraska, Iowa and Illinois before returning to CTS to study the theology and sociology of religious communities in America. Montgomery's academic interests include the study of congregations, liberal church renewal, sociology of religion and practical theology. His research languages are ethnography and statistics and he has presented academic papers on liberal church renewal and American civil religion at the Association for the Sociology of Religion. He has consulted with congregations interested in revitalization and the United Church of Christ's major gifts solicitation ministry. Montgomery is married to the Revd Peggy McClanahan, senior minister at Pilgrim Faith United Church of Christ in Oak Lawn, Illinois. They have two college-aged sons.

Lewis S. Mudge is Robert Leighton Stuart Professor of Theology, Emeritus, at San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, USA. He holds BA, MA and PhD degrees in religious studies from Princeton University, and the BA and MA in theology from Oxford University, where he was a Rhodes Scholar. He served as Secretary for Theological Studies of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1957–62), Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Amherst College (1962–76), and Dean of the Faculty and Professor of Theology at McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago (1976–87) and San Francisco Theological Seminary (1987–95). He has served on the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches, USA and as a consultant to the Commission on Faith and Order of the World Council of Churches. He has been Chair of the Theology Commission of the US Consultation on Church Union. He was co-moderator (with Fr Bernard Sesboue) of the International Reformed–Roman Catholic Dialogue Commission, second series. He took part in the WCC study on ecclesiology and ethics, serving as principal drafter of the 1996 Johannesburg statement 'Costly Obedience'. He is the author of *One Church: Catholic and Reformed* (1963); *The Crumbling Walls* (1970); *The Sense of a People* (1992); *The Church as Moral Community* (1998); and *Rethinking the Beloved Community* (2001). He is co-editor (with James Poling) of *Formation and Reflection* (1987) and (with Thomas Wieser) of *Democratic Contracts for Sustainable and Caring Societies* (2001). His forthcoming book, *The Gift of Responsibility*, will appear in 2008.

Christopher Ocker is Professor of History at the San Francisco Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley. His publications include *Johannes Klenkok: A Friar's Life, c. 1310–1374* (1993); *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (2002); and *Church Robbers and Reformers in Germany, 1525–1547* (2006).

Neil Ormerod is Professor of Theology and Director of the Institute for Theology, Philosophy and Religious Education at Australian Catholic University. He has published widely, including a series of articles for *Theological Studies* on the topic of systematic ecclesiology. He has also published in the areas of the Trinity and Christian anthropology. Most recently he has published *Creation Grace and Redemption* (Orbis) and is collaborating on a work on globalization and the mission of the Church.

David Pascoe (Revd Dr) is a diocesan priest of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Brisbane, Australia. At present he holds the position of President of St Paul's Theological College, Brisbane, a member school of the Brisbane College of Theology, an ecumenical theological consortium. After completion of doctoral studies at Weston Jesuit School of Theology, Cambridge, MA, he has lectured in systematic theology, primarily ecclesiology and sacramental theology. He is also a member of the Uniting Church in Australia–Roman Catholic National Dialogue.

Peter C. Phan, a Vietnamese-American theologian, currently holds the Ignacio Ellacuría Chair in Catholic Social Thought at Georgetown University, Washington, DC. He has earned three doctorates (STD from the Universitas Pontificia Salesiana, and PhD and DD from the University of London). He has written and edited over 20 books and 300 essays. He is the general editor of the *Theology in Global Perspective* series for Orbis Books, which promotes an ecumenical, intercultural and interreligious approach to theology.

Anthony G. Reddie was born and brought up in Bradford, West Yorkshire. He holds a BA in (Church) History and a PhD in Education and Contextual and Practical Theology – both degrees conferred by the University of Birmingham. He is presently Research Fellow and Consultant in Black Theological Studies for the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education and the Methodist Church. He is also an honorary lecturer in both the theology and education departments of the University of Birmingham, where he supervises postgraduate students and is an internal marker of postgraduate dissertations and theses. He is the author and editor of several texts, including *Growing into Hope* (1998); *Legacy* (editor, 2000); *Faith, Stories and the Experience of Black Elders* (2001); *Nobodies to Somebodies* (2003); *Acting in Solidarity* (2005); *Dramatizing Theologies* (2006); and *Black Theology in Transatlantic Dialogue* (2006). Dr Reddie has been the editor of *Black Theology: An International Journal* since 2001.

Henk de Roest was born in 1959 and studied philosophy of religion and practical theology at Leiden University. He was ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed Church in 1987, serving two parishes just north of Amsterdam. In 1998 he obtained his doctorate with distinction at Leiden University with a thesis called 'Communicative Identity – Habermas' Perspectives of Discourse as a Support for Practical Theology'. From 1999–2001 he was Lecturer in Practical Ecclesiology at Utrecht University. From September 2001 he held the Chair of Practical Theology at Leiden University and from January 2007 he has held the same Chair at the Protestant Theological University, Leiden. Keywords in his research are: ecclesiogenesis, community formation, homiletics, missional communication of the Christian faith, inclusive church, church closings, leadership, group dynamics and the future of the churches. Henk de Roest is Chairman of the Eastern Europe Committee of the Dutch Theological Faculties and Institutions.

Risto Saarinen, born in 1959, is Professor of Ecumenics at the University of Helsinki. He has doctorates in theology (1988) and philosophy (1994) from Helsinki. From 1994–9 he served as Research Professor at the Institute for Ecumenical Research, Strasbourg, and continues to act as visiting professor there. Saarinen has been a member of the Lutheran–Orthodox Joint Commission since 1995 (Vice-Chair since 2004), and adviser to the Council of the Lutheran World Federation since 2003. He is a member and ordained pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Saarinen's publications include *Gottes Wirken auf uns* (1989); *Weakness of the Will in Medieval Thought* (1994); *Faith and*

Holiness: Lutheran–Orthodox Dialogue 1959–1994 (1997, Russian edition 2002, updated website of the dialogues at www.helsinki.fi/~risaarin); *God and the Gift: An Ecumenical Theology of Giving* (2005); and *North European Churches from the Cold War to Globalisation* (with Hugh McLeod, 2006).

Steven Shakespeare is the Anglican Chaplain and Associate Director of the Centre for the Study of Contemporary Ecclesiology at Liverpool Hope University, UK where he also teaches and researches in the Theology and Religious Studies Department. His publications include *Kierkegaard, Language and the Reality of God* (2001); *The Inclusive God. Reclaiming Theology for an Inclusive Church* (co-authored with Hugh Rayment-Pickard, 2006); and *Radical Orthodoxy: A Critical Introduction* (2007). He is currently writing a book on the relationship between Derrida and theology.

Gemma Simmonds, C.J. is a sister of the Congregation of Jesus lecturing in ecclesiology and spirituality at Heythrop College, University of London. She has an MA from Newnham College, Cambridge (modern languages), an MTh from Heythrop (systematic theology) and a PhD (St Edmund's College, Cambridge), supervised by Professors David Ford and Peter Bayley, which offers a contemporary rereading of the Jansenist crisis in conversation with Henri de Lubac and the Ressourcement Movement. Her current research is on women in the Church, issues in contextualized spirituality, Henri de Lubac, Marie-Dominique Chenu and *ressourcement*, and Mary Ward. Her publications include a translation of Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum* (2006); 'Women in University Chaplaincy', in John Sullivan and Peter McGrail (eds), *Dancing on the Edge: Church, Chaplaincy and Higher Education* (2006); 'Women Jesuits?' in Thomas Worcester (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Jesuits* (2007), and various articles in scholarly journals and textbooks, including several in *The New SCM Dictionary of Spirituality* (ed. Philip Sheldrake, 2005).

Simone Sinn (Revd) is a pastor of the Evangelical Church in Württemberg, Germany. She studied at the Irish School of Ecumenics, Dublin from 1999 to 2000. Her MPhil thesis, *The Church as Participatory Community: On the Interrelationship of Hermeneutics, Ecclesiology and Ethics*, was published by Columba Press in 2002. She received a certificate in diaconal studies at the Institute for Diaconal Studies in Heidelberg in 2002 and earned her theological degree at the University of Tübingen in 2003. Currently, she serves as a theological assistant at the Department for Theology and Studies in the Lutheran World Federation, Geneva.

David Tombs is a political theologian. Originally from London, he is currently working on the Belfast-based reconciliation studies programme of the Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin. He has degrees in theology and philosophy from Oxford, Union Theological Seminary (New York) and London. His publications include *Latin American Liberation Theology* (2002); *Explorations in Reconciliation: New Directions for Theology* (edited with Joseph Liechty, 2006); and *Truth and Memory: The Church and Human Rights in El Salvador and Guatemala* (edited with Michael A. Hayes, 2001).

Hans Waldenfels, S.J. was born in 1931 in Essen, Germany and entered the Society of Jesus in 1951. He undertook philosophical studies at Pullach near Munich (Lic. phil.), theological studies in Tokyo (Lic. theol.) and studies in the philosophy of religion under Professors Takeuchi and Nishitani in Kyoto. His Dr theol. was from the Gregorium

CONTRIBUTORS

University in Rome and his habilitation (Dr theol. habil.) from Würzburg, Germany. He was Professor of Fundamental Theology at the University of Bonn from 1977–97, serving twice as a dean and as speaker for the postgraduate programme for religious studies. He has been a visiting professor of universities in Moscow, Warsaw, Bamberg, Vienna, Rome, Prague and Milwaukee (Wade Chair) and was awarded a Dr theol. h.c. by the University of Warsaw. His numerous publications have been translated into many languages and include *Absolutes Nichts* (1976, also in English); *Kontextuelle Fundamentaltheologie* (1985); and the *Lexikon der Religionen* (1987). He is also editor of the Bonn series *Begegnung – Kontextuelldialogische Studien zur Theologie der Kulturen und Religionen*, of which 14 volumes have been published to date.

Natalie K. Watson (Dr) is a theologian, writer, editor and publisher based in Peterborough, UK. She studied theology at the universities of Tuebingen, Germany and Durham, UK. She has taught theology and church history at Ripon College Cuddesdon and has more recently been Head of Publishing at the Methodist Publishing House in Peterborough. She is the author of several books and articles on feminist theology and related subjects, including *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology* (2002) and *Feminist Theology* (2003).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First of all, our very deep gratitude to all of our contributors for their efforts on behalf of what we hope readers will enjoy as a truly enthralling collection and enduringly valuable resource. An enormous thank you, also, for their belief in and ongoing support of such a huge project to Lesley Riddle, Gemma Dunn and Amy Laurens at Routledge. And an especially heartfelt expression of our appreciation to Maureen Allen and Kate Hughes at BookNow for their efficiency and meticulous work during the production processes of the final volume, as well as to Jonathan Burd for compiling the index.

INTRODUCTION

Ecclesiology – the nature, story and study of the Church

Gerard Mannion and Lewis S. Mudge

The nature, story and study of the Christian church have become very popular areas of inquiry across various religious communities, in courses of theology and religious studies and in the field of scholarly debate. The very fact that you have this volume in your hands is itself proof that, in recent decades, ecclesiology has become of great topical interest once again. This also means, as a perusal of the chapters will quickly indicate, that the amount of literature in and on ecclesiology itself has grown to enormous proportions. If one looks at the content of academic journals in recent years from a wide variety of sub-disciplines – historical, ethical, systematic, practical, missiological, sociological and philosophical – one finds an increasing number of papers where the central focus is particularly upon the church itself and ecclesiological questions and concepts. There have even been a number of journals established in recent years which are devoted solely to questions of an ecclesiological nature, and many publishers have commissioned series of ecclesiological relevance. The number of conferences devoted to ecclesiological themes across the international scholarly community is legion.

In short, ecclesiology is very much a branch of study which is becoming more and more popular. This *Routledge Companion to the Christian Church* is thus a single-volume work that can serve as a core textbook to introduce students and general readers alike to the fundamental historical, systematic, moral and – of course – ecclesiological aspects of the study of the Church, as well as serving as a resource for scholars engaging in ecclesiological debates on a wide variety of issues.

This Companion offers a wealth of information on the Church both past and present. It deals with numerous circumstances and relationships in which churches have been and are involved. It does so from perspectives that represent the best in contemporary scholarship. The editors and writers offer this volume to the world of browsers and readers, believers or otherwise, who sense the importance of this subject in a day of intra- and inter-religious conflict, and yet also perhaps of religious potential for bringing healing to the human race. Thus this volume is designed to rectify a yawning ‘gap’ in the literature and provide a true ‘companion’ to ecclesiology – a work of reference which will be invaluable to all engaged with and interested in the story and nature of, as well as the future prospects for, the Christian church.

The first part of the volume explores ecclesiology in its historical context, before turning in Part II to explore differing denominational ‘traditions’ in ecclesiology. Part III examines ‘global perspectives’ of ecclesiology from across the different continents, whilst Part IV is concerned with different methodologies in ecclesiology and contemporary debates (such as liberation ecclesiology, feminist ecclesiology and ecumenical ecclesiology). Part V covers a range of concepts and themes in ecclesiology which are the subject of debate across historical and contemporary discussions alike, such as authority, magisterium, laity, ministry and the inter-relationship between ecclesiology and other areas of theological scholarship such as doctrine, hermeneutics and ethics. The final part explores ecclesiology in a trans-disciplinary context, namely how ecclesiology and ecclesiological themes are explored in the social sciences and philosophy.

Our contributors, by and large, have also listed a selection of ‘Further reading’ to guide readers whose appetites have been whetted towards further engagement with relevant sources, texts and themes. We have assembled a group of contributors who are leading experts in their field, both emerging and newer ecclesiological voices of insight and internationally renowned figures. We have tried to involve as diverse a group of contributors as we possibly could, in terms of ecclesial background and geographical location, although naturally one could always hope for greater diversity still. Some ecclesial traditions have supplied more contributors than others, but in the main this reflects those churches where ecclesiological inquiry has been traditionally strong and vibrant.

Although many of the chapters are divided into historical periods, their primary focus is not simply *history* as such, but more the *ecclesiological* practices, events, debates and ideas prevalent in such eras. Indeed, the ‘historical’ parts really are different creatures to the other sections and, indeed, lay much of the groundwork for the later theoretical, thematic and discursive chapters. So, for example, the account of Lutheran ecclesiology will assume much of the historical material given in the chapter on the sixteenth-century controversies in ecclesiology. In other words, the part on ecclesiological ‘traditions’ will be more focused upon particular issues, methods and debates – attending to details and themes that a historical overview does not cover (for example, the Lutheran perspective on Roman Catholic and Lutheran dialogues in recent years). Whilst certain key themes, people and events will feature in more than one chapter, we have striven for complementarity rather than overlap.

Of course, no chapter can hope to be *the* definitive, comprehensive and fully exhaustive account of any particular topic. Rather, they offer representative overviews, touching upon certain key themes and people. They seek to be reflective and, where appropriate, both stimulating and even provocative.

Ecclesiological preliminaries

The word ‘ecclesiology’ needs some explanation. The term, for some, has connotations of institutionalism and prelacy, and perhaps also of precious self-concern.¹ Many people will think of competing claims by religious bodies to be the ‘true church,’ or of the ‘marks’ which are said to make a communion or congregation authentic. Others will think of conceptions of church governance, or of the relationships between the church and the civil order, or of the strategic and programmatic considerations which occupy church leaders. Some will even think of the claim that the church is a body ‘outside of which there is no salvation.’ The classical categories for speaking of the church – visibility and invisibility, validity and efficacy, ‘right’ preaching and celebration, apostolicity as episcopal succession or faithful-

ness to teaching, and so on – were formulated to address questions arising at different times and places. We dare not fail to learn the lessons they teach.

In this volume, the word ‘church’ refers to the visible community in which Christians come together for worship, prayer, communal sharing, instruction, reflection and mission. Most Christian bodies, but not all, see this visible community as imperfectly representing on earth an invisible communion of saints called together by God in Jesus Christ. The church can thus be viewed as one social institution among many, but also as a shared form of life shaped by profound theological self-understandings. Seen institutionally, the church has subsisted in a variety of communal forms and structures of governance throughout a long and very complex history. Understood theologically, the church has been the object of many varying images, descriptions, terminologies, and conceptualities interwoven with the circumstances of that history. The systematic study of the church in all these interacting dimensions constitutes the field of ecclesiology. This realm of inquiry relates constructively to most of the other principal themes of Christian thought: among them the doctrine of God, christology, soteriology, theological anthropology, and theological ethics.

The nature of ‘church’ has become, in recent years, a question of great importance to Christian thought and action. This is not only because ecclesiological questions lie at the heart of continuing church divisions after years of Faith and Order debate. It is also because we know today that Christian thought and action inevitably reflect the character of the historical ‘footprint,’ at any time or place, produced by acted-out interpretation of the significance of Jesus. That historical-sociological-institutional footprint has helped to shape understandings of the gospel down the ages. Constructive theology has always functioned to produce versions of the faith suitable to the kind of social reality the church has become at any time or place.

Authentic ecclesiology asks what the coming of Jesus Christ means as expressed ‘in the form of a community’ (Bonhoeffer). Ecclesiology looks at the churches’ forms of governance, liturgical life and corporate witness as primary instruments by which the gospel is lived and communicated. Ecclesiology becomes the normative study of communities which make social and symbolic space in the world for the workings of grace. In such a perspective, ecclesiology becomes far more than an afterthought added at the end of the book. It becomes far more than an institutional setting for the protection and promulgation of truths reached in other ways. It becomes fundamental to Christian theological reflection as such. Seen as ‘fundamental theology’,² ecclesiology concerns the nature of the social space which makes language about God, and therefore faith itself, possible.

What sort of community can sponsor and sustain a kind of discourse which employs, but transcends the limits of, that space’s characteristic imagery, concepts, language, and action patterns toward some sort of signification of the absolute? If theology itself, by definition, is discourse which regulates the language and activity of a religious community (George Lindbeck), then there must be some quality of the social space concerned that permits us to understand this discourse as pointing beyond itself. Theology does not become ‘language about God’ on the basis of its contents or argumentative strategies alone, as if human discourse could lift itself to God by its own bootstraps. It becomes language about God because it is the language of a certain kind of witnessing, serving, community. Hence theology’s root question is whether, in the light of what we know today about the relativity of cultures and about language’s limited ability to access reality, a community in and through which the God of Jesus Christ becomes present within history’s contingencies can be

conceived. Only then can we ask if such communities are possible under the conditions of postmodernity, and, if so, whether such a community actually exists.

We need to ask how far, in what way, and in what terms the institutional church has been aware of its own social reality, aware of the social conditions that shape doctrinal construction. Seen from the perspective sketched above, little can be more important for understanding of the faith. Ecclesiology has to do with our understanding of the community in relation to which virtually all theology is produced, the community whose nature shapes what is thought and hence shapes the way the faith itself is understood. In ecclesiological inquiry, therefore, theology is exploring the historical conditions of its own existence. Seen in those terms, ecclesiology becomes the primordial theological discipline. First, it formulates the social conditions of faith-articulation as such. Then it explores the character of the self-understandings that arise within these communal-institutional gatherings.

The articles in this volume, individually and together, demonstrate the many ways in which churches have taken form and come to certain self understandings, in relation to many different social-cultural-historical circumstances. These articles are written differently from how they might have been written a century ago. They presuppose new developments in historiography, new use of social science methods, new forms of understanding derived from ecumenical contacts, and the like. All these elements and more flow into the ecclesiological self-consciousness of today.

Today we ask what sort of articulate communal expressions of faith will play the most significant roles in the complex human commonwealth now emerging on this planet. We cannot see the future clearly enough to be sure. But faith's persistence in recognizable forms will surely depend in no small part on the evolution of its communal embodiments. The social forms and relationships of religious communities will decisively influence the way faith itself is construed and understood. Without communities and traditions of some sort to express and live out coherent religious traditions, people will not be able to put words to ultimate concern or primordial trust, let alone follow the life paths to which such experiences in the past have led. Shared symbolizations of faith will be needed, in short, if faith itself is to remain consciously alive in the world. The theologies of the future will be grounded in the self-understanding and practical reasoning of believing communities, and at the same time will help make such communities possible. Christian churches need now to consider the forms of life in which their insights can best be pursued in the new human situation we see coming into being. It is important to humanity – to believers, agnostics, atheists, and even to those increasing numbers who do not care one way or another – that religious traditions should learn how to live with depth and integrity as parts of this human scene, yet share the task of representing, in their many ways, the people of earth as a spiritual community.

Many features of the world in which our children and grandchildren will live are already apparent. Humanity today has reached an unprecedented and multidimensional degree of interdependence. And yet our worldwide networks of information exchange and interlocking economic relationships have virtually no spiritual dimension. This combination of material interdependence with spiritual fragmentation will likely become more marked as the twenty-first century unfolds. In this situation religious bodies have an enormous opportunity to serve human well-being and thereby their own. In particular, religious traditions and the communities that sustain and are sustained by them can articulate with coherence and staying power depth concerns for the many. There is, in fact, a widespread impulse today to revisit ancient traditions in search of symbols capable of binding communities

together and sustaining a moral vision of the universe. In a world whose communication networks are allergic to spiritual substance, faith communities can become the social spaces in which questions that are impossible for secular human beings even to formulate on their own can continue to be asked. If religious communities do not keep ultimate questions alive as issues for human beings, there will be no one to listen to the answers they have to offer.

But there are dangers that go with this opportunity. The impulse to recover tradition may lead only to new and fractious fundamentalisms. What comes out may be unimaginative parochialism or religiously tinged ethnic awareness, functioning largely for self-protection and self-esteem. If ancient traditions are to be recovered, they must come to be understood in new ways. Historic faith traditions can no longer represent themselves as one-possibility interpretations of the world, standpoints which make their adherents superior to others or give them special access to truth. It is plain, even for many of those seeking to repristinate the old ways of life, that no such way is the sole valid possibility for human beings. The closer one is to the life of actual people, the clearer this is. Christians live on the same city blocks with Christians of quite different traditions, practices and confessional positions, not to mention with Moslems, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, 'new age' cultists, secular humanists and a host of others. This fact confronts us anew with the need to live our own particular tradition of faith with full respect for those who live other traditions or no apparent tradition at all.

Our responses to these challenges, whatever forms they may take, need to press towards a new, post-Enlightenment conception of human universality, one that does not depend on the notion that all educated human beings will believe and think in the same way. We must now think in terms of an unending conversation between divergent yet interacting symbolizations of human depth and destiny. The human world, not merely the world of religious communities, needs to think of itself as a dialogical communion of many spiritual cultures. Final truth can only be a truth about this dialogue itself, not a fixed conception of reality sustained by some one culture which holds symbolic and technological hegemony over all the others.

As we address such challenges, it is essential not merely to innovate, not merely to react to immediate circumstances. We must bring to our struggles a deep knowledge of roads travelled before. This 'Companion' to the Christian church is designed to help readers journey along the way of trying to understand from whence they have come, in order to grasp in conversation with many contemporary companions the directions in which they will now choose to go.

These are not only challenging times, they are also exciting times for the church around the globe. We hope that the synoptic and comparative picture of the church that you have in your hands will both reflect and further fuel that excitement towards the practical ends of dialogue, understanding and greater human community to which the Gospel calls us.

Feast of Pentecost 2007

Notes

- 1 *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) affirms that ecclesiology concerns the nature of the church, but tells us that this term 'now, usually' means 'the science of church building and decoration'. Obviously, the possibility of misunderstanding lies close at hand.
- 2 Here the term 'fundamental theology' is employed in the sense given it by David Tracy in *Blessed*

Rage for Order (New York: Seabury, 1975) and *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), but drawing somewhat different conclusions. For Tracy, the defining characteristic of fundamental (not 'fundamentalist') theologies of every kind is 'a reasoned insistence on employing the approach and methods of some established academic discipline to explicate and adjudicate the truth-claims of the interpreted religious tradition and the truth-claims of the contemporary situation' (*Analogical Imagination*, 62). As Tracy says, the discipline employed is usually philosophy of some kind or the philosophical dimension of some other discipline. As utilized in this introduction the discipline is a philosophical approach to human science or critical social theory. The feature of the human world on which philosophical attention is focused is thus the existence of traditioned communities which are experienced by their members as making transcendent reality present in shared forms of life.

Part I

HISTORICAL
ECCLESIOLOGY

IN SEARCH OF THE EARLY 'CHURCH'

The New Testament and the development
of Christian communities

Paula Gooder

Introduction

When did 'the Church' begin? People often assert that Pentecost sees the birth of the church, and on one level this is true. The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost transformed the disciples from a frightened group of people into a band of confident, articulate missionaries. Pentecost is a vastly significant moment in the development of the church but to say, as some do, that it is the birth-day of the church is to give both too late and too early a date to the birth of the church: too late a date because it focuses the church solely around the action of the Holy Spirit and not around the presence of the person of Jesus; and too early a date because it is only towards the end of the first century, at the very earliest, that the Christian community began to have the kind of structure that many would recognize as 'church'. The church did not so much have a birth-day as a birth-century.

A reading of the New Testament also indicates that it is not possible to chart with certainty the beginning of *the* church. Instead what we observe from its pages is the growth of a number of Christian communities alongside each other: some of them live together in harmony, while others compete and have conflicts with each other. Some of these communities have strong allegiances to Judaism, while others are more markedly Gentile. The growth of the earliest Christian communities was neither linear nor monochrome. They grew haphazardly, chaotically and without discernible structure – at least at first. It is the aim of this study to sketch out the complexity of the development *into* church that marks the first century CE.

One of the challenges for those attempting to recover the details of how the earliest Christian communities grew is to find ways of piecing together the information that we possess. The methodological challenges that arise here are common to much New Testament scholarship. For many years one of the favourite methods of approach was through word study. The most influential of such approaches is Kittel's famous *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, which is based upon the attempt to understand and reconstruct early theological ideas using the theologically significant (Greek) words found in the New Testament.¹ In 1965, however, James Barr pointed out the severe shortcomings of this approach.² One of his major criticisms was that the work of the dictionary is in the realm of

‘concept history’ and yet it deals solely with words. The word *ekklēsia* illustrates the problem he identifies. Although the word *ekklēsia* is vital for understanding how the early church developed, to look only at this word and no other would deliver an impoverished picture of what the early church comprised. Furthermore, it is not possible to explain the development of Christian community with primary recourse to this word as its usage is sporadic and inconsistent.

It is important, however, not to allow the pendulum to swing back too far. Barr’s critiques of Kittel are apposite and persuasive but they do not give grounds for discarding word studies entirely. The value of word studies, although limited, remains. Word studies provide a useful foundation which can be built on in further study. Problems lie not in word studies themselves but in assuming that they can provide an entire answer to any given question.

This chapter seeks to illustrate the ways in which New Testament scholarship has attempted to trace the development of the early church and the challenges raised by such attempts. It cannot reconstruct the history of the early church itself – this would require at least three volumes by itself; instead, it looks at some of the ways in which scholars have attempted to undertake the task. This survey is limited and far from exhaustive – for example I have not even attempted to present the vast amount of scholarship on the development of ‘ministry’ in the early church;³ instead, I have sought to present major themes and indicative methodologies of current New Testament scholarship on the subject.

As a result, this chapter falls into two main sections. The first section is an examination of terminology and comprises a word study of the Greek term *ekklēsia* as well as an exploration of other words and phrases used to describe the earliest Christian communities in the various books of the New Testament. This then provides a foundation for the second section, which will seek to illustrate some of the most important areas in the study of early Christian communities in the New Testament period.

Terminology

The use of the word ekklēsia

It is popular to make a lot of the etymology of the word *ekklēsia*. The word is derived from the Greek *ek* = out and *kaleo* = called; thus great emphasis is placed, in some circles, on the ‘church’ being the ‘called out people of God’. There is no evidence in the New Testament, however, that *ekklēsia* is used to mean ‘called out’. This illustrates amply the dangers of using etymology as a way of investing a word with meaning.⁴ The origins of a word do not tell you what it means now. We can only discover this by observing how it is used in context. The word *ekklēsia* has a rich usage in both Greek and Jewish literature but this has no direct link with being ‘called out’.

The word was used commonly in Greek circles to refer to the meeting of all male citizens in Greek cities who gathered together to make decisions about the legislative and judicial welfare of the city.⁵ Luke uses it in this way in Acts to refer both to the lawful gathering of citizens (19.39) and to an unlawful gathering which ‘did not know why they had come together’ (19.32). This indicates that in Acts ‘gathering’ is a primary meaning of the word – not what is done once the gathering has taken place. *Ekklēsia* is also used in Greek translations of Jewish texts to translate the Hebrew word *qahal* and within the Septuagint (LXX) seems to have developed a meaning almost synonymous with *sunagōgē*. As in Greek its primary meaning is assembly.

However, we cannot leave it here. The background of the word indicates that it was often used to describe an activity – assembly – but common New Testament usage indicates that it began to describe not so much an activity as a reality.⁶ In other words, *ekklēsia* could have a meaning whether or not the Christians were actually assembled; thus Paul could talk of the *ekklēsia* of God (e.g. 1 Cor 10.32) as an entity, though at other times it was used to describe an actual gathering of Christians (e.g. Rom 16.5). The most common use of the word is in describing local gatherings but even in this period it was used occasionally in a range of texts to point towards a more abstract reality (see Mt 16.18; Acts 9.31; and Rom 16.23).

But why pick on *ekklēsia* at all? Why not choose an entirely different word? J.T. Burtchaell argues that the words *sunagōgē* and *ekklēsia* began as virtual synonyms, and that the early Christian community adopted *ekklēsia* because *sunagōgē* was already being used by their Jewish compatriots.⁷ Giles takes the argument a little further and demonstrates that the word *sunagōgē* developed in meaning during this period, from meaning 'all Israel as God's covenant community'⁸ to referring to the communities of Jews living outside Palestine and meeting together on a regular basis, and from there to the building in which these communities met. *Ekklēsia* developed in a similar way through Christian history, so that in the post-New Testament era it could be used of the building in which Christians met, as well as the community and the actual act of meeting. The first century CE marks the period of its development and it was only later that its meaning became more fixed. We can see evidence of continuing fluidity in the epistle of James, since 2.2 uses the word *sunagōgē* of what is presumed to be a gathering of Christians. This indicates that the words were not entirely fixed in their use at this point, though it is unusual enough to be surprising.

The problem of the word *ekklēsia* is that it was used in some parts of the New Testament but not in others. It appears in Matthew and Acts but not in Mark, Luke or John; in Paul but not in 1 and 2 Peter, and only occurs once in Hebrews. This indicates that many New Testament writers not only could but did describe the Christian communities known to them using words other than *ekklēsia*. The author of 1 and 2 Peter used many descriptions of the community to which he wrote (1 Pet 2.5–10); even Paul, who did use the word, used other words as well, such as offspring of Abraham (Gal 3.29). Thus *ekklēsia* was used alongside many other words and phrases in the first century to denote Christian communities and, although it was more commonly used than any other description, it was far from being the only one used in this period.

A final issue concerning the word *ekklēsia* is that of translating it into English. It is the custom in modern English translations of the New Testament to render the word *ekklēsia* as church. The problem with this, as Meeks notes, is that is an 'anachronism, which cannot fail to mislead'.⁹ Although, in many instances, Christians had 'begun using the term in a peculiar way that must have been puzzling to any ordinary Greek'¹⁰ it had not yet, in this period, fully developed to the extent that the formal word 'church' can accurately be used for it. Giles notes that the two alternative options for translation are community (followed by Luther and Barth using the German *Gemeinde*) and congregation (followed by Tyndale and the 39 Articles);¹¹ but, as 'congregation' has lost its universal meaning in common parlance, community best renders the meaning of *ekklēsia* today.

This study of the word *ekklēsia* demonstrates the value and the limits of word studies. While a study of the word *ekklēsia* in the New Testament provides us with a helpful way-in to understanding the development into church that took place in the first century CE, it can do no more than point us in the right direction. Over-concentration on words can assume

too monochrome and ‘technical’ a meaning, which as we have demonstrated does not exist for *ekklēsia* in the New Testament era. It can also miss important aspects of a concept. In other words, there is much more to an understanding of the early church than just the word *ekklēsia*; in order to gain a clearer picture it is important to explore images of Christian community in the different New Testament texts.

Other descriptions of Christian communities in the first century

As we have seen, *ekklēsia* is not the only word or phrase used to designate Christian communities in this early period. The use of other images was widespread: Minear estimates that there are more than eighty different images used for the church in the New Testament texts.¹² In what follows, therefore, we shall explore the most important, either in terms of number of times used or in terms of influence.

The gospels

The gospels contain few examples as their prime concern is the life and ministry of Jesus. The communities into which the gospel writers were writing stand as shadowy groups behind the text. It is clear that such communities exist. For example, Kee in his influential book on the *Community of the New Age* noted that all the images used to signify Christian existence in Mark were corporate,¹³ something that indicates that Mark was really talking to a community. However, while these communities exist they are given no titles – other than in Matthew’s gospel where the community is twice addressed as *ekklēsia* – and their existence must be identified and interpreted through a careful reading of the text.¹⁴

Acts of the Apostles

Outside the gospels many more descriptions and/or titles of the early Christian communities can be found. Acts has the most widely differing appellations, from ‘those who believe’ and ‘those who call on the name’ to brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*), saints (*hagioi*), disciples (*mathētai*), Christians (*christianoι*) and ‘the way’ (*ho hodos*), as well as *ekklēsia*.¹⁵ The phrases in English beginning with ‘those who . . .’ all translate participles in Greek and are used to describe the action of the people referred to (having believed, having been saved, having turned to God). These are not so much ‘titles’ as descriptions. The other words are more interesting as they may indicate the way in which the early communities referred to themselves in this period.

Acts is not alone in referring to the early Christians as brothers and sisters.¹⁶ It is widely used in Paul, Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, the Johannine epistles and Revelation. In all of these contexts *adelphoi* is used to refer to fellow believers. If we are seeking an internal title for the early Christians then we need look no further. The sense of community among the earliest Christians was so great that they addressed each other using familial terms. This tradition goes back to Jesus himself who calls his disciples *adelphoi* (Mt 28.10; Jn 20.17) and encourages the disciples to do the same (see for example Lk 22.32). However, this was a common form of address among communities in the first century: Josephus asserts that it was used by the Essene community (*Jewish War* 2:122) and Plato uses it for his compatriots (*Menexenus* 239a). The widespread use of the terms tells us of the close bonds of the early

Christian communities but does not differentiate them in any way from other communities of the period.

Hagioi, normally translated saints, is also widely used in the New Testament and can be found in Acts, Paul, Hebrews, 2 Peter and Revelation. As the term is rare in Attic Greek, this seems to draw upon a Hebrew bible heritage and refers, generally speaking, to those things or people that are set apart for God. In Acts there are times when it appears to be used as a 'category of social and religious identity'.¹⁷ Thus when Ananias is asked by God to take care of Paul (Acts 9.13) he responds that he has heard 'how much evil he has done to your saints [*hagiois*] in Jerusalem'. Revelation also uses the word in this way; the word and its cognates occurs twenty-two times to refer to the 'Holy Ones' who will wait in heaven alongside the Prophets and Apostles. As with *adelphos*, the word is used as an internal title to be used and recognized by those within the Christian community. Another word used in Acts as a term for Christians almost from the start is disciples (*mathētai*). In the gospels the word is used to refer to all those – not just the twelve – who followed Jesus during his ministry (Lk 6.13). It is natural, therefore, that in Acts this word should be used to refer to those who continued to follow Jesus after his ascension into heaven.

Acts is also one of the two books in the New Testament that call the early community 'Christians' (*Christianoi*). This word appears both in Acts (11.26; 26.28) and in 1 Peter (4.16). It is not at all clear where the term came from. The ending *-ianus* is Latin and can be found in other forms such as Galbiani, Augustiani and even Herodiani (rendered in English Herodians). It is used in two different ways. The word Augustiani comes from the time of Nero and is the title given to those 'who attended his [Nero's] athletic and histrionic performances and manifested [whether or not they felt] wild enthusiasm for the great – divine – man'.¹⁸ If the term *Christianoi* is connected to Augustiani then it is almost certainly given from outside and used as a means of describing a group of adherents to this 'Christ'. Alternatively, the word Herodiani refers to the household slaves of the Herodians. Given that Paul regularly describes himself as a 'slave' of Christ, it is also possible that it was first used by the Christians themselves to denote that they are a member of the household of Christ.¹⁹

The word Nazarenes is used once in Acts in the mouth of Tertullus, the advocate who accused Paul before Felix in Acts 24. In verse 5, Tertullus maintains that he is a 'ringleader of the faction of *Nazōraioi*'. Much has been made of the etymology of this word, with little success and it is most likely the word comes from Jesus' place of origin – Nazareth – and that it became used by some for those who followed him.²⁰ Possibly the most intriguing phrase used by the author of Acts is 'The Way'. This designation occurs in various places in Acts (though nowhere else in the New Testament).²¹ As with many of these terms the origin of the phrase is disputed. Barrett argues that the writings from Qumran contain the closest parallels and that here it refers to strict observance of the Mosaic law.²² It is unlikely that this is the meaning in the book of Acts but it does, perhaps, indicate that the earliest Christians were not alone in regarding their community as a way of life or a journey along a road.

The Pauline and deuterio-Pauline Epistles

One of Paul's major images for the church is the body of Christ. The language of being a body was relatively common in the Greek-speaking world. For example, a stoic parable used

the image of a body to argue that all members of a city were dependent upon each other, so that the idle nobility were as essential to the working labourers as the stomach is to the legs and arms.²³ What makes Paul's image unusual, however, is that the body in his writings belongs to someone – Christ. In the Greek imagery the body was an abstract, unnamed body but in Paul the body is the body of Christ, who as the human Jesus was known to many. It is important to recognize, however, that Paul uses this image fluidly. As Minear points out, the 'variety of usage should warn us against seeking to produce a single inclusive definition of the image, and against importing into each occurrence of the analogy the range of meanings which it bears in other passages'.²⁴ The image is and should remain a metaphor, and, like all metaphors, its meaning is not clear, never fixed and certainly not easy to identify.

The author of the epistle to the Ephesians talks about the community in terms of citizenship. In Ephesians 2.12 and 19, the author sets up the imagery of belonging. The recipients of the letter were once strangers (*apēllotriōmenoi*), foreigners (*xenoi*, 2.12) and exiles (*paroikoi*) but now they are citizens (*sumpolitai*), part of the household (*oikeioi*, 2.19) and built on a foundation stone (2.20). The language the author uses here slips between national, local and domestic identity, and even includes references to building. Again, as with *adelphoi*, the imagery bears a strong sense of belonging. Ephesians goes on in this same passage to add yet another image to the three already in place: the citizens, members of the household, are built on the foundation stone of the apostle and prophets with Christ as the cornerstone, so that they can grow into the temple (2.21). Best points out that although the shift in imagery may seem unexpected, the connection is straightforward, since the Jerusalem temple was often called the house of God.²⁵

1 Peter

The author of 1 Peter picks up this imagery, though in a slightly different way. 1 Peter, like Ephesians, identifies the Christian community as the house of God (4.17) and in doing so makes the link with them being God's temple. In 4.17 the phrase *oikou tou theou* refers to God's judgement coming first on the house of God, a concept that in the Hebrew bible almost invariably refers to the temple (see for example Ezek 9.6).²⁶ This link is even more obvious in 2.5–10, where it is clear that the building being built from the living stones is the temple. In 1 Peter 2.9 the author also introduces the concept of national identity, not this time through the Greek imagery of citizenship but through the Hebrew notion of being 'a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people'. The language of this verse depends strongly on both Exodus 19.6 ('you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation') and Isaiah 43.20 ('to give drink to my chosen people'). The language of race (*genos*), priesthood (*hierateuma*), nation (*ethnos*) and people (*laos*) makes it clear that the people of God are now to be found in the followers of Christ. A similar language of belonging can be found in the book of James which addresses its recipients as 'the twelve tribes in the Dispersion'.

This belonging is juxtaposed in 1 Peter with exile. The people are not citizens, as in Ephesians, but aliens (*paroikoi*) and exiles (*parepidēmoi*) (1.1 and 2.11). In 1.1 'exiles' is used alongside the word elect (*elektos*) and dispersion (*diaspora*), stressing that belonging to God means that the Christian community will be treated like exiles.²⁷ Thus in 1 Peter, Christian community involves both belonging and exile.

Revelation

The image of the Bride of Christ is often cited as an influential depiction of the church in the book of Revelation.²⁸ A careful examination of the passage, however, indicates that this is a misreading of the text. The image of the bride begins in 19.7–8 when we are called upon to rejoice because the marriage of the Lamb has come. Here it is clear that the righteous deeds of the saints are the garments worn by the Bride and that those who are invited to the feast are 'blessed' (19.9). The image is picked up again in Revelation 21.1–4 which describes the descent of the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, dressed as a bride for her husband, in v. 27 those who are clean are described as entering it. This image, therefore, cannot be the church itself and is probably, as Smalley argues, the New Covenant.²⁹

This is yet one more instance of the importance of taking each text on its own merit. The connection between Revelation 21 and the church almost certainly came through other New Testament passages. For example, in 2 Corinthians 11.2 Paul states that he promised the Corinthians 'in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ' and in Ephesians 5.22–25 the analogy that the wife is to her husband as the church is to Christ again suggests the metaphor of marriage. This connection has prompted people to pick up the same connection in Revelation 21 though this time with less support from the text.

Conclusions on terminology

The overall impression of early Christian communities gained from our exploration so far is one of fluidity. Although the word *ekklēsia* is widely used in the New Testament texts, it is not used in every part of the New Testament nor is it used in the same way in the places where it is used. In fact, the New Testament seems to bear witness that the word is changing in meaning during the first century itself. It was probably first used as an alternative to synagogue to differentiate what the early Christians did when they met together from what their Jewish neighbours did when they met together. Most of the times when the word is used it refers to a specific local community, though from time to time it is used to refer to a more universal phenomenon, the 'church of God'. Nowhere in the New Testament does the word *ekklēsia* mean the building in which the assembly met (not least because there is no evidence that such buildings existed in the first century), in contrast to the word synagogue in the first century which does seem to be used to refer to the building of the synagogue (see for example Mt 12.9, 'He left that place and entered their synagogue'). The word *ekklēsia* does develop to mean this later in the Christian era but has not done so in the first century.

Alongside the word *ekklēsia* a whole range of words exist to describe Christian communities. Some of these appear to be titular but many of them are metaphorical and/or descriptive. Acts contains the greatest number of possible 'titles' for the earliest communities, whereas the epistles use more metaphors. One of the striking features of the metaphors is that they too seem fluid in this period and either change in their usage (as with the body of Christ) or slip from one metaphor to another (as with the citizen, household, temple image of Ephesians). It appears, therefore, that the early Christians were fumbling to find words and images to describe themselves both internally and externally. Some of the words used survived and became dominant in the tradition; others did not.

This exploration of terminology has provided an initial sketch of the development into church that took place in the first century CE. This sketch now needs to be filled in a little more through a historical exploration of what might have happened to move the earliest

disciples from disparate followers of Jesus to more coherent and structured communities towards the end of the first century CE.

Tracing the history of the earliest Christian communities

Methodological difficulties

The task of tracing the history of the earliest Christian communities is a little like trying to describe, in a single narrative, the path of twenty rubber balls thrown into the air and left to bounce wherever they come down. Even to attempt to describe the ‘development’ of early Christian community presupposes a greater degree of uniformity than is probably true. It is simply not the case that the ‘church’ developed in a linear manner from the moment of Pentecost to present-day worshipping communities. We have seen already that ‘Pentecost’ cannot be claimed to be the birthday of the ‘church’ anymore than ‘church’ can properly be used as a title for Christian communities in this era. The task of the next part of the study is to explore what we can know historically about Christian communities in this period and to attempt to map some sort of development ‘into’ church.

The difficulties of this task are rooted in the perennial problems which beset New Testament scholarship in all areas of first-century reconstruction, and are related to the fragmentary nature of the evidence we have available.³⁰ The New Testament provides us with numerous snapshots of life in early Christian communities but what is unclear is what, if anything, connects these snapshots. So, for example, we know from Acts 19 that there was a community in Ephesus. We also know that a letter in the Pauline tradition (whether or not it was by Paul is disputed by scholars) was written to the community at Ephesus. In addition, certain scholars believe that the Johannine literature – or a least parts of it – originated from a community based in Ephesus. What we do not know, however, is whether the community baptized into Jesus by Paul and addressed in the epistle to the Ephesians was the same community as the Johannine community or a rival to it. There is no evidence at all to guide us in making a decision about this. Just as we do not know anything about historical, developmental connections between communities, we also know nothing about the uniform (or otherwise) adoption of practices. For example, in 1 Corinthians 11 Paul makes what has become an influential statement about the celebration of the Lord’s Supper which many people today cite as evidence of New Testament practice; but we do not know whether the guidelines laid down by Paul were ever followed either by the Corinthians, the rest of the Pauline communities or by non-Pauline communities. It is quite possible that Paul has a more normative influence on the church in the twenty-first century than he ever did on the first-century communities.

A further methodological problem lies in the fact that, inevitably, we bring to the task of tracing the development of the church biases derived from church traditions and expectations. This has recently been well illustrated by Burtchaell. In his book, Burtchaell surveys the way in which church hierarchy has been interpreted throughout the Christian centuries. He concludes that writers on the subject discuss the structure of the church in conformity with their own views about the Reformation, and goes on to say,

Some because they acknowledge apostolic succession and ordained office as essential to authentic Christianity, have claimed to see enough hints and harbingers of office in the New Testament to verify a radical continuity between the two periods

(and indeed between the polity then and the polity in their present church). Scholars of a contrary loyalty and interpretation have seen a radical discontinuity and have taken the earlier 'unofficered' church as the inspired norm.³¹

Any attempt at historical reconstruction must tread a careful line between these two approaches, recognizing that later Christian tradition does develop out of the seeds found in the first century but that practices, usage of words and so on change radically as Christianity develops.

From Jesus to Pentecost

In recent years, there have been numerous attempts to demonstrate that Paul, not Jesus, was the founder of Christianity.³² The case breaks down, however, in the face of the variety of the New Testament material. Paul may have been hugely influential in the crafting of theological ideas still held by Christians today, but his is not the only voice in the New Testament. The sheer variety and competing claims of earliest Christianity militate against believing that there is a single 'founder' at all. The truth of the claims made by scholars such as B. Mack lies in the fact that Jesus made no obvious attempt to 'found' anything. He was a radical preacher seeking to transform the lives of first-century Jews in Galilee and Judea. The 'founders' of Christianity were those who gathered around the earthly and risen Jesus Christ and sought to communicate what they learnt to all they met. Paul was one of these disciples but not the only one.

Nevertheless the origins of Christianity must be traced back to the person of Jesus. The factor that holds the earliest Christians together is an encounter with Jesus – whether earthly, or risen and ascended. The earliest disciples are characterized by the fact that they gathered around Jesus and took part in what M. Hengel calls the 'messianic task', which is to share the good news of Jesus.³³ As R. Haight puts it, 'Jesus remembered was the object of their experience; and the preaching they took up was Jesus' preaching'.³⁴ Jesus lies at the heart of earliest Christianity; he may not have been its founder, but its foundations are rooted in his person. The major factor that contemporary churches can be said to share with the earliest Christians is the desire to gather around the person and teachings of Jesus Christ.

From Galilee to Antioch

The earliest 'Jesus communities' were made up of Jesus' disciples, both the twelve and the wider group who followed him around during his ministry, and were essentially rural in nature. They largely originated in Galilee and its environs and returned there between Jesus' death and the feast of Pentecost (Mt 28.7, 19, 16; Jn 21.2). The Acts of the Apostles has been understood to imply that from Pentecost onwards there was a single Christian community based in Jerusalem which developed, in a clear manner, outwards from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. New Testament scholarship increasingly recognizes this perception to be untrue. As Cameron and Miller say it 'is no longer possible to posit a monolinear trajectory of development, true to a single, original impulse from which these many different groups must be thought of as divergent'.³⁵ Instead, scholars posit numerous different groups, some of which gave rise to New Testament texts, others of which did not. Of course the problem is evidence – or the lack of it. It is difficult to reconstruct anything of this multiplicity given that Acts appears to tell a story of a single expanding community.³⁶

Logic demands that there were members of the wider band of disciples, who followed Jesus in Galilee, who remained in their home towns and believed in Jesus. The problem is that the canon has preserved texts which are predominantly, possibly even exclusively, non-Palestinian in origin.³⁷ Theissen has attempted to explain this by arguing that as 'a renewal movement within Judaism, the Jesus movement was a failure' and that it succeeded as a result of the more conducive atmosphere of the Hellenistic world.³⁸ This may be true but does not account for the success of the Jesus movement during Jesus' lifetime in precisely the same environment that Theissen considers was not conducive only 20 or so years later. Attempts have been made to identify Galilee as the social setting for the provenance of the hypothetical document 'Q'³⁹ and from this to understand something of the nature of the earliest rural Christian communities.⁴⁰ The problem with this, of course, is that 'Q' is a hypothetical source whose existence is far from universally accepted;⁴¹ it is a fascinating theory but cannot be proved. We do not know whether rural, Galilean Christianity survived or not, but we do know that a number of early communities rapidly became urban, finding roots in Jerusalem, Antioch and many of the cities around the Roman Empire.⁴²

Hellenists and Hebrews

It has been common in New Testament studies to maintain that the single Jerusalem church split into two groups, the Hellenists and the Hebrews, very soon after Pentecost. This view can be traced to F.C. Baur, who described the presence of two opposing parties:⁴³ 'Palestinian Jewish Christians' who were conservative and backward looking and the 'Hellenistic Gentile Christians' who were liberal and forward looking, as Dunn puts it: 'the one holding fast to tradition, the other sitting loose to it in the light of changing circumstances'.⁴⁴ The argument continues that the Hellenistic Christians were members of separate Greek-speaking synagogues and consequently worshipped there, rather than in the Aramaic-speaking synagogues of their Hebraic neighbours. Hengel maintains that it is the Greek language that contributes to the Hellenist distinctiveness and that 'the spirit inspired interpretation of the message of Jesus in the new medium of the Greek language'⁴⁵ was the thing that prompted a widespread purge within the Hellenistic synagogue communities but left the Aramaic-speaking community relatively unscathed. This purge, he believed, caused the Hellenistic Christians to leave Jerusalem for Antioch and in the process transform Christianity into 'an active and successful city religion'. The Hellenistic Christians then initiated a movement, of which Paul was the major protagonist, in which law-free salvation was offered to all and was opposed by the traditional Jewish Christians, of which Peter was the major protagonist, causing a schism at the heart of early Christianity.⁴⁶

C. C. Hill's book, *Hellenists and Hebrews*, effectively demonstrates the flaws in this theory.⁴⁷ As Hill demonstrates, this case is built on very few verses in Acts: the divisions in the early Christian community are derived from Acts 6.1ff and the persecution of the Hellenists, but not the Hebrews, on Acts 8.1–4. Acts 6.1ff offers a single example of tension along the vague lines of 'Hellenists' and 'Hebrews' and while Hengel may well be right that this indicates that they worshipped in different synagogues on the grounds of language there is no further evidence to support the theory that differing language gave rise to a systemic schism in the early Christian communities. Nor is there anything in Acts 8.1–4 to indicate that the selectiveness of persecution was attributable to differing ideologies among the early Christians.

The Jerusalem Council and the 'Schism' of the church

What then was the cause of the dispute which is recorded in Galatians 2 and Acts 15? To begin with we must acknowledge the complexity of unpicking the relevant texts; these two do not fit easily together and establishing a chronology that works with both texts is almost impossible.⁴⁸ Hill proposes that it is possible to discern three separate but interrelated incidents here. The first, the Jerusalem council, circles around circumcision and whether Gentile Christians ought to be circumcised in order to gain access to Christ. The answer given is clear: Gentiles should not be required to be circumcised (Gal 2.7–9). This may not have been the radical decision that it sounded. It seems possible that there was a variety of practice about circumcision even among Jewish communities at this stage. An interesting example is Timothy who, though having a Jewish mother, had not been circumcised at birth. The next event recorded in Galatians 2.11–14 but not in Acts concerns table fellowship. It is all very well to say that Gentiles do not need to be circumcised but what then happens about eating together? When it became clear, therefore, that Jews and Gentiles were eating together, further instructions seem to have been sent from Jerusalem which were then adopted by Peter, Barnabas and the other Jews in Antioch. The only person in disagreement about this seems to have been Paul, who was outraged by what he saw to be Peter's duplicity. Hill, following Haenchen and a number of other scholars, sees Acts 15.20 and 29 as another episode in the dispute in which a compromise position, the Apostolic or Jerusalem decree, was reached between the Jewish and Gentile communities.⁴⁹

Hill argues, in my view persuasively, that it does not represent a split between 'conservative Jewish Christianity' and 'liberal Gentile Christianity'. Instead, it was an attempt to work out in practice what it means to be a follower of Jesus. If Hill is correct, what happened was that persecution caused all but the apostles to flee Jerusalem and as a result the message of Jesus became more widely available to Gentiles, especially once Paul began his mission. As Gentiles began to become followers of Christ the first question was whether they should be circumcised. The second question was, if they are not circumcised, what happens about table fellowship. What is unclear is what the outcome of this was. If Haenchen and others are correct and the Apostolic or Jerusalem decree (Acts 15.20, 29) did follow the Antioch incident, then a compromise position was reached – at least temporarily, because it becomes an issue again in Corinth (1 Cor 8.1ff). If not, we are left with a resounding silence from Peter who though upbraided by Paul in Galatians 2 is not recorded as having responded to him. Nevertheless, it is too simplistic to assume an unhealed schism that took place after these incidents. 1 Corinthians 16.1 indicates that Paul had requested both the Galatians and the Corinthians to collect money for the church in Jerusalem, which he proposes to send on to them in due course. This is not the action of someone 'in schism' from the Jerusalem church, rather one who despite differences is determined to maintain a link with other Christian communities at the time.

There is not, therefore, a split between liberal and conservative early Christians, but a range of opinion worked out in the face of practical problems. We see at least three, if not more, positions held. There is the church in Jerusalem who, after discussion, were willing to give up the demand that Christians be circumcised but wanted to insist on the restriction of table fellowship; the Jewish Christians in Antioch who at first adapted to change by eating with the Gentiles but were then swayed by the Jerusalem delegation; and Paul who was passionate about the inclusion of Gentiles but maintained other aspects of Jewish law such as laws about sex and idolatry.⁵⁰ All maintained the importance of Jewish law. The question

was not whether it should be maintained but in what form. The conflicts we observe taking place in these communities were about how one adapts to change and whether one should hold fast more to principle or to inclusion. We should remind ourselves that this dispute included only three voices – the Jerusalem Christians, the Antiochene Christians and Paul. We have no idea what other Christian communities thought of this dispute – nor even if they were aware of it.

Community

The above discussion has highlighted the importance for the early church of eating together and brings us to the concept of community in the early church. A common portrayal of the early Christian communities has been that Christianity began among the poor and dispossessed. For example, A. Deissmann says that the 'New Testament was not a product of the colourless refinement of an upper class. . . . On the contrary, it was, humanly speaking, a product of the force that came, unimpaired and strengthened by the Divine Presence, from the lower class'.⁵¹ From there the early Christians developed the radical economic community represented in Acts 2–5 in which they sold all they possessed and shared their profits equally. Only at a later date did the wealthy gain any particular role in early Christianity.⁵²

This, again, is too monochrome a portrayal of the earliest communities. It is quite clear from the gospels that some of the earliest followers of Jesus had sufficient financial security for them to support Jesus and his followers (Lk 8.2–3). Furthermore, the Acts account of the radical economic community adopted by the disciples in Jerusalem demonstrates how difficult this was to maintain: Ananias famously struggled to declare all he had (Acts 5.1–5); in Acts 6, we discover that the Hellenists feel that their widows are being neglected in the distribution; and in Acts 12.12 a report of Peter going 'to the house of Mary, the mother of John' implies that this house had not been sold and shared as others had been. Economic community was not without its problems even then. These problems do not undermine the importance of this strand of early Christianity, as the concept of radical poverty can still be found as an ideal in the *Didache*.⁵³ The reality may have been difficult to maintain but the ideal persisted nonetheless.

While one strand of early Christianity was probably rooted among the poor and dispossessed, another was rooted across the boundaries of class and wealth. In recent years, considerable work has been done on the social context of Corinth as a model for understanding the sociology of early Hellenistic Christianity.⁵⁴ A new consensus is now emerging among scholars that suggests that although the lower classes played an important part in the early Christian communities, it is much more likely that these communities represent a cross-section of society and that the tensions we see in the Corinthian communities stemmed from the inequality of power that arose in such a mixed community.⁵⁵ R. Stark backs this up from an entirely different perspective. His statistical exploration of persecution in the first century indicates that, although terrible when it happened, it was not widespread enough to be systematic. This he attributes to the wealthy and powerful members of the earliest communities whose influence would have 'mitigated repression and persecution'.⁵⁶

Table fellowship and baptism

In Corinth one of the places in which tensions in community emerged was during the sharing of table fellowship (1 Cor 11.17–34). It seems that the sharing of table fellowship

lies at the very centre of the earliest communities. Table fellowship, however, was more broadly conceived in the early church than it is in the church today and encompassed the early Christian habit of sharing a common meal, as well as a symbolic remembrance of Jesus' last supper with his disciples and his practice of breaking bread and giving thanks. Burtchaell's reconstruction of the development of worship in early Christianity suggests that table fellowship is *the* central moment of gathering among the earliest Christians. Burtchaell proposes that, to start with, the earliest Christians took a full part in the worship of temple and synagogue. But, he argues,

during those earliest days of community stress, the only worship situation where they might arrange to find themselves exclusively in sympathetic company was at the domestic Sabbath suppers. It was inevitable that those suppers would become the treasured occasions for worship among the Jesus people. They would and did also serve as the most appropriate occasions to evoke the Lord's death and his suppers with the disciples before and afterwards.⁵⁷

This seems to be born out by Acts 2.46 ('Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts'). It is in this context, then, that we can begin to understand more about the stresses and strains to the earliest communities brought about by the Jerusalem council and the Antioch incident. The decision that Gentiles did not have to be circumcised in order to be a part of the new covenant solved some problems but raised many more. If the primary moment of meeting together involved food, how then would Jews meet with fellow followers of Christ who were not Jewish? The question of table fellowship would in this context run right through the middle of early Christian communities. If the central act of the remembering of Christ became impossible then the communities would face profound levels of division.

Although this does not seem to be an issue in Corinth, another has become important there (1 Cor 11.17–34). Here the table fellowship had become more concerned with table than fellowship. Theissen's reconstruction of the problem is compelling. He argues that the rich were enjoying food of better quality and quantity than the poorer members of the community.⁵⁸ Whatever the initial problem, Paul's response suggests a development/change in the significance of table fellowship. In 1 Corinthians 11.22 he suggests that they should eat and drink at home and in 11.34 that if they are hungry they should eat first. Thus the community meal becomes more about fellowship than it does about eating; it is the meeting together to remember Jesus that is the most important. Nevertheless there is no evidence at all that, as R. Jewitt somewhat provocatively puts it, the 'purely symbolic meal of modern Christianity, restricted to a bite of bread and sip of wine or juice' had any place at all in the first-century gatherings of Jesus' followers.⁵⁹

Alongside table fellowship, another important act of the earliest communities was baptism: a practice which, like table fellowship, found its roots in the life and ministry of Jesus. There is ample evidence that baptism was practised within the early communities in most strands of early Christianity (see Mt 28.19; Jn 3.22–26; Acts 2.38–41; 1 Cor 1.14). Just as gathering together, sharing food and breaking bread can be traced back to the disciples' life together with Christ, so also baptism can be traced back to the time of Jesus. These symbolic actions are as vivid a link to the historical Jesus as the stories of the teaching and life of Jesus were, if not more so. Theissen maintains that both baptism and Lord's Supper had a stage of development that took place in the first century. At first they were simply

symbolic recollections of the actions of John and Jesus but later, in the theology of Paul, became associated with the death of Jesus.⁶⁰

Households and synagogues

One of the contrasts between the Jerusalem and Antioch churches, and those of Paul, may lie in the way in which they were constituted. Burtchaell believes that the predominantly Jewish communities developed alongside synagogues as a particular expression of Jewish faith and worship, whereas Meeks identifies the household as the primary formative influence. It may well be that in all the diversity of the first century both are correct.

Burtchaell's theory is that the early Christian communities developed alongside their Jewish counterparts until this was simply no longer possible. He notes that Meyers and Strange could find no physical archaeological identifiers of Christianity until the fourth or fifth century. Thus 'a study of the earliest Christian remains in Palestine means studying Jewish remains'.⁶¹ The implication of this is that Christian self-definition was not sufficient in this period to leave behind archaeological remains that were clearly Christian, as opposed to Jewish. Burtchaell goes on to argue that in large cities such as Jerusalem and Alexandria there were enough synagogues to allow groups (e.g. Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes) each to have their own synagogues, but in small towns and cities of the Diaspora there would have had to be only one synagogue.

In this setting the early Christians would have been viewed as yet one more 'group' and would have vigorously argued their case about the true interpretation of scripture with their fellow Jews until common existence became no longer possible. Burtchaell's theory is that then they would have taken the structures and patterns of worship from the synagogue into their own exclusively Christian situations of worship. Hence his theory about table fellowship, explored above: they would have begun meeting together to eat, share stories about Jesus' life and read out letters from influential people such as Paul, but would have worshipped at the synagogue; only when they could no longer go to the synagogue would they have brought the synagogue practices into their own Christian setting.⁶²

Meeks argues that the primary point of contact (and therefore of mission) was not the synagogue but the household: '[o]ur sources give us good reason to think that it [the household] was the basic unit in the establishment of Christianity in the city, as it was, indeed, the basic unit of the city itself'.⁶³ If Meeks is right, then at least in the Pauline communities there was a double network of relationships: a vertical one between the *paterfamilias* (head of the household) and the rest of the members of the household, and a horizontal one linking households together across the city. This structure would have formed community relationships and given missionary opportunities. Although Meeks acknowledges that synagogues, voluntary associations and philosophic or rhetorical schools all had influence in the forming of Christian community, he believes that it was the household that was most formative.

The positions of Burtchaell and Meeks may both be right. When the early Christians gathered together, even at the earliest stage, to share table fellowship apart from the synagogue, it would have been in a household. The rate at which they wore out their welcome at their local synagogue would have varied, probably in direct proportion to how many Gentile Christians there were in the community. So in some communities, like Jerusalem, where separate synagogues were possible, the synagogue model of '*ekklēsia*' may well have had a greater influence than in places where Christians stopped going to the synagogue at a relatively early date.

This moment of 'eviction' from synagogue seems to have had greater impact on some early communities than on others. Scholars see behind the writing of Matthew and John the scars of communities struggling to come to terms with the parting of the ways between the 'Jewish' and 'Christian' communities.⁶⁴ This 'parting of the ways' is long, drawn out and ill defined. Some groups within Christianity may have withdrawn or been evicted from the synagogue relatively early on in the first century, but others continued as Jews for a long time. In fact recent research suggests that even in the second century there is evidence of interdependency between Judaism and Christianity. This raises the question of whether the terms 'Judaism' 'Christianity' and 'parting of the ways' can be accurately used at all in this period.⁶⁵ As with the word 'church' they point to a reality that came into existence well after our period. Here, as with many other themes that we have explored, the answer varies from community to community, but our evidence remains so scant that it is very difficult to produce a reliable reconstruction of how it happened.

Christian self-definition does not seem to have been achieved in many Christian communities in the first century CE. The lack of boundaries between the early Jesus movement and their Jewish neighbours does not mean that boundaries did not exist. Both Paul, in 1 Corinthians 5.1–13, and Matthew 18.17 speak of the exclusion of members from the community. In Paul this was on the grounds of incest and in Matthew on the grounds of ignoring the community. This indicates that even fairly early on in the first century attempts were made to draw some boundaries around the communities, even if they are not where we might expect them to be.

Conclusions on tracing the history of early communities

The traditional scholarly view, that a single Christian community based in Jerusalem spread outwards first to Antioch and then to other Roman cities as a result of the persecution of Hellenistic Christians, seems no longer sustainable. Although we are hampered by lack of sources, the development of early Christian communities seems much more varied and less systematic than has been traditionally assumed. Some rural Palestinian communities drop silently out of view, but not necessarily out of existence. Other Hellenistic communities struggled with the practical issues of the mission to the Gentiles, while the communities with a higher proportion of Jewish Christians struggled to come to terms with the choices the Hellenistic communities made. There is little evidence for absolute schism and more evidence for conflict, compromise and debate. It is likely that both the synagogue and the household influenced the development of Christian community but in different measure depending on the particular community. While some communities withdrew or were evicted from the Jewish synagogue, others did not and continued their allegiance into the second century CE and beyond. The search for the 'church' of the New Testament can feel a little like the search for the Holy Grail: romantic, desirable, but ultimately impossible. We can tell a little of individual communities and certain points in the first century but how – indeed if – they all relate to each other globally and chronologically remains unclear.

Overall conclusions

The aim of this chapter has not been to recover the development of 'the early church' as such but rather to point to the major trends of scholarship in the area. There are three main ways of exploring early ecclesiology: through word studies, through looking at Christian

community in each New Testament book, and through attempting to recover the history of Christianity in the first century. I have attempted to represent each of these strands, however briefly. Each strand contributes something to the task. Word studies allow one to focus closely on a single area but can exclude important information; a book by book approach gives broad coverage but no indication of connections between communities; and a historical/sociological approach gives connections but has insufficient data available to provide a full picture. Furthermore the ideal, particularly of Acts, of presenting a linear development from the Ascension of Christ to Paul's arrival at Rome obscures much of the diversity of the period.

Our search so far has delivered certain key features. Although the major New Testament texts present a picture of uniformity, beneath these lie indications of diversity. There were numerous ways of describing early communities and numerous experiences of developing within and alongside Judaism. What we can tell of one community is not necessarily true of all communities. Nevertheless there were intimations in this period that communities were not regarded entirely in isolation and that there was an abstract reality which could be termed – by some at least – the *ekklēsia* of God. The word study, book by book exploration of descriptions, and historical/sociological exploration all show a diverse church which in this period is growing towards, but does not reach, a sense of self-definition and which certainly does not have a monochrome sense of what this might be.

Challenges for the future are many. More work is needed on the best methodologies to employ to help us 'recover' an understanding of early Christian community; and we need further exploration of how we tell a story of such diversity in any kind of coherent way. Add into this the need for an understanding of how second order issues such as ministry, liturgy, etc. varied from community to community, and the challenges to future scholarship become vast. A further challenge to ecclesiologists also emerges from this work. Most ecclesiologies begin with an exploration of the early church as a model for reflection on the historical or current church; this study has raised the question of how possible this is. If the early Christian communities were diverse in their expression of faith and identity what does that do to attempts to locate ideas and practices in the 'early church'? What it means is that those who hope to find order and hierarchy in the early church are able to do so and those who hope to find fluidity and equality can also do so. This should alert us to the fact that the church in the first Christian century was as varied as it is today and that discerning models of order in the first century may not be as definitive as we might think.

Notes

- 1 G. Kittel et al., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965.
- 2 J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961.
- 3 The development of ministry in the early church is a second order issue and one so large it is impossible to do it justice here. See Chapter 31 of this volume for a more detailed treatment of ministry in general.
- 4 The point that James Barr famously made in Barr, *Semantics*.
- 5 See discussion in E. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996, p. 130; W.A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd edn., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 108; K.L. Schmidt, 'Ekklesia', in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel et al., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965, pp. 501–36, at pp. 513–17.
- 6 See K. Giles, *What on Earth is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995, p. 240.

- 7 James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, esp. p. 345.
- 8 Giles, *What on Earth is the Church?*, p. 240.
- 9 Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, p. 108.
- 10 Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, p. 108.
- 11 See Giles, *What on Earth is the Church?*, pp. 241–3.
- 12 P.S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1960, p. 28.
- 13 H.C. Kee, *Community of the New Age: Studies in Mark's Gospel*, New Testament Library, London: SCM, 1977, p. 107.
- 14 The reconstruction of gospel communities is one of the most important strands of current New Testament scholarship, though this consensus is beginning to be challenged; see Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998.
- 15 Cadbury suggested that there were nineteen different words and phrases used for the Christian community in Acts (H.J. Cadbury, 'Names for Christians and Christianity in Acts', in *The Beginnings of Christianity*, ed. K. Lake et al., London: Macmillan, 1933).
- 16 It is clear that the author of Acts intends this term to be inclusive: in Acts 16:40 Paul and Silas went to Lydia's house and encouraged 'the brothers' there and it is hard to believe that Lydia would be excluded by this term.
- 17 R. Hodgson, 'Holiness', in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. D.N. Freedman, New York: Doubleday, 1992, pp. 249–54, at p. 251.
- 18 C.K. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, The International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, p. 556.
- 19 This would be supported by Bickerman's argument that *chrēmatisō* (were called) is better translated as 'assume the name' or 'styled themselves' (E.J. Bickerman, 'The Name of Christians', *Harvard Theological Review* 42 (1949), 109–24).
- 20 See discussion in Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 1098.
- 21 See 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.
- 22 Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 448.
- 23 See Titus Livius, *Ab Urbe Condita* 2.32.
- 24 Minear, *Images of the Church*, p. 174.
- 25 E. Best, *Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998, 287–88.
- 26 See discussion in P.J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996, pp. 315–16.
- 27 For the definitive discussion of the use of term alien in 1 Peter see J.H. Elliott, *A Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter, Its Situation and Strategy*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981.
- 28 See for example Minear, *Images of the Church*, p. 55.
- 29 S. Smalley, *The Revelation to John*, London: SPCK, 2005, p. 536.
- 30 'The basic problem in writing a history of early Christianity lies in the fragmentariness of the sources and the haphazard way in which they have survived', M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, London: SCM, 1979, p. 3.
- 31 Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, p. 274.
- 32 See for example M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God*, Cambridge: Clarke, 1991; B. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*, New York: HarperCollins, 1993; G. Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*, London: SCM, 1993.
- 33 M. Hengel, 'The Origins of Christian Mission', in *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, ed. M. Hengel, London: SCM, 1983, p. 62.
- 34 R. Haight, *Christian Community in History*, 2 vols, vol. 1, New York and London: Continuum, 2004, p. 72.
- 35 R. Cameron and M.P. Miller, 'Introduction: Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins', in *Redescribing Christian Origins*, eds R. Cameron and M.P. Miller, Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2004, p. 20.
- 36 Scholars such as D.E. Smith have gone so far as to argue that the first-century church in Jerusalem is a Lukan fiction.
- 37 A possible exception to this is the epistle of James, which if written by James the brother of Jesus could have found its origin in Jerusalem.

- 38 G. Theissen, *The First Followers of Jesus, A Sociological Analysis of the Earliest Christianity*, London: SCM, 1978, p. 112.
- 39 'Q' is the explanation that many scholars give for the remarkable overlap that exists between Matthew, Mark and Luke. They propose that the three gospel writers had a common source which they used in the creation of their gospels; this they call 'Q'.
- 40 See J.S. Kloppenborg Verbin, *Excavating Q: The History and Setting of the Sayings Gospel*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2000.
- 41 See M. Goodacre, *The Case against Q*, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002.
- 42 Important here is the work of Meeks, *First Urban Christians*.
- 43 See discussion in C.C. Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews, Reappraising Division within the Earliest Church*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991, pp. 5–9.
- 44 J.D.G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, London: SCM, 1977, p. 275.
- 45 Original italics, M. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul. Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity*, London: SCM, 1983, p. 24.
- 46 Though Hengel points out that Peter was not Paul's real opponent but acted as a mediator between Judaists and Gentile Christians (Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, p. 92).
- 47 Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews*.
- 48 See the extensive discussion in Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews*, pp. 103–47, for a full treatment of the issues.
- 49 Hill, *Hellenists and Hebrews*, pp. 143–6.
- 50 For a full discussion of the place of Jewish law in the early church see M. Bockmuehl, *Jewish Law in Gentile Churches: Halakhah and the Beginning of Christian Public Ethics*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2000.
- 51 A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient near East*, London: 1927, p. 144, cited in G. Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity, Essays on Corinth*, trans. J.H. Schutz, Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 1982, p. 69.
- 52 For a discussion of some of the motivations that lie behind this position see A. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity*, Philadelphia, 1983, pp. 4–13.
- 53 See particularly 11 and 13.
- 54 The most influential arguments can be found in Meeks, *First Urban Christians*; Theissen, *Social Setting*; and David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996.
- 55 For a full discussion of the issues see Horrell, *Social Ethos*, pp. 63–125.
- 56 R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 46.
- 57 Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, p. 285.
- 58 Theissen, *Social Setting*, pp. 147–62.
- 59 R. Jewitt, 'Tenement Churches and Pauline Love Feasts', *Quarterly Review* 14 (1993), 42–58, at 44.
- 60 G. Theissen, *The Religion of the Earliest Churches: Creating a Symbolic World*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999, p. 124.
- 61 E.M. Meyers and J.F. Strange, *Archaeology, the Rabbis, & Early Christianity*, Nashville: Abingdon, 1981, p. 169 (cited in Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, p. 275).
- 62 Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church*, pp. 272–338.
- 63 Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, p. 29.
- 64 See discussions in R.E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979 and G. Stanton, 'The Communities of Matthew', in *Gospel Interpretation: Narrative-Critical & Social-Scientific Approaches*, ed. J. D. Kingsbury, Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997, pp. 49–64.
- 65 For a full discussion of the issues see A.H. Becker and A.Y. Reed, *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 95, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003.

Further reading

- Adam H. Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed. *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*. Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism 95; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003.
- James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- R. Cameron and M.P. Miller (eds), *Redescribing Christian Origins*. Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2004.
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THE CHURCH IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CENTURIES

Ecclesiological consolidation

G.R. Evans

It is recorded that believers in Jesus Christ were first called Christians at Antioch (Acts 11.26). These first 'Christians' saw themselves as followers of a person, Jesus Christ. Jesus' ministry had been spent in the company of a group of disciples who had followed him, but it was a very different matter for that group to 'constitute' itself after his death. The transition of thinking which taught them to regard themselves as a community and to begin to define the nature and purpose of that community and work out how it should conduct its affairs is not fully mapped in the New Testament. What happened in the next few centuries to clarify matters revealed a series of tugs and strains in the fabric. Not the least of these was the gradual divergence of ways of thinking in the Eastern and Western halves of the ageing Roman Empire as the two language communities of Greek and Latin speakers pulled apart, eventually to diverge so completely that for a thousand years after the Empire fell very few writers would be able to command both languages, let alone understand the subtle cultural differences they expressed.

The church lived its first centuries in chronological order, of course, but it did not crystallize its thinking generation by generation in an orderly way. Topics presented themselves episodically, because someone asked an awkward question or the political situation in the late Roman world shifted, so that it is likely to be easier to understand the emergence of the key ideas by taking them thematically.

In what follows the first group of questions considered are those which had to do with deciding who made up the church, what constituted membership and whether it could ever be possible to know for sure who God himself considered to belong. The following sections look at the meaning of baptism as an entry qualification and what the church did about those who were baptized and then lapsed from the faith, but later wanted to return to the church. It concludes with the challenges presented by the Pelagians, who questioned the need for baptism as a means of cleansing the individual of original sin and as a consequence threw baptismal theology into a new crisis.

The second section of this chapter deals with the emerging arrangements by which the church came to run itself as an institution. It continued to believe itself to be a vehicle and instrument of God's free-acting grace but it found it needed to think about organization. We

look first at the idea of holding councils, which began as early as New Testament times. Then comes the relationship of church and state; the relationship between the local and the universal churches; the development of a recognized structures for ministries and a system of ordination; the place of sacramental and pastoral duties in the theology of ministry; provinces and primacy; the maintenance of the faith, with the role of creeds and the ministry of the Word. The chapter ends with a consideration of the relationship between faith and order in the theology of the church, and the problems caused by heresy and schism.

Theology and practice

Throughout this early formative period there was both a 'daily life' of the community to be arranged and a developing sense that the church was something higher and deeper. One of the most important ecclesiological ideas, which only really crystallized in the second half of the twentieth century under the stimulus of the ecumenical movement, is that the church is first and foremost a 'communion' (*koinonia*). In the Western tradition 'communion' is 'fellowship', in the sense of friendly sharing of a common life with mutual support. This sort of 'fellowship' language in Latin is exemplified in Hilary of Poitiers' (c. 315–67/8) talk of the *fideliū coetus* (In Ps. 131.23, CSEL, 22, p. 680). Communion is also seen in the West as a mystical union of Christians with one another and with Christ. For example, the ninth article of the Apostle's Creed, a Western document, speaks of the *communio sanctorum*. But the conception of a mystical communion was to become far more refined and sophisticated in the Greek tradition because the heritage of late Platonic mysticism remained alive and growing there. The 'spiritual' approach continued to be central in the Eastern half of the Roman Empire after the Council of Nicaea had put its mind to some ecclesiological matters. Cyril of Jerusalem explained for the benefit of catechumens that the church is a spiritual society (Cat. 18.22–28). It is a safe sheepfold for all kinds of people. That is why it is called 'catholic' (universal). Cyril was not discussing the complex problems about the institutional structure of the church which had been debated in the Latin-speaking West in the previous century, especially in Africa in the time of Cyprian (Cyprian died a martyr in a period of persecution in 258). Cyril's outline ideas are far from superficial, but their profundity is in the area of 'mystery' and they do not lend themselves to rational analysis. Cyril's line was followed by subsequent Eastern writers, such as John Chrysostom (c. 347–407). Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) emphasized the importance of unity of faith as the marker of the 'oneness' of the church (In Psalmo 44.10, PG 69.1042). Gregory of Nazianzus (329/30–89/90) describes this mystical making one with Christ not only of the individual believer but of the community of believers, as a 'new mystery'.

Alongside this 'spiritual' notion of the nature of the church its daily realities had to be lived. There are plentiful indications from the New Testament onwards that the 'fellowship' of the common life was frequently disrupted by disagreements, particularly over details of practice, but also about the shared beliefs of the community. The mystical union was threatened by arguments about who was 'in' and who was 'out of' the community, and whether those who had left could be admitted back in and on what terms. The church was engaged in trying to explain itself to itself through these debates. From the distance of two thousand years it is possible to observe the interaction of theory and the urgencies of the problem-solving needed to keep the community together. It is important to remember how much harder it was for those living through these events to take this kind of sage overview.

The disputes about membership

Charism and the invisible church

Was the Christian's relationship with Christ going to be first and foremost a matter for the solitary individual within his or her own soul, a personal relationship, or was it to involve membership of a community with others? Jesus had summed up the Ten Commandments in terms of the dual expectation that the believer should love God wholeheartedly and love his neighbour as himself (Mk 12.33). When Jesus sent out his disciples two by two (Mk 6.7) and promised his disciples that the prayer on which two agreed to ask for some particular thing, would be answered (Mt 18.19), he was later taken to be laying down norms. The individual's love of God was to have a context in the relations within the community and his or her activities were to be subject to its expectations. John the Baptist had been a lone and somewhat wild figure, but he was seen as having a divinely-appointed place in the providential plan. It is stated that Philip's baptism of the eunuch he found reading the book of Isaiah in his chariot (Acts 8.26–39) was directly prompted by the Holy Spirit. This baptism took place by the roadside and not in church, but it was not the act of a breakaway rebel. Indeed Philip was one of the seven men of honest reputation who were given special responsibility for making sure that the practical requirements of the widows and needy were not neglected by the community of believers (Acts 6.5).

That did not mean that 'individualists' did not exist and sometimes cause problems, when they believed themselves to be directly guided by the Holy Spirit and did not consult fellow-Christians. There were some who seem to have felt free to develop their teaching independently, without reference to the community as a whole. 'Charismatics' who believed the Holy Spirit spoke to them directly and were not willing to submit their views to revision or correction by the community could be dangerous to the continuing unity of the church, for forming consensus was not their way.

Such individuals prompted the crisis which is recorded in Acts 15.1. They came down from Judaea and were teaching Christians in other places that they would have to be circumcised as Moses had instructed or they could not be saved. This challenge was addressed (Acts 15.2–27) by holding a meeting of the community, which was later construed as a primitive 'council', with the various opinions being put to the whole community until agreement was reached. The 'ruling' or 'decree' was to be disseminated by chosen and trusted individuals and it was to carry the authority of the apostles and elders at Jerusalem 'with the whole church'.

This early emergence of an 'orderly' means of making decisions in matters of faith and maintaining and preaching the faith was going to be of central importance. From it would develop the whole complex structure of the institutional church designed to protect 'unity of faith' within an 'order' and eventually a structure. In this episode are to be glimpsed hints of the emergence of important principles: that decisions should be taken by consensus, and involve the whole community; that the community needed leaders and that it was going to be important that they should be properly authorized and their role and authority made clear; that not only this question of continuing with circumcision but many other things were going to need to be considered for acceptance or rejection as essential to the Christian life; and that it was also going to be necessary to decide what could and could not be a legitimate variation of practice from place to place.

All this pointed to the need to be clear who was 'inside' the church and who was not. It turned out that this was not at all easy to answer.

If God wished to speak to individuals in the person of the Holy Spirit he must be free to choose how and when and to whom he did so. Grace is essentially a free gift. God could 'accept' an individual if he chose (Rom 1.5, Rom 12.6–8). Divine grace could not be impotent to work directly to achieve the effects of baptism, forgiving sins. And, conversely, even if someone was baptized, even if someone was in a position of leadership in the church, it could not be taken for granted that such a person was accepted by God. Although the Holy Spirit was believed to 'work' at the moment of baptism to free the person baptized of sin and its consequences, he could not be constrained or obliged to do so. Nor could it be taken for granted, it was quickly realized, that those appointed to be elders or ministers would always be worthy. The Holy Spirit was believed to act in ordinations through the laying on of hands (cf. Acts 13.3). Under persecution many thus ordained fled from their pastoral duties or apostatized.

Someone with genuine 'gifts of the Spirit' must surely be thought to enjoy some form of 'membership' of the church, even if the individual thus favoured had not been baptized. Tertullian took some first steps towards defining grace and its operations, but the subject was first fully explored by Augustine, partly as a consequence of his dispute with the Pelagians, which we shall come to in a moment. This 'Western' context helped to ensure that the vocabulary and concepts were more refined in the Latin half of the Roman Empire than in the half that did its theology in Greek and whose theology and spiritual life were already beginning to take on a different style and flavour as a consequence.

Augustine's position on all this was in some respects paradoxical. He held that the Holy Spirit cannot be received outside the church (Sermon 267.4 and 268.2) and that there was no salvation outside it (*nulla salus extra ecclesiam*). Yet in *The City of God*, Augustine insisted that the church is invisible, because only God knows who are his own. And they are his own because he has freely chosen them before the world began and before they were created (Rom 8.29). They have no say in his choice and he will never change his preferences. Augustine asserted that the visible church, the community of the baptized and worshipping, is a mixed community in which the wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest (cf. Mt 13.28–30). Only at the Last Judgement (Mt 25.32) will it be revealed who belongs to the church and who is a member of the other 'city' of the damned.

Baptized but still a sinner

There were several reasons for the early practice of delaying baptism until late maturity. One was educational. The would-be Christian first had to become a catechumen and take instruction. The catechumenate was taken seriously. A catechumen who 'lapsed' and then decided he wanted to return would have to go back to the beginning and spend three more years with the 'hearers' before being allowed to pray with the catechumens, says Canon 14 of the Council of Nicaea.¹ Catechumens went to church but sat apart, and left before the celebration of the eucharist began. As each Easter approached those who were to be baptized formed a special group for their final instruction. So they were conceived as part of the local church community but not yet really as members, and the preparation for baptism was recognized to be a preparation for the full membership of the church.

Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315–87, bishop of Jerusalem from c. 349) is the author of the *Catechetical Discourses*. These were the instructions given to candidates for baptism in fourth-century Palestine in the period before Easter, evincing strong confidence in the efficacy of baptism and the elements of anointing, renunciation of sin, washing away of sins and

the use of the laying on of hands. The Latin commentary on the Apostles' Creed of Rufinus (c. 345–411) is partly dependent on Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Discourses*, so the picture it gives does not merely reflect Eastern attitudes. Ambrose in *De officiis ministrorum* gave his remarks on Christian ethics Ciceronian foundations, in a series of explanations on faith and sacraments for candidates for baptism.² Augustine's *De catechizandis rudibus* gives a vivid picture of the sophistication of some of those who came for instruction and the difficulties of teaching adults in the North Africa of his day. Adults could also, as Augustine discovered in his own version of the 'faith and works' question, be reluctant to begin on amendment of life until they had completed their classes and perhaps even until they had actually been baptized.

The baptism which ultimately took place at Easter was seen as an act of the church within which each individual was purged of sin by the action of the Holy Spirit in the presence of the community. Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350–428) describes the union of believers through baptism and by the action of the Holy Spirit as 'constituting' the body of Christ. It is the faith of the believer which 'attracts' the Holy Spirit, not the use of the water in itself, he stresses.³ The Holy Spirit will not rest on someone without faith. But the Spirit will not descend except through baptism (cf. I Timothy 3.2 and 6).⁴

The development of the penitential system and restoration to the church

Baptism was held to purge the individual of both original and actual sin, completely. But it was unrepeatable. He who put his hand to the plough must not look back (Lk 9.62). The move to infant baptism in the West at the end of the fourth century, although it reflected the emergence of a stronger doctrine of baptism which made people afraid to risk that their children might go to hell if they died unbaptized, inevitably meant that more individuals would commit sins after baptism than could be hoped for if people delayed baptism until an advanced age. It was not until after the patristic period that the penitential system seems to have developed to accommodate the need for a mechanism to deal with the minor sins of a population baptized as babies. The emphasis of the first centuries was upon the major sins of murder, adultery and apostasy. These were treated as matters of concern to the whole local community. Such sinners were to be excommunicated, cut off from normal participation in the life of the community and the celebration of the eucharist. Canon 5 of the Council of Nicaea decreed that this was to extend throughout the church. Other bishops were to recognize it so that sinners did not simply decamp to other places and carry on regardless.⁵

The period of penance could be very lengthy. Canon 11 of the Council of Nicaea deals with those who have apostatized even though they have not been in danger or threatened at a time of persecution. They should be shown mercy and readmitted to the community, but only after three years among the hearers (*audientes*) and six years among the prostrators and two more years when they are allowed to join the community in the eucharistic prayers but not in the 'offering' itself.⁶ After an appropriate period of demonstrating the seriousness of their repentance they might be publicly restored by the bishop's absolution in the presence of the whole congregation. This was a very public penance and it ended with an ecclesial act. Even so, the sinner was not quite in the position he had been before. In many communities a reconciled penitent who had formerly been a priest was no longer allowed to exercise his ministry.

A crisis of rigorism

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage from 248 (d. 258), became a Christian convert only in 246, in mature life. Soon after he was elevated to the episcopate a period of persecution of Christians began (the Decian persecution) and he went into exile. He continued to carry out the duties of his office as best he could by correspondence. When it was safe to return, in 251, he came back to find a scene familiar in the period of the persecutions. A number of his flock had abandoned the faith in fright. Others had procured certificates for their own protection, which declared that they had sacrificed to idols as the persecutors required, although in fact many of them had not really done so. Those who hid behind these certificates were known as the *libellatici*.

This situation, it seemed to Cyprian, presented him with important issues of principle. Should these apostates be allowed to return to the church as though nothing had happened? Local 'confessors', Christians who had courageously refused to compromise their faith, were allowing the lapsed to come back and maintaining that any penitential payment which might have been appropriate to 'make up for' what they had done was satisfactorily allowed for by calling in aid the surplus 'virtue' or 'merits' of those who had died as martyrs for their faith. Cyprian disagreed and two Councils were held at Carthage in 251 and 252. The first of these concluded that there must be at least an appropriate period of penance to ensure that the community was seen to take the matter seriously.

The second of these Carthage Councils (252) was concerned with Novatian, a priest in Rome who had led a secession which had become a schism, in disapproval of the failure to take sufficiently seriously the implications of apostasy under persecution. The Novatianists favoured a rigorist approach which refused completely to readmit those who repented of their lapse.⁷

One of the most important questions this period of controversy brought to prominence was whether baptism by those excluded from the communion of the catholic church (heretics or schismatics) was valid and efficacious, and if it was not both these things, whether a repentant person who now wished to be admitted could or should be baptized, on the principle that he or she had not really been baptized at all so this was not really a rebaptism. For a sacrament to be 'valid' meant that it had been done 'properly', that is, in a way complying with the formal conditions for that particular sacrament. For it to be 'efficacious' meant that it was regarded as 'a true vehicle of grace'. It was never a problem that the alleged baptism might have been carried out by someone who was not ordained. Anyone could baptize. So this did not raise directly the question whether an 'unworthy minister' could invalidate a sacrament by his bad behaviour. (Augustine of Hippo was to help consolidate the church's emerging view that the minister of the sacrament is really God so an unworthy minister does not get in the way of the sacrament's validity.) The practical solution was that someone who had been baptized, in any context and by anyone, even heretics, was usually admitted to the church by imposition of hands, at least in the West.

But that did not satisfy everyone. The extreme rigorists denied both the validity and the efficacy of heretical baptisms. Cyprian found himself embroiled in a vigorous dispute with the Bishop of Rome when he and the African bishops at two more councils of 255 and 256 tried to insist that schismatics should be (re)baptized. Their argument was that a sacrament could not be administered validly except within the true church. (Here Augustine was to refine the principle adumbrated by Cyprian, that sacraments do not have automatic effects.)

A sensible solution was agreed in the early fourth century. From the time of the pronouncement of the Council of Arles in 314, responding to the Donatist reluctance to accept those baptized outside their own communion, it became accepted that the basic requirement was that the baptism should be carried out in the name of the Trinity and with water.

Pelagianism

The 'ecclesial' contextualization of baptismal theology was challenged in a further way from the end of the fourth century by the Pelagian controversy and its aftermath. Pelagius, a society preacher probably of British origin, made a name for himself in Rome by teaching his congregations that they could be good if they tried. This teaching can be retrieved now only in part, and our picture of it is heavily coloured by Augustine's hostile rewriting of what Pelagius was saying. His main idea seems to have been that the Christian life was merely a life of imitation of the best models, and the best model of all was Christ. God's good opinion could be won by the living of a virtuous life. Pelagius probably did not exclude the help of God's grace, or undervalue the work of Christ, or forget the effects of human weakness to the extent Augustine alleged.

Augustine, seeking to counter what he considered to be Pelagius' bad influence, placed more and more emphasis on the helplessness of the human individual; as he saw it, Pelagius did not sufficiently recognize the immense generosity of the divine gift. Everyone since Adam is a sinner. Everyone was contaminated by Adam's original sin and everyone but a newborn infant was guilty of particular actual sins as well. It was an act of incomprehensible mercy on God's part to discount all this in the case of the people he chose to be in his 'city'. To preach that one could earn a place there by one's own efforts was to insult God and treat his generosity as something cheap. Pelagians, as Augustine observed, were not above playing safe and bringing their infant to be baptized just in case.

The debates about organization and institutional structure

The traditional 'marks' or 'notes' of the church (describing it as 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic') were first formally pronounced by the Council of Nicaea in 325. They have a settled air. Yet this was not the calm pronouncement of a church confident in its own identity and merely stating the obvious. In reality the Council of Nicaea was an emergency meeting, summoned by Constantine who had recently become the Roman Empire's first Christian Emperor.⁸

It was urgently needed to deal with the fundamental challenge posed by the followers of Arius to the way Christians understood the divinity and humanity of Christ. This was a theme not far removed from ecclesiological concerns as they then stood. Athanasius, Arius' chief adversary, took the idea of the mystical body very seriously. Those who are 'in Christ' are made sons of God by adoption, by an incorporation which enables them to participate in his death and resurrection and also in his immortality.

The Council produced the Nicene Creed, a brief official statement of the orthodox faith which (in the slightly revised form put out by the Council of Constantinople in 381), has remained fundamental throughout almost all of Christendom ever since. The World Council of Churches made a special study of it in the last decades of the twentieth century precisely because it was the document most likely to be 'owned' by the majority of the divided ecclesial communities attempting ecumenical rapprochement.

In time this came to be regarded as the first 'Ecumenical Council', that is, a formal gathering of the whole ('universal') church in the persons of the leaders of the churches all over the world, in the presence of the Holy Spirit, capable of defining the essentials of the faith in a way which would be authoritative for all Christians everywhere and for all time. That first list of 'marks' of the church appears almost as a 'throw-away line', a natural starting-point with which everyone can be expected to agree. Its appearance as a bold statement tells us a good deal about the emergence of the key threads in the formation of the idea of the church up to that point.

The church, in the account the early writers give of it, resembles an organic growth in response to practical problems and questions of principle arising, rather than an imposed plan. When it came to the theory, the minds of the New Testament writers ran to metaphor rather than to philosophical or theological concepts. Clusters of passages containing attempts to express aspects of the idea of the church occur in the New Testament texts, revealing that some of these images and analogies established themselves early. These principally concerned the relationship of Christ and the church. Christ loves the church; Christ is head of the church and the church is subject to Christ (Eph 5). Christ is the 'head' of the 'body' which is the church (Col 1.18). Christians could even be seen as forming 'one Christ' through their union with Christ. (*una quaedam persona*, as Augustine (354–430), Bishop of Hippo, puts it).⁹ Concomitant with this sense of the church's intimate association with Christ are the frequent insistences on the divine 'ownership' of the church, and a budding sense of the activity within it of the individual Persons of the Trinity – for example in the emphasis on the church as the church of God in which the Holy Spirit appoints ministers (Acts 20.28). The Holy Spirit also appears as a directing influence in the New Testament account of the early church in the form of a 'witness' (Acts 20.23). The taste for imagery and analogies was persistent. Hermas, a freed Christian slave of the second century, wrote *The Shepherd*, a series of visions. In one of the visions the church appears to him in the form of a tower. Two centuries later, Augustine, preaching a long series of sermons on the Psalms, looked at the heavens for a comparison. Just as the moon and stars are established in the heavens, so is the universal church (*luna et stellae in caelis sunt fundata, quia et universalis ecclesia*). The universal church is like the moon and the individual local churches are like the stars.¹⁰

Church and state

The highly political complexion of the way the Council of Nicaea was held is a reminder that the young church was not emerging in a vacuum. A consciousness of the political and social context was apparent from the first, when Jesus, asked whether his followers must pay the taxes the state imposed, replied that they should render to Caesar what was Caesar's (Mt 22.21; Mk 12.17). It was also of a piece with Paul's teaching that slaves should obey their masters (Col 3.22).

Christianity did not set out to be revolutionary in the ways feared by the civil authorities of Jesus' day. He was not a Messiah who was going to lead a rabble through the streets or start an uprising. He had made that plain by riding into Jerusalem not in triumph but on an ass (Mt 21.2). But the Christians rapidly turned out to be a collective thorn in the flesh of politicians in a rather different way. As the Roman Empire grew, it perforce took in adherents of many different religions in the lands it conquered. Its usual practice was to encourage syncretism. In many cases, lists of equivalent deities were easy enough to draw up. The

Romans called the king of the gods Jupiter and the queen of the gods Juno and the Greeks called them Zeus and Hera respectively. Polytheists were not unduly disturbed by the addition of more gods to the pantheon, though there were some discomforts when it came to the inclusion of the mystery religions of Asia Minor, such as Mithraism.¹¹ It was not a long step to the expectation that citizens would be willing to worship their emperor if required, and regard him too as a god. This became a useful instrument of state control in the Roman Empire. Augustine speaks of this 'civic religion' in Book VI.7–12 of his *The City of God*.

Jews and Christians would not accept this approach. They were determined monotheists and that led to a series of persecutions in the early church. At first these were not initiated by the state and seem to have been prompted by hostility to Christians because they were 'different', did not 'join in', and alarmist myths circulated about them. Imperial authority stepped in during the reign of the Emperor Decius, who in 249 ordered all his subjects to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Decius died in 251 but the Emperor Valerian began further persecutions in 257–8, imposing the death penalty on Christian clergy who would not sacrifice to the gods. Diocletian began a new period of persecution in 303, ordering church buildings to be burned and copies of the Christian scriptures seized. Christians were not to meet for worship and they were to enjoy the privileges of citizenship only if they agreed to sacrifice to the pagan gods. This sort of thing went on in the East longer than in the West, where Constantine became Emperor in 306. Frightened Christians, even their leaders, were sometimes terrorized into apostasy, even handing over their copies of the scriptures to the state bullies, making them *traditores*, 'handers-over' (the literal meaning of 'traitors').

The ecclesial implications of the conversion of the Emperor Constantine were therefore very considerable. Christian expectations were transformed and placed on a secure basis socially and politically. The missionary activities of Christians had, from the first, been influenced by the existence of the Empire, with its trade and travelling routes and its organizational unity. The letters to the young churches which were eventually included in the New Testament testify to that. Something of a consolidation was now possible.

But the same new security could prompt a backlash. A century later, when the Empire was under serious threat from barbarian invaders and Rome itself fell in 410, wealthy educated pagans began to flee from Italy to the fringes of empire in North Africa. Augustine wrote *The City of God* partly to answer their indignant questions when they arrived in his congregations at Hippo. They were asking him why, since the Empire had become officially Christian, it had begun to go downhill politically and economically. His answer was that one must take a large view of the providential purposes of God. He had his plan. Within that plan the fall of the Roman Empire was a minor matter. It was not to be taken to suggest that the God of the Christians was less than omnipotent.

The end of empire proceeded, and the church's continuing administrative role became important in maintaining some continuity of civilization and practical provision of the necessities of secular life. The correspondence of Gregory the Great (c. 540–604), who became Pope from 590 after a lengthy career in the secular and ecclesiastical civil service, is concerned with the distribution of grain as well as questions of theology and spiritual jurisdiction.

Local and universal

One of the ecclesiological fundamentals already to be found in the New Testament is the acceptance that local communities are in some sense 'churches', although there is only one

church. The New Testament texts are not at all tidy in their indications here, except insofar as they see a 'church' as having a geographical location and a territorial identity. There cannot be two churches in one place. Paul writes to some of these 'local' churches as 'the church of God that is in Corinth' (1 Cor 1.2, RSV) or 'the church of God that is in Corinth including all the saints throughout Achaia' (2 Cor 1.1, RSV). But he also addresses himself to the local church as though it is a self-contained entity: 'the church of the Thessalonians' (1 Thess 1.1), or simply to the community, 'the saints and faithful brothers and sisters' (Col 1.2).

The letters to the churches which are preserved in the New Testament, mostly written by Paul, make it plain that these local communities were full of independent life, engaged in debate, sometimes on matters of considerable importance to the future unity of Christian faith, and also subject to unedifying quarrels, for which Paul reprimands them in terms which were later seen to have clear ecclesiological implications. For example, he writes to the church at Corinth (1 Cor 1.10) begging the Christians there to ensure that they do not allow divisions to persist among them but strive to be united in the same mind and the same purpose. So these multiple local churches were from the first not mere local church buildings or places of worship. They were communities or fellowships, and it was evident that there would have to be clarification of the ways in which they were related to one another and to the one church.

One possibility, later strongest in the West, was to view the local churches as parts of the whole. This way of thinking encouraged Ambrose of Milan (c. 339–97), for example, to see schism and heresy in terms of a fragmentation of Christ's body into broken pieces.¹² This went naturally with the view that those present at a meeting of the churches or 'council' represented the relevant local churches and only those churches could subsequently be bound by what had been agreed. That became the normative assumption when 'councils' were held at which representatives of the churches of a particular geographical area came together at intervals to discuss matters of common concern. A group of local churches might set out disciplinary rules or decisions about the choice of liturgical rites, on the understanding that these would apply in the places where the participating churches held territorial sway.

But there was also a conception of a relationship more like that of microcosm to macrocosm, flowing naturally from the way Paul expressed himself in writing to the church of his day at Corinth. Theodoret (c. 393–c. 460) saw the many geographically distinct churches as one church spiritually (*In Cant. Cant.*, 3.6.1–4, PG 81.166). This was the way of looking at it which tended to be preferred in the East; in the Anglican–Orthodox ecumenical dialogues of the late twentieth century it remained natural to the Orthodox to see the local church as the whole church in microcosm, rather than as a geographically distinct section of it.¹³

The leader of the 'local church'?

Whichever model or image is to be preferred, a number of practical questions had to be addressed. How was the local church 'unit' to be defined and its boundaries settled, and how was it to be decided what it was allowed to do for itself?

The answer which emerged is that each church has a separate leader, its 'bishop'.

Augustine also had important things to say about the *mode* of episcopal leadership. The bishop was to be 'with and among' his people, their servant, not lording himself over them, though Gregory the Great inclined rather more to the view that a bishop is an overseer, and

a *rector* or ruler. But they agreed that the bishop in some sense held the local diocesan church together in his person.

This made him the natural representative of his people, the right person to go on their behalf to any meetings of the churches in councils or synods and to speak for them. 'The bishops assembled at Nicaea, . . . constitute the great and holy synod.'¹⁴ The representative function was understood to allow him to act 'in the person' of the community. This personal role made the bishop a point of intersection in the wider and longer life of the church. He and his fellow-bishops met in councils and synods and that was one plane of the church's life. The church had a historical continuity, which formed another plane, and here too the bishops were important, because they carried the apostolic succession in their persons. The local community was the third plane. Three planes intersect at a point, and by analogy the three 'planes' of the church's life were seen to intersect in the 'person' of a bishop.

These are in themselves purely ecclesiological developments, but it should not be forgotten how important the social implications of a bishop's standing could be. Ambrose (c. 339–97) was bishop of Milan from 373/4. At the time when the local people clamoured for him to be made their bishop he was not yet baptized, although he had been brought up in a Christian family; he remained a mere catechumen at the time. In 1 Timothy 3.6–7 Paul had expressed the concern that the rapid promotion of a recent convert was likely to expose him to temptation. The Apostolic Canons (80) laid down the rule that no one should be made a priest or a bishop as soon as he had been baptized. Canon 2 of the Council of Nicaea 325 reinforces this rule, noting that 'a catechumen needs time and further probation after baptism'.¹⁵

'Diocesan bishops are not to intrude in churches beyond their own boundaries', says the Council of Constantinople 381, Canon 2.¹⁶ An *ecclesia* (Greek *ekklēsia*) was from an early stage a geographical area in which a single leader or *episcopus* (Greek *episkopos*) had pastoral care of the people.

Within his diocese he allowed priests to minister in a fashion which made them his 'vicars', exercising on his behalf a ministry which remained the bishop's. Thus when a priest wished to travel to another diocese his bishop would write a letter for him to take with him, introducing him to his new bishop, testifying to the fact that he was genuinely a priest and a priest in good standing. Canons 15 and 16 of the Council of Nicaea emphasize the importance of clergy remaining in the diocese, that is, the local church where they were ordained, with provision for them to be sent back there smartly if they try to move elsewhere without permission.¹⁷

Initially the diocese was normally in a major city. There was the bishop's *cathedra* or throne, and from there he taught the people. The principal church building of the diocese derived its title of 'cathedral' from the cathedra's presence. The unitary character of a diocese as a local church was put under some stress as the typical diocese ceased to be a church centred on a city and moved out to include rural areas. And the vocabulary used to describe the diocese has never become wholly consistent. What is now generally called a 'diocese' in the West and a 'paroikia' in the East could be described in either way in Africa, though 'diocese' was usual there by the fourth century. *Diocesis* is used in the *Gesta* of the Council of Carthage 411 (Chapter 162.28., CCSL 149A pp. 3–257). Nevertheless, the bishop's role as leader of the community was not compromised by this blurring of the original notion of a local church with its pastor.

There is already a recognition of the privileged position of the apostles and of Paul, the 'last' of the apostles in the New Testament, This seems to have involved an element of local

leadership, for which the heirs of the apostles had particular responsibility. Acts 20.17 speaks of the elders of the church. In Acts 20.28 Paul's farewell to the elders at Ephesus includes the assertion that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers of the flock there. Clement of Rome before the end of the first century emphasizes the importance of the line of succession of ministry from the apostles and of the apostles from Christ.

This expectation of continuity of succession in the original commission to the apostles created fresh difficulties as the local churches grew. One pastoral leader could not always cope with the work, and the notion of assistant bishops or priests became established. These additional ministers tended to be seen as exercising the bishop's ministry and not their own.

The emergence of different ministries

One of the decisions recorded in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 6.5) was that the role of those who were to look after the practical needs of the community, and ensure that widows and orphans did not go hungry and unprotected, should be formally separated from that of the leaders. The word *diaconos* is not used in this passage, but it appears elsewhere (Phil 1.1 and 1 Tim 3.8), where deacons seem to be envisaged as aides or assistants to bishops, a role not incompatible with their having complementary functions such as those hinted at in Acts 6.

Clement of Rome (fl. c. 96), one of the earliest successors to Peter as leader of the church in Rome, mentions deacons in his Epistle to the Corinthians. Nevertheless, his first category of specialist ministry, that of the deacons, did not long remain distinct in the way Acts 6 indicates. By the time Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35–107) was writing his letters, the diaconate had begun to become the first stepping-stone on a ladder to be climbed by those in search of the highest ecclesiastical office, with the diaconate occupying a third place below bishops and priests, though practice still varied from place to place and there was a good deal of continuing fluidity.

It was part of this emerging pattern that although deacons had a role in worship in the ministry of the Word, reading the Gospel as well as the Epistle and leading the prayers of the congregation, they did not consecrate the bread and wine. Canon 18 of the Council of Nicaea notes that deacons do not have authority to 'offer' at the eucharist.¹⁸ Canon 18 of Nicaea also condemns any breach of hierarchical discipline, as when deacons presume to give the body of Christ to priests who are their seniors even though they themselves do not have the authority to consecrate the elements.¹⁹ (Deaconesses, says Canon 19 of the Council of Nicaea, do not receive imposition of hands and are to be regarded as laity.)²⁰

A debate about terminology and function extended through the early centuries and beyond. Were the 'elders' of the New Testament (for example, Acts 14.23; Tit 1.5; Jas 5.14), *presbyteroi* or *episkopoi* and what was the difference at that time, if any?

One of their roles was to preside at the eucharist, saying, *in persona Christi*, the words of Jesus which consecrated the bread and the wine (Lk 22.17–19). *Sacerdos* was not one of the terms about whose application to the roles and functions of ordained ministers there was active dispute in the first centuries. The word *sacerdos* was not particularly controversial in this connection. It is an Old Testament term in the Vulgate and was already discussed by Tertullian and Ambrose in that context. Cyprian is interested in the way Christ is identified as a priest in the order of Melchisedech (Heb 5.10), but there is no hint in the early church of the kind of argument which split the church in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, in which one side claimed that to call a minister a priest is to allow him to usurp a ministry

unique to Christ. The East in particular did not work out a sacramental theology in any systematic way in the early centuries.

Another role of the bishop, and of the priest acting on behalf of his bishop, was that of pastor or shepherd of the local flock, a self-evidently ecclesial responsibility. The terms *sacerdos et pastor* are linked by the Council of Tours 567 (CCSL 148A pp. 176–99). Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) comments in his *Sententiae* that ‘just as the shepherd stays awake to guard his sheep against attack [by wolves], so the priest of God is careful to ensure that Christ’s flock is not laid waste by the Enemy’ (PL 83.714).

Of the remaining roles of the senior ordained ministry, the declaring of absolution to repentant sinners began by being restricted to the bishop. It passed to priests when the public penance of the early period became the routine private penance which everyone would need to make from time to time. The penitent confessed to his priest and was absolved. There was no longer an expectation that such absolution could be granted only by a bishop.²¹

It remained true throughout our period that only a bishop could ordain priests or, by joining with other bishops, participate in the ordination of a bishop. That authority to ordain never moved to priests themselves.

Provinces

Clusters of dioceses formed themselves into geographical groups, roughly following the secular organization of the Roman Empire. A metropolitan city would have its metropolitan bishop, who was recognized as leader by the bishops of lesser cities on the strength of the secular importance of the city where he had his see. Sometimes in African provinces the senior bishop was simply the one who had been consecrated earliest. The Council of Nicaea of 325 first rationalized and gave an authoritative stamp to this practice and it was the first council to use the term ‘metropolitan’ for such senior bishops, with, as a rule, the bishop of the diocese which was the local capital city at their head. Canons 4, 6 and 7 deal with problems which had arisen in the local application of what ought to be consistent principles. There are a number of fine points concerning the respective claims of ancient custom about metropolitan jurisdictions and exactly which senior bishops may use the title.

The working relationship of the senior bishop of the province to the other bishops gave rise to a number of practical considerations with ecclesiological implications. For example, were the lowlier bishops his suffragans? What say should he have in the replacement of bishops in the sees of his province? Should local councils and synods be summoned by the metropolitan? (The terms are largely interchangeable, derivatives respectively of the Latin and Greek for much the same thing.) On such points there was variation of understanding and practice, but on one matter there seems to have been unanimity. The metropolitan bishop did not hold a higher order. He remained still a mere bishop.

By the sixth century the aggregation of local sees into groups extending over larger geographical areas had enlarged itself still further. The great patriarchates of the ancient world were identified at the Council of Nicaea in 325 as Antioch, Alexandria and Rome; Constantinople was added in 381, for Constantinople was the ‘new Rome’ founded by Constantine the first Christian Emperor. The first Council of Constantinople in 381 (canon 3) expressly decreed that ‘because it is new Rome, the bishop of Constantinople is to enjoy the privilege of honour after the bishop of Rome’.²² Jerusalem was added to complete the five at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The Patriarchs exercised authority over the metro-

politans, both in terms of the authority to ordain metropolitans and the judicial authority to hear disciplinary accusations against them and to act as a court of appeal from judgements of the metropolitans in their own courts. Primacy did not constitute a higher order, however, nor did being a metropolitan. A retired primate or metropolitan was a bishop. A retired bishop would remain a bishop.

Primacy

Beyond this change lay the shadow of another, very far-reaching development. The Patriarch was primate of a large and significant area. But which primate was primate of all? Rome, claimed Gregory the Great, on the authority of Jesus' words to Peter, first Bishop of Rome, when he told him that he was the rock on which the church was to be built (Mt 16.18).

The emergence of an ecclesiology of primacy also threw up new challenges about the role of councils and synods. The essence of a council was that it brought together all the 'local' bishops who would then confer and reach decisions which were sent out as 'decrees'. Unanimity was a requirement strongly emphasized by the early councils. Not only the creeds and canons of councils were considered 'authoritative' but also a good proportion of any additional material which happened to survive, such as letters sent from the Council to those who had not been present.²³

Would a primate have authority to overrule a council? The Eastern patriarchates had more or less accepted the primacy of Rome during the first centuries, at least as a primacy of honour. But a primacy of jurisdiction was another matter, as was any notion that Rome had a primacy which would allow it to determine disputed matters of faith or order on behalf of the whole church. Ambrose had a great respect for Roman primacy and went so far as to say that he thought significant questions of faith and order, including problems arising in the relations of churches, ought to be referred to the Bishop of Rome for determination (Letter 56.7 and 13.7). Optatus of Milevis and Augustine were of much the same view.

The popes themselves were not slow to foster this kind of thinking, notably Damasus (366–84), Siricius (384–99) and Innocent (402–17), popes of Augustine's lifetime. Leo I (440–61) wrote to Anastasius the Bishop of Thessalonica in 446 to set out a comprehensive view (Letter 14.11. PL54.7577). Jesus gave Peter supreme authority in the church. Peter was the first Bishop of Rome and, Leo claims, he handed on that authority to his successors. Gregory the Great took this further, refusing to acknowledge the claim of the Patriarch of Constantinople to the title of 'Ecumenical Patriarch'.

The maintenance of the faith

It was decided in the period recorded in Acts 6 that one of the responsibilities of leadership was to teach the faith. It was also accepted very early that there must only ever be one faith. One of the most necessary tasks of the first centuries was to work out how this was to be done within the church in a way which would protect the integrity of this faith.

A defining moment is described in Acts 15, when a division of teaching threatened the unity of the community. Some of its leaders thought that the requirements of Old Testament practice, such as circumcision, ought to apply to Jesus' followers too. Others favoured a new beginning, in keeping with the freedoms Jesus had promised. This was no small question and the community at Jerusalem dealt with it by behaving like a council and seeking consensus

through debate. They also appointed missionary leaders to convey their consensus to other communities.

The conception of the unity of the faith became linked with the notion that the church could not ultimately lose it or go seriously wrong so long as it kept together and spoke with one voice. Cyril of Jerusalem wrote (*Catechetical Lectures*, 18.16 and 19) that Jesus' words to Peter when he described him as the Rock on which the church would be built (Mt 16.18) amounted to a promise that the church would be indefectible. This confidence was spelt out by Vincent of Lérins in his *Commonitorium*. The church is to hold what has been held 'everywhere, always and by everyone', he says. This is what it is for the church to be truly *catholica* and *universalis*. The traditions of the universal church which the catholic and apostolic church follow must share the unanimous consensus of old.²⁴ Augustine spoke in similar language about the 'consensus' of the faithful in his *De peccatorum meritis et remissione et de baptismo parvulorum* (III.ii.2, CSEL 60, p. 130). At this point in the church's history there was no real anxiety that there might be any conflict between consensus and authoritative top-down teaching, or between a monarchical primacy and a collegial conciliarity.

The affirmation of faith in the church: the creeds

The 'Apostles' Creed' was used only in the West. Unlike the Nicene Creed its origins are liturgical and it is essentially an expression of the faith of the church as a body. The Apostles' Creed encapsulates the notion of 'one faith, one baptism'. It seems to derive from the creed used in the early Roman church, and it has the characteristic three sections relating to the three questions asked of those who offered themselves for baptism, concerning faith in God the Father, Christ and the Holy Spirit respectively. Ambrose of Milan mentions it in Letter 42.5, about 390, describing it as the composition of the apostles, for by that date the story of the apostles meeting to compose it by providing a clause each was well established.

The ministry of the Word

Among the surviving texts of the first centuries in the West are exegetical sermons preached by bishops. Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, Gregory the Great were all fond of preaching lengthy series in which they worked their way through books of the Bible. Each sermon was substantial in itself and would require the congregation's attention for an hour or more. Such preaching was done from the cathedra, or bishop's seat in the cathedral, and formed part of a liturgy. This solemn instruction in the way the text of scripture was to be understood went far beyond the preaching of a sermon on a 'set text' or reading. It reflected a respect for the Word and a seriousness about ensuring that the people were familiar with it and could think about it intelligently (at a period when Latin was the vernacular and they would have no difficulty in understanding what was read to them).

Yet clarity about what was and what was not to be regarded as scripture was slow to emerge and the process underlines at every point the importance of the church as the vehicle of transmission and approval and acceptance of the Christian writings from which the 'canon' of scripture was ultimately agreed upon. The *Didache* (first to second century) was considered to be part of scripture by Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215). Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340) knew of it and also Athanasius, the contemporary of Arius. It contains details of the church life of the earliest Christians, their preference for baptism by

immersion, their fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, the forms of their eucharistic prayers. The *Didascalia Apostolorum*, probably written in Syria in the early third century by a converted Jew, gives guidance to Christians on a number of practical points of the Christian life. It was worked into the *Apostolic Constitutions*. The *Apostolic Constitutions* themselves, also probably deriving from the Syrian churches, were a fourth-century product of an authorship coloured by more than a hint of Arianism. The Apostolic Canons form the last chapter of the *Apostolic Constitutions* and date from about 350–80. They are of interest for the way they list the books of scripture in the last of the canons, including among them these canons themselves.

Jerome (c. 345–420), who was encouraged by Pope Damasus to prepare a new, definitive Latin translation of the Bible at a period when Augustine was preaching on the Bible as the established Word of God, was still discussing exactly which books were scripture and which were not. The ‘canon’ was probably defined only about 382. The emergence of an agreement about what was to be included was itself an act of the church.

Maintaining the faith and matters of ‘order’

Where does the boundary lie between a matter of faith (on which the church must preserve ‘one mind’) and a matter of order? It was accepted from an early stage that local worshipping communities did not have to use exactly the same liturgies. Hippolytus, probable author of the *Apostolic Tradition* (the original Greek text is now incomplete but Latin translation survives), describes various rites, including baptism, eucharist and ordination. This may represent the way things were done in Rome in the early third century, but it did not constitute a fixed point of reference for other places. Yet in all variations of rites is embedded a theology which must reflect the expectation that Christians shared one faith and that faith will never change. Paul says that women should learn in silence in church (1 Tim 2.11). Is this a matter of faith (which cannot change) or of order (which may)?

The idea that baptism can happen only once and that it irrevocably changes the relationship of the person baptized not only to God but to the church is hinted at in Ephesians 1.13, and Clement of Alexandria spoke of baptism as a ‘sealing’. Is ordination too a once-and-for-all and irrevocable act? The terminology of ‘character’ seems to have been a medieval and Western invention, but the underlying questions were arising much earlier. If something subsequently happens to bring into question his acceptability for ordination, can someone once ordained have its effect removed, or can he only be suspended from the exercise of a perpetual ministry? For instance, does the presumption that priests must be ‘entire’ males affect the answer to this question? The Council of Nicaea 325, Canon 1, sets out the rules for priests who become eunuchs in the expectation that they will embody the general principles appropriate to the decrees of a ‘universal’ council. Someone who has been castrated for medical reasons or ‘by barbarians’ may remain a priest, but if someone voluntarily castrates himself he is to be suspended.²⁵ Would it be appropriate for fundamental questions of this sort to be answered differently in different places?

Keeping the church together: heresy and schism

Schism is division of the church; heresy is obstinate persistence in a belief which the church has ‘decided’ is not part of the faith. But like ‘faith and order’, ‘schism’ and ‘heresy’ overlap. Augustine considered that schism was a heresy because he regarded the doctrine of the unity

of the church as itself a point of faith. The lists given earlier of categories of outsider who could and could not be admitted to the catholic communion illustrate the complexity of the question when wrong faith became church-dividing. Lucifer Calaritanus, Bishop of Cagliari (d. 370/71) was passionately of the view that there must be no associating with heretics, in particular with the Arians (*De non conveniendo cum haereticis*).

A person with uncertainties about what to believe is not a heretic. Nor is someone with doubts. The heretic is someone who wilfully goes against the consensus of the community about the content of the faith. But how is that consensus formed and expressed and how does it become clear when it has reached a defining moment? It is all very well to say that *haeresis* involves the making of a deliberate choice to keep to a wrong or false belief, but who is to declare that it is 'wrong'? Where does authority lie in the church to determine the matter?

The early church had to make its collective mind up on such points at the same time as it was dealing with a series of very difficult questions about some of the most central points of the faith. It had to determine the locus of its own authority while exercising that authority. One possibility was to lodge decision-making authority with the bishops as leaders of the community. Tertullian insisted that the true church is to be identified in a visible episcopal succession through history, to which is entrusted the stewardship of the tradition which began with Christ's commissioning of his disciples to be the apostles; only this church can be trusted to interpret the scriptures faithfully and so it also has a duty to maintain and communicate the faith. But the bishops made their decisions collectively, in council, and with a conscious reference to the importance of preserving unanimity down the ages to which Vincent of Lérins made implicit reference in his *Commonitorium*.

The Donatist schism

In about 311 Caecilian was consecrated as Bishop of Carthage by Felix of Aptunga. He had handed over the scriptures during the persecution initiated under the Emperor Diocletian and had consequently become a *traditor*. The bishops of Numidia objected that this consecration could not be valid and consecrated a rival. A schism began, directly reflecting the problematic character of the question of the overlap of faith and order. Attempts to resolve the matter by the Synod of Arles in 314, and then two years later by the Emperor, failed, for the Donatists had coalesced into something of a local interest group. They claimed that they had the authority of Cyprian for their position. The rigorist tradition had a strong appeal to them because they wanted to hold that they were protecting the purity of the church. Donatists saw it as a mark of the true church that it should be without spot or wrinkle, an ecclesiology arguably incompatible with a doctrine of the mixed church as propounded by Augustine, which was itself a challenge to the doctrine of the holiness of the church which was so important in the East. The Donatists' idea was that those who communicate with anyone who countenanced what they regarded as a contaminated non-church were themselves contaminated. The continuing modern topicality of all this has become apparent with the controversies about the use of 'flying bishops' to accommodate those who cannot accept the ordination of women or practising homosexuals.²⁶

Gangs of wandering trouble-makers calling themselves Donatists began to constitute a social nuisance and government attempts were made to suppress these *circumcelliones* in the mid-340s. Not all the Donatists were mere bandits. Tyconius the Donatist wrote a treatise on the interpretation of scripture containing an exegetical theory which commanded the

respect of Augustine and which he himself utilized. Their position had become newly topical with further government intervention from 405, culminating in a conference at Carthage in 411, at which the Emperor's emissary issued a final condemnation of the Donatist position.

The chief intellectual protagonist against the Donatists was Augustine of Hippo. Augustine was prompted by the debates about Donatism to give serious thought to the question of how far schism was itself to be regarded as a heresy.

The Easter controversy

Of great importance ecclesially was the dispute about the way the date of Easter should be calculated. The Council of Nicaea wrote a letter to the Egyptians in which it announced (prematurely) that the disagreement about the date of Easter had been resolved: 'All the brethren in the East who have hitherto followed the Jewish practice will henceforth observe the customs of the Romans and of yourselves and of all of us who from ancient times have kept Easter together with you.'²⁷ Hilary of Poitiers describes the celebration of the eucharist as an expression of the unity of the church (*De Trinitate*, 8.15ff). The debate about the date of Easter, which was still going on in the seventh century, drew much of its energy from the sense on both sides that the unity of the church was manifested in the celebration of Easter in a eucharist held on the same day everywhere, so that the difficulty of agreeing which day this should be in any given year was actually dividing the church.

Conclusion

To get a sense of where these matters lay at the end of the sixth century, particularly in the West, we need only look at the situation in England at the time of the mission of the Augustine who became Bishop of Canterbury. As bishop he sent Pope Gregory the Great a series of mainly ecclesiological questions which are reported by Bede, together with Gregory's replies.²⁸ One question concerns the legitimacy of variation of rites. Gregory's advice to Augustine is that he should make a selection of practices, drawing upon those with which he is familiar from his own early life in Rome and those he knows from his contacts with Gaul, and create a set of rites which will be appropriate for the use of the new church in England. Another question is about the consecration of bishops. Although a single bishop could ordain priests, it was well-established (Canon 4 of the Council of Nicaea) that in normal circumstances all the bishops of a province should come together to ordain a new bishop. If the distances are too great or there are special circumstances, the number may be reduced but at the very least, it took three bishops to ordain a bishop. Augustine asks whether even this can be relaxed in emergency, for example, where distance makes it a practical impossibility to gather a sufficient number of bishops together. Gregory accepts that Augustine can hardly expect bishops to come over from Gaul to help him ordain the bishops he needs for the new English church. But he instructs him to ordain the bishops he will need in the first instance in such a way that they will be within reach and the emergency will not need to occur in future. Another question concerns territorial jurisdiction and questions of seniority among bishops. Augustine cannot be given authority over the bishops of Gaul because earlier popes gave the *pallium* (the stole of office) to the Bishop of Arles. So if he finds anything reprehensible going on he must treat the local bishops as equals and discuss with them tactfully how they may put matters right in their own dioceses, says Gregory. So

on many of these points of technical but ecclesiological detail, answers could now be furnished with some confidence.

The church had a written history now. Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c.340, Bishop of Caesarea from at least 315) had the idea of writing a history of the church, mainly in the East and mainly in the form of a compilation of extracts from the writings of others; others took up the idea, however, and began to create a historiographical tradition.

And the church had a prophetic as well as a temporal future. The *Didache* discusses the second coming and includes prophecy about Antichrist (16), but as the generations went on, theories about the place of the church in the world to come developed with the ecclesiology.

Notes

- 1 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. G. Alberigo *et al.*, and ed. and tr. N.Tanner, Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990, 2 vols, Vol. I, p. 13.
- 2 Ambrose, *De officiis ministrorum*, ed. G. Krabinger, Tübingen, 1857.
- 3 Theodore of Mopsuestia, *On the Minor Epistles of St. Paul*, ed. H.B. Sweet, Cambridge, 1880, 2 vols, II, pp. 99–108.
- 4 Theodore of Mopsuestia, *On the Minor Epistles of St. Paul*, II, pp. 111–14.
- 5 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 8.
- 6 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 11.
- 7 This was in line with the teaching of Tertullian (c. 160–c. 225), for whom rigorism went with asceticism and a kind of early Puritanism.
- 8 The convention developed that a secular ruler was permitted to call such a council but not participate in the decision-making.
- 9 *Enn in Ps.* 30(2) I.4, CCSL 38, p. 193.
- 10 *In Ps.* 8.ix, CCSL 38, p. 53.
- 11 F. Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans la paganisme romaine*, Paris: Chicago UP, 1906.
- 12 *De poen.* 2.iv.24, CSEL, 73, p. 173.
- 13 See Chapter 22, 'Ecclesiology and Ecumenism'.
- 14 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 16.
- 15 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 6.
- 16 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 31.
- 17 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, pp. 13–14.
- 18 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 14.
- 19 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 14.
- 20 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 15.
- 21 B. Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick* (Freiburg: Herder, 1964), remains a definitive discussion of the history of these transitions.
- 22 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 32.
- 23 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. xi.
- 24 'In ipsa item catholica ecclesia magnopere curandum est, ut id teneamus quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est', Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium*, 2.5, ed. R. Demeulenaere, CCSL 64 (1985), p. 149. 'Universalis ecclesiae traditiones. . . in qua item catholica et apostolica ecclesia sequantur necesse est universitatem antiquitatem consensionem', *ibid.*, p. 186.
- 25 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 6 ff.
- 26 See the discussion of the emergence of neo-exclusivism in Chapters 7 and 13.
- 27 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, I, p. 19.
- 28 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969, pp. 78–102.

Further reading

Augustine, *The City of God* (Penguin Classics, 2003), introduction by G.R. Evans.

Allan Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century* (Brill, Leiden, 1995).

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Stuart G. Hall, 'The early idea of the Church', in *The First Christian Theologians*, ed. G.R. Evans (Blackwell, 2004).

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THE CHURCH IN MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY

James R. Ginther

Medieval Ecclesiology as a category of thought is a combination of historical fact and theological fiction. There is no doubting the existence of a social and institutional entity bearing the name *ecclesia* during the medieval period, and indeed it would be difficult to study any aspect of medieval Europe and not discover some role or influence of a church.¹ Moreover, ecclesial functions and structures did not remain static over the period's thousand years and there is clear documentary evidence that on occasion Christians did take time to reflect upon what church means in order either to evoke or explain change. This in itself surely must be indelible evidence of an extant ecclesiology.

The historical fact has been enhanced, however, by theological fiction. Such a phrase is hardly pejorative and it does not imply that medieval ecclesiology was lacking any truth values. Rather, ecclesiology as a theological fiction points to two essential features. First, since the Church was a major medieval institution, its leaders and defenders exploited all available resources to protect and enhance it, including Roman civil law. Canon lawyers drew out the notion of discussing an institution as a person with its own standing before a court – the *persona fictiva*. The Church as a whole claimed the status of 'person' in law, a legal fiction that reinforced its corporate identity but never undermined the truth value of any legal or theological claim.² Second – and in keeping with the Latin verbal root of 'fiction' (*ingere*, to create or shape) – the phrase reminds us that this part of medieval theology has often been constructed (*fictus*) according to modern and post-modern theological agendas. Ecclesiology is the 'wax nose' of medieval theology: it can be shaped and re-shaped because, despite being grounded in historical fact, ecclesiology of the Middle Ages remained undeveloped. The doctrine of God, salvation, Incarnation, the life of virtue and penance, the sacraments – all these were recognizable categories of theological discourse and theologians continually addressed them throughout the Middle Ages. The same cannot be said for ecclesiology and attempts to identify an ecclesiological textual tradition have often yielded more frustration than fruit. Perhaps the greatest student of medieval ecclesiology, Yves-Marie Congar, concluded after the first twenty years of his research into pre-modern ecclesiology that the Middle Ages did not enjoy a 'proper' ecclesiology until the last quarter of the thirteenth century.³ Congar was not alone in this opinion, as Artur Landgraf had come to a similar conclusion in his careful study of twelfth-century theology.⁴ There are moments, indeed centuries, when the ecclesiological sources apparently fell silent.

That silence easily allowed for modern theological assumptions to overpower the narrative. Congar's claim to a 'proper ecclesiology' emerging only in the late thirteenth century is

based as much upon the documentary evidence as his own ecclesiological commitments that were riveted to the twentieth century.⁵ Even Landgraf's more moderate conclusion was based upon the assumption that treatments of the papacy were the definitive factor of any ecclesiology. In other words, the disparate data relevant to constructing a doctrine of *ecclesia* in the Middle Ages has been organized around themes that may have greater contemporary force than medieval fact. For example, can medieval ecclesiology be condensed into a jurisdictional tension between community (conciliarism) and leadership (papacy)? This is often presented as a fundamental issue, one sparked obviously by the Reform movements of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (but with some antecedents that stretch back into the core of the medieval period). This tension was clearly extant in both recent Vatican Councils and it remains a touchstone even as Catholic ecclesiology has begun to speak more about 'communion' than jurisdiction and leadership. The tension also enjoyed a serious revival in the middle of the twentieth century for medieval historians, thanks in large part to scholars such as Walter Ullmann, Brian Tierney and Francis Oakley.⁶ But was this tension really at the core of all theological reflection on the nature, function and structure of the Church?

The silence of ecclesiological discourse is more apparent than real. I argue that the present model used to explore the theology of Church in the Middle Ages does not fully capture all the data and sources available to the historical theologian and that a new methodology needs to be adopted. By including additional sets of texts in their analysis, historical theologians can better capture the multivalent vision that medieval thinkers had of Church. Study of medieval ecclesiology must include an account of both ecclesial events and texts. To make this case, I first discuss whether the issue hinges on only one point of departure – in this case whether a bottom-up approach is better than a top-down one. Then I will outline the standard account of medieval ecclesiology, which will be followed by a suggestion on how it may first be amended. Finally, I want to introduce a set of textual resources rarely employed in the scholarship of medieval ecclesiology, namely expositions of the Psalms and commentaries on the Dionysian corpus.

Points of departure

If we find the current account of medieval ecclesiology deficient, the first solution might be to address its *point of departure*. Until recently those who studied the medieval understanding of Church had adopted a 'top-down' approach, or what Nicholas Healy has called *blueprint* ecclesiology: scholars consider the nature and function of the Church in ideal and abstract terms, so much so that they find it difficult to relate to the events on the ground as it were, and so are reduced to describing how 'real' churches only fail to live up to the ideal standards.⁷ This informs historical study in the sense that ecclesiological principles function a-historically and so, many assume, they can easily be applied to any given period. The alternative is to adopt a 'bottom-up' approach which, according to Roger Haight, begins with the actual experience of being 'in church' and subsequently becomes the basis for understanding how general principles may be abstracted from the concrete.⁸ Haight in fact has adopted what Healy theorizes for contemporary ecclesiology, namely an approach to Church that focuses more on the drama of ecclesial experience than on the 'epic' narrative its exponents create.⁹

For any study of medieval ecclesiology, however, historical theologians must seek both points of departure – and for two important reasons. First, medieval thought gravitated to an essentialist analysis of all reality because the phenomena of everyday experience were

considered to be illusory and misleading.¹⁰ That approach was certainly echoed within the theological reflection on Church, and if so it would be difficult to avoid this aspect of medieval ecclesiology and still remain an honest exponent of the sources. Second, the contrast of these two points of departure can imply that they are almost incompatible, or at least leads to the conclusion that each provides a different etiology for medieval ecclesiology. To argue that somehow the abstract account of ecclesiology had no bearing on the events on the ground assumes an almost Durkheimian view of the development of ecclesial community. There were certainly moments of 'collective effervescence' that advanced the medieval view of Church, but the shaping of real-time ecclesial experience was itself shaped or ordered by the abstract and essentialist musing of Christian leaders. It would seem necessary, therefore, to consider the ecclesial experience and theological reflection about it in tandem when creating a narrative for medieval ecclesiology.

Such a broader and more coherent account of medieval ecclesiology necessitates fresh consideration, if we are to come to a better understanding of how medieval Christians identified themselves as part of a believing and worshipping community. This is no easy matter. Despite his demand for a new reading of medieval ecclesiology, Haight relies heavily upon those scholars who worked in a manner completely opposite to his own bottom-up approach.¹¹ How can he determine that he really has begun at the bottom, at the very locus where Christians engaged one another in community? Indeed, Haight's method requires a careful interplay between the practice of micro-history and the 'grand narrative' in order to establish what the 'in church' experience really was for the Middle Ages.¹²

How then do historical theologians keep their bearings as they wade deeply into the daily life of medieval Christians while simultaneously rising up to catch a view of the ideals that medieval theologians embraced in ecclesiological thought? The answer, I want to argue here, lies in providing a more coherent account of the resources they ought to utilize. If anything, historical theologians need to exploit in their research sets of texts that hitherto have not been (or at least rarely) attached to the study of medieval ecclesiology. I want to suggest that a richer set of texts comprises two general categories. Together they can be a helpful heuristic device for future study of the medieval theology of church.

Events as ecclesiological texts

In order to demonstrate why it is essential to expand the resources for medieval ecclesiology, let us focus now on its standard account.¹³ Many scholars have described medieval ecclesiology as juridical in nature and papal in orientation.¹⁴ It was juridical in nature because it was mainly concerned about institutional structures and how those structures operate within the context of Church-State relations. Granted, the Church-State dichotomy does not accurately represent the medieval experience, since most medieval thinkers would have found it bewildering to conceive of the 'State' as something outside of the Church. Nevertheless, most medieval ideas of the Church addressed the problem of where temporal authority fits into the Church, be it at the local, provincial or universal level.¹⁵ This complex relationship has often been reduced to the tension between 'kingdom' (*regnum*) and 'priesthood' (*sacerdotium*). On a theoretical level secular rulers and church leaders alike were quick to identify their own and the other's jurisdiction and provide sophisticated reasons why a certain activity or social relationship fell under the authority of one or the other. More pragmatically speaking, political programmes could not but impinge on ecclesial territory and almost every religious practice had political implications. The result was an