

## **The Church or the Individual**

*Probably by a member of the WEC*

It is only after forty years as a child of God that it is becoming more and more fixed in my consciousness that the church is the true agent of the Spirit, not the individual. Nor is this out of the right spiritual order. It was Paul, the aged, Paul the prisoner, not Paul the young evangelist, who placed the coping-stone on revelation by his "church" epistles. Individual salvation and sanctification, "the flight of the alone to the Alone" as the old mystic described the pilgrimage of the soul, is the absolutely essential forerunner to an understanding of the final mystery within the Veil, the perfect Man, Head and Body. Indeed, it has been the false claim of churches to be that Body, with a largely unregenerate membership, and the still more blasphemous claim of one great false church to be the only Body and only mediator between God and man, which has diverted countless numbers of individual believers since Reformation days from ever discovering the function of the Body as the true agent in the full purposes of God.

Generally speaking, it is true that all believers recognise the reality of the Body of Christ; and the unity of the Body is a living experience, as believer meets with believer. To any of the Lord's servants who are travellers this is a precious worldwide fact. But the practical functioning of the Body as a Body in any given area is another thing. Many of us remain so individualistic in our thinking that the main point to us in our service to Christ is, What does the Spirit say to *me*? How does He guide *me*? How does He use *me*? While acknowledging the Spirit in the whole Body, in actual fact the point that supremely matters to me is that I am His agent, and He has a plan for me. It needs a basic change of outlook and conviction to recognise that the Spirit's agent is the Body itself; and that means for me in the immediate present that portion of the Body with which I am organically linked in living fellowship. That may mean my local church if it has a born again membership and functions on a New Testament pattern in the liberty of the Spirit, or it may mean a smaller group with whom I am knit in living fellowship and service, perhaps within an official congregation, perhaps without. That is "the church of Christ" for me in the immediate present, the Body in which the Spirit dwells.

Now if we recognise the Body as an agent, rather than merely the individual, then we shall see the necessity of being part of a fellowship-in-action, where there is combined guidance, prayer and ministry to a lost world: in other words a fellowship which is not merely having a nice time together, but is more what is meant by our modern use of the word "team"; the fellowship as the basis of united action, and only a true fellowship when it does issue in guided action.

That a fellowship-in-action, and not an individual, is God's order from eternity is easy to see. God Himself has been from the beginning Three-in-One, the Fellowship from which all fellowship proceeds. The Saviour, immediately He started His ministry, gathered round Him and Himself became one of a "team". At Pentecost the Holy Spirit formed that team, now 120, into the first church; and all the early problems, persecutions and victories were solved and borne and gained as a fellowship. When the first missionary to the Gentiles was called, it was as the church at Antioch prayed, and it was they who sent Paul forth, and to whom he always returned to share with them the wonderful works of God. Paul himself never travelled alone, but gathered an ever increasing "team" around him, his itinerant church as it were, and was restless when without them (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:6); and it is obvious in all his writings that the church is the unit he addresses, up to the full and final revelation of the Body in the prison epistles.

How then is this to work out in practice in our individual situations? First, again we say, by the recognition of any group of believers of whom we are part as a living organism of the Spirit; it may be a born-again family circle, or a group who meet in a home, or a larger fellowship of true believers.

At the home-bases of the W.E.C., though we have much to learn yet of the truth of the Body, God has long led us increasingly on fellowship lines. We long ago became convinced that the Scriptural basis for the government of a 'Mission', which is a fellowship of commissioned believers, is not by an outside Board or Committee; but that the Spirit works through the Body, speaks to the Body, leads in the Body. Therefore the Body itself must be the 'Mission Council', just as the first council of the early church was the church itself in council (Acts 15:22,25). There is nothing in our midst that God has more sealed at our home ends these twenty-three years than the daily meetings of the whole fellowship to seek God's mind by open discussion, the guidance of the Word and the Spirit, and by the prayer of faith; and then the quarterly, or more frequent meetings of all workers who are led to attend, when all final decisions are made in the fullest possible freedom for prayer and discussion leading to a united mind in the Spirit. All that God has done these years has had its source in this functioning as a fellowship in our commission, as in fact a New Testament church. There is leadership, as in the New Testament, but always a leadership which finds its sanction in the united mind of the fellowship; and as a result, each launching out into some new ministry in the work has been as from the Body with its full cooperation as part of one whole. This has meant fellowship, inspiration, challenge, correction, as the developments of the new project are brought back to the Body for report and review.

On the fields, where each group functions on the same principles, it may often have to start by the two or three missionaries there recognising themselves, not as strangers and isolated individuals come to preach the gospel to people of another race, but as Christ's church in that area. As the church, they would not just be one running a dispensary, another a school, another as an evangelist, but *first of all*, they are the organism of the Spirit there, His church, and they function as such. By fellowship in the light which keeps disunity melted out at the cross, by constantly seeking together God's pattern for their ministry as His church in the area, by prayer and faith, and by each then fulfilling their God-appointed share of the ministry as members of the one Body, they act together as His agent for the growth of the living church through the salvation and sanctification of souls. As nationals of the country receive the gospel, they become joined to the church and share in the fellowship, first by baptism on confession of faith, then at the Lord's table where the Lord's body is "*discerned*" (1 Cor. 11:29), all as brethren around their glorified Elder Brother: then in the fellowship of believers growing in the Word of God, sharing their problems and burdens in the freedom of the Spirit and responsible as a Body for "sounding out" the gospel to the unsaved. In that growing fellowship will be manifested the varied gifts of the Spirit to the believers, one as evangelist, another as teacher, another as shepherd, others as elders and leaders.

When I recently asked a national Christian leader in India, much used of God, the reason for little results despite faithful labours in some areas, his answer was that in his own experience he had had to learn the meaning of disciplined and guided ministry. The discipline was that the ministry must proceed from the Body. The guidance was that it was not enough just to scatter the Word indiscriminately in a given area. It was necessary to seek God's face first, sometimes for days with prayer and fasting, until the word came clear, Go here or Go there, and that then they found, prepared souls. Once he had learned this, he and his little band, now increased to many churches, always put fellowship in prayer first, and one or another only moved out to ministry as the Lord indicated to the Body that it was His calling, and the Body then shared the prayer burden and sense of responsibility until the victory was won.