

THE CHURCH

By STUART ALLEN

We offer no apology for making the word 'church' a subject for study. Our experience has proved that it is a partial understanding, or a wrong usage, of this word that is keeping many believers back from grasping what is the great secret of Ephesians 3.

The phrase, 'the one church' is often on the lips of Christians, but it is never found in the Word of God: 'one body' is used, but this is not the same thing. The word 'church' means 'assembly', or a gathering of 'called-out ones' (Gr. *ekklesia*).

Owing to our small space let us tabulate the various ways in which this word *ekklesia* is used by the Holy Spirit:

(1) It is used of Israel as a nation, called out and separated from all other nations — 'The church in the wilderness' (Acts 7:38).

(2) The Jewish synagogue: 'And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church ...' (Matt. 18:17). (Note the word 'assembly' in James 2:2 is not *ekklesia*, but *sunagoge*, and the phrase should be translated, 'If there come into your synagogue').

(3) The guild of Ephesian craftsmen in Acts 19:32,39,41 ('The lawful assembly').

(4) Separate assemblies in different localities:

'The church of God which is at Corinth' (1 Cor. 1:2).

'The churches of Christ' (Rom. 16:16).

'The churches of God' (1 Cor. 11:16; 1 Thess. 2:14).

(5) The church of the firstborn (Heb. 12:23). This assembly is connected with the New Jerusalem (verse 22), and the New Jerusalem with the Bride (Rev. 21:9,10). Paul wished to present believers at Corinth — a chaste virgin to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2), and likened the Lord to a 'husband'.

(6) The church which is His Body (Eph. 1:22,23). This church is connected with a great secret hid from all past generations (Eph. 3:9; 5:32; Col. 1:26). It is called a 'new man' (Eph. 2:15), and its goal is a perfect man, or full grown *male* (Eph. 4:13, the same word as is translated 'husband' in Eph. 5:25). This church is part of the Husband — Christ — and cannot be the Bride at the same time, and when it can be proved that there is no difference between a man and a woman, then it will be time to state that the church of which Christ is the Head and the church which is the Bride are identical — but not until then! Let us give the Holy Spirit credit for using figures of speech in a sensible way.

The sphere of blessing connected with this church is at the right hand of God, to where the Lord Jesus ascended. Now we are never told in the Scriptures that the right hand of God is in the New Jerusalem, or that the Lord Jesus ascended to the New Jerusalem, and we have no Scriptural reason to treat these two spheres as though they are identical: rather are we given to understand that the right hand of God is the highest place that can be conceived — 'far *above* all heavens' (Eph. 1:20,21; 4:10), whereas the New Jerusalem is *in* heaven, and eventually *comes down out of* heaven (Rev. 21:2,10).

We table hereunder some of the differences between the church formed during the period covered by the Acts of the Apostles and after:

UP TO ACTS 28

AFTER ACTS 28

TITLE

The word 'mystery' (or 'secret') never used concerning this church.

The mystery made known, which previously had been hid in God (Eph. 3:9; 5:32; Col. 1:26).

This company is linked with Old Testament (Gal. 3:8; Heb. 11).

No connection with Old Testament (Col. 1:26).

TIME

The time period connected with believers is 'since the foundation (overthrow) of the world' (Matt. 13:35; 25:34).

This church chosen *before* the foundation (overthrow) of the world (Eph. 1:4).

This expression only used elsewhere of Christ Himself (John 17:24; 1 Peter 1:20).

UP TO ACTS 28

AFTER ACTS 28

PLACE

The New Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven (Rev. 21:2,10).

The right hand of God, 'far above all' (Eph. 1:19-21; 4:10).

FIGURE

The Bride, The Lamb's wife (Rev. 21:2,9,10).

The New Man (Eph. 2:15).

CONSTITUTION

As saved sinners, believers are one in Christ, but dispensationally are not equal. The Jew is first. Gentile believers are wild olives grafted into the true (Israel) — note Romans 11:17,18,22; 15:27. They are warned that they may be 'cut off' (Rom. 11:21,22). Doctrinally they are in Christ; dispensationally they are blessed with faithful Abraham (Gal. 3:9).

Jewish and Gentile believers one in Christ, and on a perfect equality doctrinally and dispensationally.

They are joint-heirs, joint-partakers, and a joint-body (Eph. 3:6). Doctrinally they are in Christ; dispensationally they are blessed with Christ in His ascended glory (Eph. 1:3; 2:6).

Believers are identified with Christ in His burial and resurrection (Rom. 6:4 R.V.).

Believers not only identified with Him in burial and resurrection, but have the added blessing of being raised and seated with Him (Eph. 2:5,6, R.V.).

PRACTICE

A walk that was worthy was also accompanied by evidential gifts of miracles (Mark 16:17-20).

The practice of this assembly is on as high a level, but without these evidential gifts of miracles (Phil. 2:25-30; 2 Tim. 4:20).

Two baptisms; water and spirit (Acts 1:5; 2:1-4; 8:14-17; 10:44-48).

One baptism (Eph 4:5). The type vanishes, but the great spiritual reality remains. See also Colossians 2:16,17.

UP TO ACTS 28

AFTER ACTS 28

PRACTICE (cont.)

The New Covenant promised to Israel in Jeremiah 31:31-33 in operation (2 Cor. 3:6).

Israel now *lo ammi* (not My people), and the covenant connected with Israel as a *nation* and with their *land* is not mentioned (see Jer. 31:31-40; 32:37-44). It is held in abeyance until the nation of Israel is taken up again by God (see Rom. 11:26,27).

HOPE

Believers looked to meet the Lord in the air on His way to the earth. This is connected with the Archangel Michael (1 Thess. 4:16; Dan. 12:1), and the last trumpet (1 Cor. 15:52), and the reigning of Christ over the Gentiles, i.e., the millennium on the earth (Rom. 15:12,13).

Believers look to be manifested in the glory of heaven's holiest of all, where the Lord Jesus is now seated, and where they are seated with Him, by faith, hope being the realization of this glorious position. Their inheritance is there 'in the light' (Col. 1:12), and they are exhorted to keep their minds and affections fixed there (Col. 3:1-4).

The words used in relation to this hope are 'revelation' (*apokalupsis*) and 'coming' (*parousia*). These are dated as being after the Great Tribulation (Matt. 24:29).

The words used for this hope are never *apokalupsis* or *parousia*, but *epiphaneia* (epiphany, appearing, 2 Tim. 4:1,8). No connection with prophetic times or seasons.

Concerning these things believers '*knew perfectly*' (1 Thess. 4:16; 5:2).

Prayer for *enlightenment is necessary* that this new hope may be understood (Eph. 1:18-23).

These are some, at least, of the manifest differences between the Bride, the Lamb's wife, and the church of the Mystery, and they relate to time, place, symbols used, constitution, practice, and hope, although both have in common, and find their foundation in, the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ upon Calvary's Cross.

In addition, we should note that the church of the Mystery is not just a development of the Pentecostal church, for the following reasons:

(1) The nation of Israel in covenant relationship with God is likened to an olive tree (Jer. 11:16). Gentile believers during the Acts were grafted into the tree in the place of the unbelieving branches that had been cut off, in order to provoke the nation to jealousy (Rom. 11:11). That these are individual believers and not Gentile nations is clear from the fact that they stand 'by faith' (Rom. 11:20), and are addressed as 'brethren' (Rom. 11:25).

The epistle to the Romans was the last that Paul wrote during the period covered by the Acts of the Apostles, and in it he stated that *some* of the branches had been broken off (Rom. 11:17). There had been several excisions of the branches (Matt. 13; Acts 13:46; 18:6), but the olive tree still stood when Romans was written. It does not stand today, for the nation of Israel has been 'plucked up' and scattered all over the earth. The tree is cut down, and Israel is *lo ammi* — not My people. They await the Deliverer, Who shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob, and graft the natural branches back again into the olive tree, or in other words, restore Israel nationally. Then will the olive tree flourish once more (Hos. 14:4-7).

When was this tree cut down? We believe Acts 28 supplies the answer. It was there that Isaiah 6:9,10 was quoted for the *last* time concerning Israel, giving them blinded eyes, dulled ears, and a non-understanding heart, the very negation of the New Covenant (Note Jer. 31:33, and the reference there to the 'heart').

After this time the olive tree is never mentioned again in Paul's epistles. The cutting down of the olive tree must mean that God is now dealing with His people in a new way; in other words, a new dispensation or administration must now be operating. Hence the 'Dispensation of the secret' (Eph. 3:9 R.V.) which follows Acts 28, containing what God now wills to make known to His saints, consequent upon the failure of the olive tree — Israel. This is not the olive tree patched up or improved from the Acts period, but a new revelation and a fresh commencement in God's purposes.

(2) The church of the Mystery is a *new creation* (the word 'make' in Ephesians 2:15 is the word 'create', and is so translated in the R.V.). Now creation, whether in the material universe or the spiritual realm, means a new beginning (see 2 Cor. 5:17; Rev. 21:1,4, 5), old things pass away, all things become new. Hence in the same verse that speaks of this church being a 'creation', it is designated a *new man* (Eph. 2:15). Thus, the church of the Mystery is not an evolution doctrinally from the church formed during the Acts of the Apostles, but a new creation — a fresh beginning. We do not believe that evolution can be found here any more than in the material universe of Genesis 1.

(3) Ephesians 4:12 uses the phrase, 'the perfecting of the saints', in connection with the practical outworking of the Mystery. The word translated 'perfect' is not the usual word which means 'to bring to completion or maturity'. It has behind it the thought of a rupture or breakage, compare '*mending their nets*' (Matt. 4:21); '*perfectly joined together*' (1 Cor. 1:10; note the reference in the context to 'division'); '*restore*' (Gal. 6:1; because of the separation caused by sin). It is a word therefore that aptly describes this new ministry. The breakage had come at Acts 28 and the saints needed to be 'mended' or 'adjusted' to the new dispensation of the Mystery.

For these three reasons we feel that we cannot teach faithfully that the Mystery is but a dispensational development of things that pertained during the Acts of the Apostles.

Moreover, the usage of the words 'adoption' and 'firstborn' in the Scriptures shows that God has at least three companies of His redeemed children which are blessed in differing spheres. We must not read our Western ideas of adoption into the New Testament. An adopted child today can never be in such a close position as a child by birth.

The reverse was possible in New Testament times.

'Adoption was a kind of embryo will; the adopted son became the owner of the property and the property could pass to a person that was naturally outside the family only through his being adopted ... this ancient form of will was *irrevocable* and *public*. The terms "son" and "heir" are interchangeable. ... It is remarkable that the adopted son should have a stronger position than the son by birth; yet it is so' (A *historical Commentary on St. Paul's epistle to the Galatians*, Sir William Ramsay, D.C.L.).

Such was the custom of adoption when the apostle Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia and it forms the basis of his arguments in chapter 3 (see verse 15). Those who by grace receive the blessing of adoption in the Scriptural sense are put in the position of the *firstborn* with the *firstborn's inheritance*.

First of all is Israel according to the flesh — ‘to whom pertaineth the *adoption*’ (Rom. 9:3,4). ‘Israel is My son ... My *firstborn*’ (Exod. 4:22). Consequently in the earthly sphere where their blessings are centred, they are destined to be first and above the Gentile nations (Deut. 28:13; Isa. 61:5,6). Secondly, as Israel are passing off the scene in unbelief, there is formed a company of believers who are called the ‘church of the *firstborn*’ (Heb. 12:23). They too have received the position of adoption (Gal. 4:5-7). Their sphere of blessing is the Heavenly Jerusalem whose goal is to descend from heaven and form part of the new earth (Rev. 3:12; 21:2,10,24). Thus finally introducing to us another earthly sphere. They are likened to a Bride (Rev. 21:2) and have the first place for they are above the innumerable company of angels who are linked with this city (Heb. 12:22) and will finally take part in their judgment (1 Cor. 6:3).

Thirdly we have the revelation of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Firstborn of all creation (Col. 1:15,18) and He is above all not only in earth but in heaven, including principality, power, might and dominion and every name that is named, being now seated at the Father’s right hand (Eph. 1:19-23). There is a company of believers so intimately linked with Him that He is designated as the Head and they His Body (Eph. 1:23) so that where He is, they must be also. The epistle to the Ephesians reveals that they have been marked off likewise in the Father’s will for ‘adoption’ (Eph. 1:5) and it is expressly revealed that the sphere where they are blessed is not this present earth or the future one, but highest heaven itself, for they are not only raised with Christ, but seated together with Him in the heavenlies (Eph. 2:6) and share His glorious exaltation ‘far above all’ (Eph. 1:21). There are then three differing companies of the redeemed, all rejoicing in ‘adoption’ and holding the firstborn’s premier position which most obviously cannot be in the *same* sphere at *one and the same* time.

Let us learn to be obedient to the will of God, and ‘try the things that differ’ (Phil. 1:10, margin). We do not further the

truth by blending what He has kept apart. This can only cause confusion, and inability to receive the highest and best that God has to give. 'Things that are excellent' (Phil. 1:10) can only be appreciated when the command to test and try the things that differ has been complied with faithfully.

We would remind the reader that salvation is only a beginning, and that those who have been *saved* by faith in the Lord Jesus must learn to *live* by faith. This means going on to believe and act upon *all* that God has revealed in His Word. Alas, there is the possibility of an evil heart of *unbelief* in a believer (Heb. 3:12). Looking back on Israel's history we can see that all were redeemed by the blood of the passover lamb, and yet, of the many thousands who came out of Egypt, only *two* (Caleb and Joshua), believed *all* the revelation of God, and thereby entered into the fullness of blessing and enjoyment of Canaan. The rest could not enter in because of *unbelief* (Heb. 3:19). Thus, although saved, they *missed the best* that God had revealed at that particular time.

We realize that the truths set forth in this leaflet are challenging, and earnestly desire that the reader may carefully and prayerfully weigh over the evidence given in the light of a Word rightly-divided, so as fully to apprehend that for which we have been apprehended by Christ Jesus (Phil. 3:12), and thus be *approved* unto Him (2 Tim. 2:15).

May the principle embodied in the rebuke of the Lord to the two disciples on the way to Emmaus never be merited by either writer or reader:

'O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken' (Luke 24:25).

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