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# The Transformation of the Idea of the Church in the History of Early Christianity\*

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## I

THE Christian church had its origin in the primitive Christian community; in the fellowship of the disciples and followers of Jesus who, after the stumbling-block of the Cross had been overcome by faith in the resurrection of Jesus, came together to wait until he who had been raised and exalted should shortly return on the clouds of heaven as "Son of man," to institute the judgment and to introduce the time of salvation.

The primitive community understood itself in light of the idea of *Heilsgeschichte*, of history as the path along which Israel, the people of God, had been led in accordance with the divine plan. It thought of itself as *the community of the last days*, as the "little flock" that had been assured that it was God's good pleasure to give it the kingdom (Luke 12:32). As the community of the last days it was the goal of God's saving purpose and the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecies. It was *the true Israel*, whose gathering and manifestation Jewish apocalyptists had ardently desired and Jewish prayers implored. This primitive Christian fellowship appropriated the name that heretofore had designated Israel as God's people: *qāhāl* in Hebrew and *ekklesia* in Greek. Its members were the elect, the saints. The twelve, who gave it leadership and whom its legends promptly read back into the life of Jesus, corresponded to the twelve tribes. They were shortly to sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28 [Luke 22:29 f.]).

The fact that the primitive community knew itself as the true Israel of the last days indicates (1) that *it was unaware of itself as a new religion* over against Judaism and paganism. The temple and the sacrificial cult were not repudiated. The community foregathered in the temple precincts (Acts 2:46), and its members continued to observe the ancient sacrificial ritual (Matt. 5:23 f.). As Mark 13:9 and Matt. 10:17 show, Jewish administration of justice was acknowledged, and the twelve, who gave leadership to the community, were not regarded in any sense as a legal body whose authority might supersede or override that of the Jewish Sanhedrin. As a matter of fact, the twelve were not properly an institution at all; they were a representation of the true Israel. Ideally they were the princes of the twelve tribes, though they had not yet achieved that dignity. Furthermore,

\*Dedicated to Fritz Taeger on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday.

the choice at a later date, not much later, but we cannot be too specific, of elders as leaders of the community also did not involve any separation from the Jewish racial and religious group. It only showed that the community constituted itself as a synagogue comparable to others already within Judaism (cf., e.g. Acts 6:9). As these had their elders, so also had the Christian community, to the extent that it assumed the outer form of a synagogue.

The fact that the primitive community knew itself as the community of the last days, however, indicates (2) that its peculiar and essential being was not brought to expression in this form. Its essence, as the essence of an eschatological phenomenon, could not possibly be embodied in ordinances, in institutions, in offices; for by its very nature it was *an entity that belonged to the age to come*. It belonged no longer to *this* world, to the old aeon that already had run its course. It knew itself summoned by the word of Jesus, the word that continued to resound in it as a message imparted by the Spirit. It was the community assembled about this summoning word and, in faith in the word that gave it its being, it detected the powers of the coming age already in effect within it. *The Spirit*, of which the community knew itself possessed, was clearly a gift of the last days. It performed miracles within the fellowship; it brought forth prophets (cf. Acts 11:28; 21:9, 10 ff.); it operated in situations of persecution by imparting the proper answers to those who had been delivered up and brought to trial (Matt. 10:19 f.; cf. Mark 13:11). It worked also in the proclamation of the gospel—whether reproducing, that is, recalling the words that Jesus had spoken; or producing, proclaiming Jesus as the coming Son of man and speaking in his name.

Those who belonged to the community were sealed with the "seal of the living God" (Rev. 7:2 f.; 9:4), which placed them under God's protection that they might be spared the terrors of the last days. Perhaps the phraseology of the Apocalypse is not merely symbolic. If Erich Dinkler is correct in maintaining that the sign of the cross was employed even in Judaism as an eschatological seal (*sphragis*), it is natural to assume that the sealing of Christians took place in realistic fashion, with the sealed marked with the sign of the cross, possibly at the same time as their baptism, which Paul already knew as a seal (2 Cor. 1:22; cf. [at a later date] Eph. 1:13; 4:30).

Naturally the problem is posed at the very outset, how the early Christian community continued to think of itself as an eschatological, other-worldly entity, both in view of the fact that it was compelled by the non-occurrence of the parousia to fashion and consolidate an organization, and especially in the light of its claim to be the true Israel. For the fact that the community knew itself as the true Israel indicates (3) that only those who belonged to Israel would share in the salvation of the last days (Matt. 10:5 f., 23; Mark 7:27; cf. Matt. 15:24). That did not exclude the possibility, foretold by certain prophecies and anticipated by some

Jewish hopes, that Gentiles would also be received into the community. But it did mean that non-Jews, to be admitted into the community of the last days, would have to become Jews, that is to say, would have to assume the obligations of the law and allow themselves to be circumcised.

## II

The way in which the disagreement over this issue disturbed the apostolic age is well-known, although the quarrel was not by any means the only theme then under discussion, as F. C. Baur and the Tübingen school once assumed. We do not propose to enter into the details of the controversy. It is necessary only to recall Paul's debate with the apostles at the so-called Apostolic Council (Gal. 2:1-10). The result was that Jewish Christianity *recognized non-Jewish congregations that would be free of the restraints of the law*. The extent to which the primitive community understood Paul's ideas is open to question. However, since his conception of the ecclesia became the dominant one, and since Jewish Christianity, which had extended recognition to gentile Christians but had remained itself within the confines of the law, soon disappeared from the stage of history, we may see in the Pauline understanding of the ecclesia *the first transformation of the idea of the church*. Although it may also have been reached by others as well as by Paul, and independently of him, nevertheless it was he who gave it its most decisive articulation.

The ecclesia now no longer thought of itself as bound to the Jewish people and its ordinances. Above all, it was conscious of freedom from the law, as, for that matter, from all bonds of a human order; from social and national as well as from natural, bonds:

There is neither Jew nor Greek,  
there is neither slave nor free,  
there is neither male nor female;  
for you are all one in Christ Jesus.  
[Gal. 3:28; cf. I Cor. 12:13, Col. 3:11.]

“Or is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one.” (Rom. 3:29 f.) “For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him.” (Rom. 10:12; cf. also I Cor. 7:17-24.)

From the point of view of the primitive community it was inevitable that this should appear to be an appalling transformation, or perhaps, to the extent that it understood Paul, a tremendous, new perception by which the very thing that the eschatological community claimed by its nature to be was radically apprehended; the apprehension, namely, that it was an unworldly, other-worldly entity. To this degree it would be legitimate to say that this first transformation, however much a change it was when viewed from the vantage point of history, was not an intrinsic change at all,

but the radical realization of what had been latent from the beginning. If the other-worldliness of the eschatological community had consisted in the first place only, or essentially, of the confidence that it belonged to a future that was fast becoming the present, it now characterized the community *in statu quo*, a community that was beginning to understand all the relationships of life in the light of the beyond, in Pauline terminology, to view them from the standpoint of the "as though . . . not" (I Cor. 7:29 ff.); a community that thought of this life as the life of strangers and foreigners, to be led in the power of the Spirit, i.e. in the power of the other world, with the Spirit no longer understood primarily as the gift of "speaking with tongues" and of working miracles, but as the power of ethical behaviour. The life of the other world had broken in upon this world of space and time.

The fact that the church separated from Judaism as a racial group and from its law did not mean, however, that it surrendered its eschatological consciousness, its conviction that it stood at the end, and was the goal, of a *Heilsgeschichte*, a course of history God had planned for man's salvation. For Paul, as for his Jewish-Christian predecessors, the ecclesia was the true Israel, the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). The holy book of the Jews, the Old Testament, was taken over from the primitive Christian community as a matter of course, that is, as a matter of course for Paul and for those whose thinking was akin to his, whereas it was rejected by those with gnostic tendencies, or accepted only with a critique such as that employed by Ptolemaeus, the disciple of Valentinus. However, it was the Pauline point of view that prevailed in the church, and that meant that the Christian community remained conscious of its continuity with Israel, naturally not with the history of Israel as the history of a national group, but with the *Heilsgeschichte* that God had wrought in and through the history of the Israelitish people. In this sense Abraham was the father also of the faithful in the pagan world. Above all, the relationship of the Christian community to God was interpreted as the new covenant that had been prophesied by Jeremiah. The church was the people of God, and to it belonged all Israel's predicates of honor.

What all this, especially the appropriation of the Old Testament, meant in other directions, that of ethical indoctrination and ecclesiastical law, for instance, is here left out of account. Its bearing on the idea that the church held of itself is the only subject of our present inquiry. This consisted of the following:

(1) In the self-consciousness of gentile Christians also, Christianity in the first instance was *not a new religion*. Naturally it was also not regarded as the old "religion." The fact is that the Old Testament was not understood in any sense as the document of the religion of Israel, but as the document of the revelation of God, of his ways, his demands, his grace. The Israel with which the gentile Christian knew himself to have solidarity was not the empirical Israelitish-Jewish people, but *that* Israel that always stood, so to speak, only as an ideal above the empirical history of the peo-

ple and was realized only in individual persons such as Abraham or David; *that* Israel that had its reality after all only in the word of God that confronted the empirical people as promise and demand. To this same word of God the Christian community knew itself bound to respond, and therefore the continuity was, so to speak, that of the word of God of the then and the now. Accordingly, by the very fact that it understood itself as the true Israel, the ecclesia was in this sense an other-worldly entity.

(2) The fact that the ecclesia understood itself to be the people of God meant also that it thought of itself as a *unity*. The gospel did not promise individual persons the salvation of their soul and immortality, as did the mystery cults; it called individuals together to the one congregation of God. In the mystery cults, to be sure, individual persons came together to form congregations, but the individual congregations, although they may have stood, viewed historically, in certain relationships to one another, neither constituted a unity nor were exclusive. As a matter of fact, of course, the Christian congregations also were formed by the convocation of individual persons. However, they did not think of themselves as a visible, empirical corporation, but as a manifestation of the one, invisible congregation of God to which they all had been called. All individual congregations belonged together in the one and the same ecclesia that here and there took visible form. This ecclesia was in being before the individuals who were called into it. By his call the individual was summoned into an order or a sphere that projected invisibly, mysteriously, into the earthly. And such a faith soon led to the speculation that the ecclesia was a pre-existent heavenly entity (Eph. 5:32; II Clem. 14; Herm. ii, 4. 1). Whoever belonged to the ecclesia was loosed from all worldly bonds, and his whole life was encompassed by the might and the blessing of this sphere. Membership in the ecclesia naturally ruled out participation in the rites of other cults, but it also had a profound effect on everyday life and conduct. Whoever belonged to it was translated into a new state of being; freed, so to speak, from all ties with this world and associated as a new creature with the world to come.

When Paul characterized this new Christian being as a being "in Christ," however, he employed a mode of thought and a manner of expression alien to his Jewish-Christian inheritance. When he described the ecclesia as the "body of Christ" and the believer who had become part of it by baptism as then "in Christ," he was using concepts taken over from Gnosticism. Those who thought of God as working out his saving purpose in and through the processes of history thought in the category of time; the Gnostics thought in the category of space. The former could no more speak of a being "in Abraham," their phrase was "sons [or children] of Abraham," than the latter could speak of "sons of Christ," or refer to Christ, like Abraham, as the "father" of the faithful.

Paul appropriated the concept of the "body" of Christ (as well as other gnostic categories) in order to articulate the unity and the other-worldliness of the ecclesia in a way that would be congenial to Hellenistic thinking.

Christ was thereby represented as a cosmic unity; as a gnostic aeon to which all who had been baptized belonged by virtue of the Spirit they had received at baptism, as to a unity that embraced them all: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither male nor female; for you are all *one* in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27 f.). "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into *one* body." (I Cor. 12:13.) Consequently the ecclesia was a *sacramental community*, filled with other-worldly power, with Spirit, that pervaded it, so to speak, like a fluid.

### III

In all this, however, the outlines of a *second transformation* of the idea of the church began to emerge. Instead of regarding itself as the eschatological goal, realized by God's saving purpose in the process of history, it began to think of itself as a sacramental fellowship constituted by the Eucharist and by the sacramental powers of which the Eucharist was the medium. Paul was not conscious of any contradiction; for him the people of God was identical with the body of Christ. The way in which he so to speak neutralized the sacramental concepts with his idea of faith (e.g. Rom. 6) cannot here be discussed, since we are concerned only with the history of the idea of the ecclesia.

The contradiction could remain concealed (1) because both ideas articulated the other-worldliness of the ecclesia: in its essence it was something other than it appeared to be; those who belonged to it were no longer part of this world; (2) because both ideas had in common an orientation to the future, albeit a different one in each instance. Those who thought in terms of God's saving purpose working itself out within the framework of history expected the divine plan to be brought to completion with the (shortly forthcoming) parousia of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the world-judgment that the new aeon would succeed. According to gnostic ways of thinking, the present was the time in which the body of the heavenly redeemer would assemble the divine sparks scattered in men's souls and thereby reach its "fullness." Once these fragments of light had all been absorbed into the body, the earthly world would collapse and return to the chaos of darkness. The individual longed for the release from this world that death would bring, the ascent to the heavenly world of light, and the enjoyment, with no more ado, of immortality and its glory. Accordingly the cosmic eschatology of Gnosticism retreated in practice before the hope of individual immortality. In the church, on the other hand, both individual and universal eschatology persisted side by side, and at least Paul and his school were not aware of their antithesis. It was apparent, however, to Christians with gnosticizing tendencies, who rejected the realistic apocalyptic eschatology together with the ideas of the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment: such Christians as the Corinthians who were attacked in I Cor. 15 and the false teachers of the Pastoral epistles who maintained that "the resurrection is past already" (II Tim. 2:8).

Consequently the church continued to think of itself as an other-worldly entity whose existence in space and time was only a preliminary stage of its being. Here and now the ecclesia was in an alien land: the faithful had their citizenship in heaven (Phil. 3:20); their city was yet to come (Heb. 13:14); they were now on a journey (Heb. 3:7 ff.); and they were bidden to gird up their loins (I Pet. 1:13; Polycarp to *Phil.* 2:1).

But gradually the idea of the church underwent a transformation, for which various factors were responsible: (1) the non-occurrence of the expected parousia, which not only brought disillusionment to the members of the community of believers, but also had the understandable consequence, attested as early as the Pastoral epistles, that they accustomed themselves to the regular course of the world and slipped into an unpretentious, although distinctively Christian, pattern of living; (2) the sheer, practical necessity of developing ordinances and offices, without which a community could not exist, even though it thought of itself fundamentally as an unworldly, other-worldly entity, since for good or ill it was also an empirical-historical one; (3) the immanent effect of the sacramental way of thinking. As a consequence of this last factor interest came to focus more on the salvation of the individual soul than on a universal eschatological future. The immediacy of the other world was no longer, as in Paul's instance, understood dialectically as the actuality of the word, which was to be apprehended by faith; it was construed as the efficacy of the sacramental powers, of which the ecclesiastical institutions were custodians and trustees.

The complex of problems created by the *non-occurrence of the parousia* and the attempts to come to terms with it (so far as the church was aware of it as an issue) will not be discussed in this article. Nor is this the place to give an account of the development that resulted in the *formation of ecclesiastical institutions*. That this took place, is self-evident; *how* it took place, is not really a matter of concern to us in the present connection. The critical question is, whether the organization was regarded as functional, as regulative, or as constitutive. If the church, as a human order, was originally constituted by the word that was proclaimed, and if the apostles, the first vehicles of the word, were not originally officials, then the decisive step was taken when the idea became current that the apostles had installed elders or bishops in the individual congregations as their successors, and that these congregational officials, who only had administrative functions to begin with, also took over the preaching of the word. For therewith tradition and succession, which were essential if the proclamation of the word were to be perpetuated, had been transformed from free and charismatic into institutional occurrences. This had happened in large part as early as the book of Acts and the Pastoral epistles, in which the Spirit was already associated with the office and was believed to be conferred by ordination. It was complete by the time the epistle of First Clement was written; that is, towards the end of the first century.

Something more was added when the bishops became also the official

leaders of the cultus, and it was this development that made the ecclesia fully conscious of itself as a sacramental fellowship. For if the cultus, the sacraments of baptism and the eucharist, served to mediate the spiritual powers of the other world, then the leader of the cultus, spiritually endowed by virtue of his office with the right and the gift of administering the sacraments, was set apart from the laity as a *priest*. Thus there arose the contrast between priests and laymen, which was still unknown to the New Testament. Also the pre- and extra-Christian idea of the sacrifice offered by the priest intruded into the understanding of the Christian cultus, which originally was the representation or manifestation of the eschatological community, a community in which the Spirit had free play. All this predicated a sacred ecclesiastical law in contrast to a profane; the cultic ordinances were ordinances of a holy law. And, because the ecclesia was to embrace the whole life of the believers, what was true of the cultic came to be true of all ordinances of life: they all partook of the sacramental character of the cultic. The fact that individuals were upheld and directed by divine ordinances was their guarantee of salvation. *The church became the institute of salvation.*

#### IV

*The last decisive transformation of the idea of the church* was now complete. The sacramental fellowship developed out of the eschatological community and issued finally in the institute of salvation. The consciousness that it was an unworldly, other-worldly entity was not abandoned, but it underwent a peculiar modification. The transcendental character of the church was no longer grounded essentially in its orientation to the future, but in its present possession of institutions that already mediated the powers of the other world and guaranteed the individual his future salvation. The immediacy of salvation had lost its dialectical character.

The church's original self-consciousness was not simply obliterated. It was overlaid and could break through again and again. This created tensions that were characteristic of the history of early Christianity, but these are matters into which we cannot enter here. However, the consequence of the transformation in one specific respect needs still to be characterized.

Naturally the orientation to the future did not simply disappear. To begin with, however, the interest in the individual future of the believer, for whom, for instance, the Eucharist was the "medicine of immortality" (Ign. Eph. 20:2), came to outweigh the interest in the universal eschatology. Then the latter, while by no means abandoned, was robbed in large part of its vitality. The cosmic drama of the end of the world was pushed off into some indefinite future, although at certain times, as in the book of Revelation, the earlier eschatological hope could experience a passionate revival.

But the dialectical relation of the church to the world fell into decay when Christians, as a consequence of the non-occurrence of the parousia, accommodated themselves to a further life in this world and came to think

of the ecclesia as an institute of salvation that guaranteed life after death. Not only the Pastoral epistles and the epistle of I Clement—these especially clearly in their prayers for the state—but also Hermas, with his protest against the development, bear witness to a secularization of the church in the sense that *the Christian faith was thought to be a new religion*. And this involved a conception of the ecclesia as an entity within the framework of world-history, in the terminology of the Gospel of Peter, as the “third race,” over against the Jews and the Greeks (i.e. pagans).

The beginnings of this development were articulated even within the New Testament; more specifically, in *Luke's representation of history*. In his Gospel volume he endeavored, in contrast to the other evangelists, to give a historical account of the life of Jesus. In the prologue he declared that he had proceeded as a conscientious historian. Within the narrative itself he not only took pains to sketch a better ordered sequence of events than Mark had given, but also tried, by his datings in 1:5, 2:1-3, and 3:1 f., to give the events narrated a chronological relation to the history of the world. He changed the apocalyptic prediction of the “abomination of desolation” (Mark 13:14-20) into the prophecy of the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (21:20-24).

In his Acts volume he described the history of the primitive community, of the beginnings of the mission, and of Paul's missionary journeys to the time of the apostle's imprisonment. The very fact that he wrote a report about the origin and early history of the church at all, is significant; for the older community, with its predisposition to eschatology, would have had no interest in it. But, above all, the fact that he made the Acts of the Apostles the sequel to the Gospel proves that he no longer understood the original function of the tradition about Jesus as a constituent of the apostolic preaching (the kerygma). He had historicized it. For the eschatological faith of the primitive community, as for that of Paul, the history of the world had come to its end with Christ; as the eschatological community, the church of Christ was the goal and the end of God's plan of salvation. In the thought of the book of Acts, however, this Christian community itself had again a history, beginning with Jesus. A later age naively accepted this notion and understood Christ as the middle and turning-point of history.

Throughout all changes the thought persisted that the church belonged to the other world and, in view of the fact that salvation lay in the future, was a provisional entity, even when at the same time it was understood as a phenomenon with a historical nexus. But the question is, how the relationship of this life and the life to come, of the now and the then, was understood. As a consequence of the non-occurrence of the parousia and of the accommodation of the church to the world, and with the development of ecclesiastical ordinances, the dialectical understanding of the future and the present, of the other world and this world, was shattered and more or less lost. The church does justice to its essential nature only when a dialectical understanding of its true being remains alive within it.