

## Chapter Two

### THE HISTORICAL ORIGIN OF THE "ECCLESIA"

#### (a) *God's people in the Old and the New Covenant*

IT is easily forgotten that the primitive Christian Community began its existence as a Jewish sect (1). It was some considerable time before the first church in Jerusalem freed itself from the cultic obligations of Judaism in which, of course, all the apostles had been nurtured. Their first place of assembly was naturally the temple, in whose life the earliest Christians continued to participate without much sense of inconsistency. We know how deeply they were agitated by the question as to how far the Jewish ritual and food laws and prohibitions, and, above all, the requirements of circumcision, still possessed validity for them. Only gradually and after violent struggles was a final release from Judaism attained and did it become recognized in consequence that the Christian society was utterly distinct from and indeed irreconcilable with the Jewish church. Not only in this early period, however, but throughout the whole course of Christian history up to the present time, it has proved impossible to answer with a plain "Yes" or "No" the question whether or not the fellowship of Jesus Christ is something new in contradistinction to the people of God according to the Old Covenant. Such a question can only be answered with a "Yes" that must be at the same time a "No", and a "No" that must also be a "Yes". This dialectical relationship is not the result of a confused insight, but springs from the essence of the matter in question.

The *Ecclesia* of Jesus Christ is God's people, the elect people—that was also the rightful description of Israel. For the conviction of election, arising not from their own patriotic over-estimation, but from the revealed word of the prophets, had

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been from the beginning the inspiration of Israel's religious consciousness. Israel is the covenant-people of the covenant-God—that, however, is precisely what the *Ecclesia* of the New Testament apprehends itself to be. It would seem, therefore, that according to the purpose of God the *Ecclesia* was to be identified with the elect people of the Old Covenant. And yet the fellowship founded by Jesus realized that it was something wholly new, namely, the fellowship of those who through Jesus Christ share in the New Covenant and the new aeon. Although the church since Irenaeus (2) has been accustomed to explain this relationship of identity and non-identity as due to the difference between two different economies or dispensations within the course of one and the same stream of redeeming history, this explanation cannot be made quite to correspond either with the first Christians' own interpretations of their community, or with the historical facts. On the contrary, Jeremiah had already raised the expectation of a "new covenant" which "would not be as the old covenant which God had concluded with their fathers"<sup>1</sup> and the *Ecclesia* itself is aware that through the present fulfilment of what had been previously merely promised, not simply a new *modus dispensationis* but an utterly new dimension of salvation has been vouchsafed, namely, life in the Holy Spirit, concerning which the Gospel of St. John roundly declares "for the Holy Spirit was not yet given".<sup>2</sup> When Paul affirms: "If any man is in Christ he is a new creature"<sup>3</sup> he is alluding to a new mode of existence not yet known to the believers of the old covenant.

This new mode of existence in the new covenant, therefore, characterizing the life of the *Ecclesia* in contradistinction to that of the Old Testament people of God is especially recognizable in three facts. Firstly, the ceremonial and cultic laws of Israel and Judaism are no longer valid for the *Ecclesia*. This issue was especially at stake in the struggle which Paul had to fight out with the exponents of the doctrine of continuity: for those who belong to Christ, circumcision is no longer a valid requirement.<sup>4</sup> To assert the continued obligation of circumcision would be nothing less than to disown and lose one's

<sup>1</sup> Jer. 31:31ff.

<sup>2</sup> John 7:39.

<sup>3</sup> 2 Cor. 5:17.

<sup>4</sup> Gal. 5:6.

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relationship to Christ. At this point the particularism of a Jewish sect was transcended and superseded by the universality of the new humanity—in Christ. This meant a break with the Temple cultus due to the recognition that Jesus Christ Himself has offered the only perfect sacrifice, consequently is the only true high priest, and that this His sacrifice has been offered once for all.<sup>1</sup> With this recognition, the idea of a distinction between priesthood and laity has forever ceased to be tenable.

In all this was implied, secondly, a clear discrimination between membership of a nation or race and membership of a community of believers. This distinction is now explicit: for already within the framework of the Old Testament itself such a distinction is at least implicit—that between the true Israel, the true people of God, and the Israel to whom God addressed His relentless “Not my people”.<sup>2</sup> Even within the Old Testament itself it is already a question of a “Remnant” springing up within the physically constituted Nation. This Remnant, however, was never separated off. But such a separation was now effected through baptism in the name of Christ, whilst that other distinction—the wall of partition<sup>3</sup>—between born Jews and born Catholics—was at the same time abolished; the Gentiles who are in Christ are quite as fully citizens of the new heavenly *polis* as are those of the circumcision.

A third conclusion was implied, namely, that the civil laws of the Old Testament prescribed for Israel as a national, political entity were no longer relevant. From the point of view of constitutional law, the *Ecclesia* stands under the jurisdiction of the Roman Emperor and Roman jurisprudence, and this heathen order was granted complete recognition as the divinely appointed one,<sup>4</sup> in spite of the fact that it stood in no sort of historical continuity with the process of special revelation. As far as secular politics are concerned, the *Ecclesia* is no longer subordinate to the Jewish theocracy, but to the avowedly secular government of the Roman state. *Ipso facto* the *Ecclesia* renounces every kind of theocratic pretensions;

<sup>1</sup> That is the theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews.

<sup>2</sup> Hosea 1:6; 2:1.    <sup>3</sup> Eph. 2:14.    <sup>4</sup> Rom. 13:1-5.

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theocracy, the fusion of Christ's rule with the law of the state, is henceforth given up, just as much as the Temple priesthood, and the laws of the Sabbath and of circumcision, are given up.

Therein resides the otherness of the new dispensation as compared with the old: but its otherness cannot be fully grasped by such a comparison; it consists above all in the new dimension of life in the Holy Spirit and the new aeon, which Jesus Christ has not merely announced, but also inaugurated. Therefore there now ensues the plain and unambiguous outward secession from Judaism to which there corresponds inwardly the self-description of the *Ecclesia* as the true Israel,<sup>1</sup> the Israel of God<sup>2</sup> in opposition to the description of Judaism which rejects Christ as the "Israel after the flesh":<sup>3</sup> this secession, however, does not imply the renunciation of the hope of an ultimate reunion through the conversion of the Jews to Christ.<sup>4</sup>

### (b) *Jesus and the Ecclesia*

The approach to an understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the *Ecclesia* has been obstructed by the translation of the term *Ecclesia* without more ado by the term "church", as a result of which the question has been formulated whether Jesus founded or instituted the church, and further because it has been too little realized that there are appointed stages in the process of saving history, that God travels with men along a road of which the end and the beginning are far apart. Revelation is progressive; to the present phase of the process there corresponds a specific mode of existence of the *Ecclesia*. If we bear in mind these two considerations, the question whether the only two places<sup>5</sup> in which Jesus speaks of the *Ecclesia* are genuine or not will appear somewhat beside the point. Whether with the older school of critical scholarship we deny this genuineness or whether with the more recent and no less critical school we affirm it, two points in any event remain indisputable: Jesus

<sup>1</sup> John 1:47; Rom. 9:6.  
<sup>4</sup> Rom. 11:23ff.

<sup>2</sup> Gal. 6:16.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 10:18.

<sup>5</sup> Matt. 16:18; 18:17.

did not “found” the Church; and Jesus unquestionably gathered around Himself a circle of disciples of such as were specially related to Him and whom He specially equipped and sent out in His service.

When we recollect how long the Church took to become clear about its relationship with Judaism, we must not expect Jesus—who never forestalled historical developments, but was content to fulfil His appointed task in history—to have expounded any kind of doctrine about the *Ecclesia* and its relationship to Judaism and the Temple. His mission in the process of redemption and revelation was not to announce the coming of the Messiah, but to be the Messiah, and to be, in particular, the veiled, the “incognito” Messiah. The veil does not begin to be lifted until His death upon the Cross draws near: in the same degree His teaching concerning the character and function of discipleship becomes clearer (3).

From the very beginning, however, He had chosen disciples whose existence may be counted as among the firm constituents of the tradition. The twelve are from the start a fixed feature of it, whose certainty not even Paul ever doubted, although he may well have been sorely tempted to do so. If Jesus knew Himself to be the secret Messiah He could not help doing precisely what tradition reports Him to have done: He gathered around Himself a body of His own, to whom “it is given to understand the mysteries of the Kingdom of God” in contrast to “them that are without”.<sup>1</sup> But He collected this circle around Himself in such wise that in it too the “incognito” was preserved. A visible separation from the Jewish community could as little be thought of as Jesus’ own self-revelation as the Messiah: both events could, of course, only have been misunderstood. But everything speaks for the reliability of the tradition according to which the Last Supper was the occasion when the Master, in sight of His approaching end, revealed to His own their true significance as the community of the New Covenant (4). Up to that point His band of disciples remains the secret following of the secret King.

<sup>1</sup> Mark 4:11.

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With the first Easter all that changed, and the change was openly exhibited in the event of Pentecost.

The community which had been founded and fashioned anew through the events of the passion, death and resurrection, at Pentecost stepped forth out of its concealment; the Messianic secret is now disclosed and at the same time the interpretation of the Messiahship of Jesus transformed; He is now hailed as Messiah—a Messiah who is also the vicariously suffering Servant of God, the Lord who is present with His own through His Spirit. Henceforth the body of disciples are moulded through the “fellowship of the Spirit”. They live not by the inspiration of a historical memory; but He with whom they had eaten and drunk is now in the midst of them.<sup>1</sup> He, the Lord, present through the Spirit, is the life-principle of the *Ecclesia*. But since the Spirit is the present gift of salvation, He is also the earnest (*aparché*)<sup>2</sup> of that which is to come. As the communion rejoicing in the here-and-now presence of the Saviour, the *Ecclesia* at the same time yearns for the future consummation with tense expectancy. And precisely that gift which is present miraculous possession—the Holy Ghost—is the link which as a pledge (*arrabon*)<sup>3</sup> united her with the coming, future One.

So finally the question whether Jesus “founded the *Ecclesia*” is seen to be of small moment: the *Ecclesia* is in any event rooted in Him and interpenetrated by Him, since He is the head of the body which is the *Ecclesia*. The gift of the Holy Ghost and the sharing in the invisible presence of the Master are so closely connected that it is hardly possible to distinguish between them, but rather it may be said: “The Lord is the Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> So then the fellowship of Jesus is the true people of the covenant, whose history doubtless begins with the old covenant, but which only attains full reality through the living presence of the Risen Lord. But because the fellowship is nothing else than this people of God dwelling in the Spirit, it is in no sense an institution, but the living body of the living head.

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 18:20; cf. below, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup> Eph. 1:14; 2 Cor. 1:22.

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 8:23.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Cor. 3:17.