

## Chapter Six

### THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY IN ITS MESSIANIC ESCHATOLOGICAL CHARACTER

**T**he fellowship of Jesus discloses a paradoxical unity of terms which elsewhere are incompatible. It is a mystical unity of visible earthly persons with an unseen, heavenly, and yet present Person, their Head, with the eternal ever-present Christ. One is accustomed therefore to describe the idea of the *Ecclesia* as a mystical one and to speak of a mystical approach to the life of faith (1). One may do this, only one should be aware at the same time that this mysticism is fundamentally different from all other mysticism in that it is rooted in history. For this invisible Christ, the Lord, is in fact no other than He whom the pillars of this society—the apostles—had known in the flesh as the rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, with whom they had eaten and walked in bodily fellowship, who had been amongst them in His physical presence on the last evening of His life and who on the day following had been crucified. And His death upon the cross was a very real and tangible fact of history—crucified under Pontius Pilate, for so in credal confessions this fact had been formulated in terms of world-history. It was not something which now lay forever behind them as though it had been revoked by the subsequent fact of the resurrection: much rather the fact of His having been crucified was the saving fact itself upon which all their faith was founded. Only in the unity of the Cross and the Resurrection was the life of faith possible as a being crucified with Christ and at the same time a sharing in His triumphant life (2). And not until they had risen with Him in their hearts did they apprehend within themselves His so-called mystical presence. An odd sort of mysticism this, which lives entirely in the life of

THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH

a historical, never-to-be-repeated occurrence and is actually identical with this occurrence!<sup>1</sup>

Again, this consciousness of union with the Christ, especially in what are traditionally called the sacraments, has been described as magical (3). One may so call it as long as one is also aware that this real communion with Him in His death and in His risen life was also an act of faith in what God was saying to them through this His *verbum visibile*: namely, that here was the revelation of His righteousness and love, of His justifying grace, by the effect of which they, poor sinners, are no longer sinners in His sight, but rather His dear children or sons to whom He promises the gift of His own eternal life. An odd sort of magic this, which is so completely one with faith in God's revealing Word and saving act. Of course, the fact remains that the vocabularies of both mysticism and magic must be laid under contribution in order to convey what the Christians possessed in a new life of personal communion, which far transcended all rational conceptions of human society and in a new experience of supernatural powers and gifts which lay beyond the boundaries of the sober, rational everyday world. We may go further and say that the paradoxical character of the Church has yet another decisive aspect, in virtue of which whosoever seeks to grasp this new phenomenon by confining himself to the categories of mysticism and magic must once again be totally led astray. For this community knows itself to be not only bound up with the saving history of the past, rooted in it and living in it, but also essentially looking forward to a salvation which is yet to come. The *Ecclesia* as the fellowship of the Messiah is itself Messianic: its existence can be properly described only by using the categories of eschatology, or expectation of a transcendent consummation. This consummation has dawned with Jesus; in His incarnate life it has already begun, for *ephthasen gar he basileia*—the Kingdom of God has come:<sup>2</sup> the rule of God for which all are looking is already among you, for He the transcendent eternal Messiah is already in their midst.<sup>3</sup> But as yet it was a concealed presence. Only with the

<sup>1</sup> Gal. 2:20.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 12:28; Luke 11:20.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 17:21; Matt. 18:20.

Resurrection did the veil begin to be withdrawn. His presence among them as the Risen One is a transcendent happening, “realized eschatology” (4). The new age has now dawned. And yet, at the same time, it remains unfulfilled; in its plenitude it has still to be awaited. This expectation of the future consummation as distinguished from the salvation which has already been realized cannot be dismissed as a more or less ancillary element in the life of the Christian community; it is the very breath of its life (5). To live in this hope, in this tense expectation of the transcendent goal, and from that standpoint to view the here-and-now as a preliminary—that is precisely the fundamental character of the community’s life. They “have, as though they had not”.<sup>1</sup> And further: precisely this forward-looking attitude is identical with what they term the gift of the Holy Ghost. For He, the Holy Ghost, is the very life of the new age. *He* is the “realized eschatology”. For they qualify the gift of the Holy Spirit as the first-fruits, the earnest, the pledge of the future. To be in the Spirit and to live in this expectation are one and the same thing. Therefore they know that their material life on earth, in this sinful body, subjected to the sinful ordinances of this world and chained to the body of this death, is a not-yet-having. They are therefore pilgrims on earth, they know that this earthly life is but a provisional dispensation which will not be transformed into the finality of eternal heavenly life until the Lord comes again in glory.

They walk as yet “by faith, not by sight”.<sup>2</sup> As yet by faith—one must remember what faith means to these first Christians in order to measure the significance of the fact that precisely to this word, which sums up the whole gift of salvation, they add an “as yet”. It is just life in the Spirit which is life on the threshold—one foot has already passed it, the other is still here. Of course, this paradoxical combination of the “not as yet” with the “but already” is expressed in various parts of the New Testament with very varying emphases: sometimes the accent falls on the “not yet”, at other times on the “but already”; but the fact that every “not yet” is always also a

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 7:29f.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 5:7.

THE MISUNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH

“but already” and vice versa, is common to them all (6). Everywhere it is implied that the new life is a life on the threshold, and everywhere it is just the possession of the Holy Spirit which determines and characterizes that life on the threshold.

The spiritual is the eschatological and the eschatological is the spiritual. The fact of standing at a determinative point in the unfolding *historical* process of salvation is therefore the most essential characteristic of this “mysticism”, just as the consciousness of the provisional is the decisive feature of this “magical” element (7).

We have already seen how, out of this mysticism and magic which are primarily and principally none other than faith and hope, there arose that unique life of fellowship which is characterized by the conscious paradox that it is essentially a fellowship of persons and not an institution. This is so in spite of the interior economy as a result of which each one is assigned his special function without there being any official recognition of distinctive rank.

Therefore this economy is something quite spontaneous, springing up of itself, something of which one is hardly aware. It is for this reason that we hear so little of it in the New Testament. When, however, it is spoken of, then the allusion occurs, not as describing a form of church administration, but as relating the parable of the body which has many members, and in connection with the teaching on the Holy Ghost. The description of this economy reaches its climax in the hymn of love,<sup>1</sup> which again culminates in the eschatological vision of faith becoming dissolved in sight. “Church order” as such has not the slightest importance in itself; it is as much a matter of course as is the functioning of his bodily organism for a healthy man.

Ministries have as yet acquired nothing of the character of offices. The command given by the Master Himself—“Who-soever would be great among you, let him be your servant”<sup>2</sup>—is lived out as the essential truth of things. Even the apostle who founded the community at Corinth and who received the

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 12; 1 Cor. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Matt. 20:26f.

most explicit instruction on these matters, thinks it not beneath his dignity to strive to win the approval of his congregation and declined to exercise dominion over them.<sup>1</sup> He wishes to prove anew to them his apostleship, which in fact needed no further authentication, by the manifestation of the signs of an apostle.<sup>2</sup> And those in Corinth who are obviously marked out as leaders by their possession of the *charisma* and *diakonia* of *kybernein* (governing) are recalled to the community as persons who have proved themselves by faithful service, and who therefore have shown by their service that they are worthy to be obeyed when necessary.<sup>3</sup>

The tendency to exalt the office as such could not arise as long as men's hearts and hopes were set upon the future and in consequence the present dispensation regarded as provisional merely. The emergence of ecclesiastical rule and jurisdiction is coincident with the loss or weakening of the community's messianic consciousness. Both the pneumatic and the messianic factors work in the same direction. As long as they are sufficiently alive, they prevent and render superfluous all institutional consolidation. The community which waits in hope for the return of the Lord and which lives by faith and love in the possession of His Spirit, cannot be an institution, a church.

<sup>1</sup> 2 Cor. 1:24.

<sup>2</sup> 2 Cor. 12:12.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Cor. 16:15f.