

Gospel to His praise. Liberalism has not merely undercut the Gospel, it has undercut every type of traditionalism as well. Christians in all traditions have been rendered unsure of their faith by the common enemy. After centuries of complete separation they are being drawn together by virtue of their common faith *and their common doubt*. And where do they find unity? In a common New Testament. It is a stratagem worthy of Almighty God Himself that He should use liberalism as a means of reforming the apparently irreformable and of reconciling the hitherto irreconcilable. In such a context there can be a glorious expectation of entering into the length and breadth and depth and height of revelation as never before.

It looks like the verge of the Promised Land. We have not been this way before. There are terrible dangers ahead of us, but even greater dangers if we hang back. I believe that we should go forward until the pillar of cloud says "Stop". Let us work together in those things in which we are agreed, and let us be utterly honest with one another over those things on which we are disagreed. Let us steep our thought in Scripture, knowing that the more fully we are gripped by the Gospel, the less fearful we shall be of letting go of our traditions. Let us press on with reunion studies centred upon the Bible. (The real task of the Anglican-Methodist Commission is, surely, pre-eminently to foster such studies on a national scale.) Let us resist with all our might any bogus unity. Let us be absolutely firm in refusing any act of union which appears to undercut the Gospel, knowing that our firmness is part of the process whereby the divine will is made known. The removal of the difficulty will be itself an indication of God's continuing guidance. We must remain prepared in the last extremity to face the cost of schism, should unity ever be set above truth. But let us press on with prayer and thanksgiving, looking to the living God to renew us.

## The Church of God: Invisible and Visible

BY ALAN STIBBS

**I**N our day there are some who—at least as far as the Church militant here on earth is concerned—deny the existence of any Church but the visible Church, and in some cases even declare that the concept of the invisible Church is a heretical doctrine. There are others, like Emil Brunner, who emphatically declare that the New Testament Ecclesia and the historical "Church" must not be identified. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants err, says Brunner, "in that they understand the Ecclesia of the New Testament to be the historical Church". Yet, Brunner has no use for the distinction made by the title of this paper. "Quite useless attempts have been made," he says, "to elucidate the relationship between the two

quantities" (that is, the New Testament Ecclesia and the historical "Church") "by drawing a distinction between a visible and an invisible church. This expedient," he continues, "is of no avail, simply because the invisible church is not a fellowship but a *numerus electorum*, hence a fundamentally individualistic conception: but no more is the visible church a fellowship: it is rather an institution, a collective, hence an external means of help. Both fail to tally with what was intended and realized in the New Testament."

Let us notice for our possible guidance where Brunner thinks the truth lies: not in a list of individuals who enjoy no realized fellowship, for they are not a functioning Church; nor in a visible earthly institution, for, he says, "as the Body of Christ the Church has nothing to do with an organization, and has nothing of the character of the institutional about it". It is, he says, "nothing other than a fellowship of persons", or what he calls "a unity of persons". He thinks Luther showed great discernment when he translated the New Testament word *ecclesia* by "congregation".\*

Before we go further it is therefore clearly advisable that the significance of the distinction invisible and visible should be defined; and, if possible, vindicated as worthy of continued use.

At its simplest the description visible church can apply for me only to a gathering whose local meeting together I personally observe. It is noteworthy that in Article XIX the term "visible church" is limited to this meaning, that is, to a congregation meeting in a particular place which can be recognized as Christian by the faith its participants confess, and by the distinctive actions—preaching and administration of the sacraments—in which they engage. Also, in contrast to the church visible, that is, to the local congregation in which they share, Christians are aware that the Church invisible embraces both fellow-believers in Christ scattered throughout the world, and departed saints who are already with Christ in glory.

Just as a thin crescent moon visible in the sky is known to be completed as the moon by much more moon which is invisible, so Christians believe that in Christ their small visible local congregation is one with the whole invisible company of the redeemed. They are persuaded that the one Church is in its full embrace both local and worldwide, both on earth and in heaven, both visible and invisible.

It is more common, however, not to interpret the distinction made by invisible and visible in quite so simple a way. While visible then still means discernible by men, invisible virtually means not only not discernible by men, but also, and more positively, known only to God, and known to men only by faith and not by sight. The terms then distinguish the church as God sees it from the church as men see it. To the one belong all who as true children of God are indwelt by God's Spirit—to the other belong all who profess the faith of Christ and call themselves Christians.

This understanding and use of the terms invisible and visible is capable of bringing division into a single local congregation. For while, if judged by marks discernible by men, the church visible may

\* The quotations are from *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, London, 1952.

include all who are present, it is always to be expected that some of these will lack essential spiritual marks which are fully discernible only by God. In consequence the church invisible, or the true congregation of God's own people as God Himself sees it, will not be identical with the church visible, or the congregation as men see it. This truth is recognized in Article XXVI by the statement that in the visible church the evil be forever mixed with the good. In the Old Testament this is illustrated first in the household of Abraham and then in what Stephen called the Church in the Wilderness, that is, in the generation who came out of Egypt under Moses.

In his epistle to the Romans the Apostle Paul recognizes both sides of this distinction between the invisible and the visible church. On the one side, he says, "They are not all Israel, which are of Israel" (Rom. 9 : 6) ; that some who have all the necessary visible marks of personal participation do not belong to God's true people because they lack the unseen but decisive mark of divine election. On the other side, Paul says, "He is a Jew which is one inwardly ; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit and not in the letter" (Rom. 2 : 29). This indicates unmistakably the possibility that some, who do not belong to the visible Israel because they are not circumcised, nevertheless are true Jews and members of the invisible Israel of God, if inwardly and in spirit they possess and fulfil the necessary spiritual conditions.

So we must recognize that Scripture teaches that the invisible or true church of God both does not include some who belong to the visible church, and does include some who are not reckoned by men as members of the visible congregation of God's people. E. J. Bicknell summed up these points well when he wrote that, "the theory of an invisible church contains the truth that God alone knows who are His, and that His true servants may be found in all Christian bodies and indeed outside them".\*

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The immediate positive implications of such teaching are of far-reaching consequence. Let us notice three of them. First, the true Church is invisible, and its fellowship is enjoyed only by those who come to "the heavenly Jerusalem" (see Heb. 12: 22-24), or are seated in the heavenlies with Christ. For it is God's new creation. It does not really exist in the natural visible order of this world at all, but only in the unseen spiritual order, the order of the world or age to come. It cannot, therefore, be organized as if it belonged, like earthly empires do, to this present visible creation. If we are to enter more fully into the true communion of the saints we must walk by faith and not by sight.

Second, the new and distinctive unity which Christians are meant to enjoy and to exhibit as a witness to the world is a fellowship of the Spirit and not a product of organizational achievement. The very terms in which our Lord prayed for the unity of believers in Himself implies a work of God's Spirit and not an achievement of human effort.

\* *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles*, p. 302.

So Paul in Ephesians 4: 1-3 exhorts his readers not to create a unity which does not exist, but to be eager to maintain the unity which is already given "of the Spirit". Has it not been ever since the continually renewed wonder and miracle of Christian fellowship that Jew and Gentile, bond and free, black and white, find themselves, and are seen to be, "all one in Christ Jesus"? It is this spiritual unity, expressed in actual personal fellowship among people, that is still meant of God to convince the world of the truth of the Gospel, and not some new achievement of ecumenical organization.

Third, all earthly fulfilment of this prayer of our Lord's for unity is inevitably incomplete. There is a final consummation of the unity of the whole body of Christ towards which we are to look, and towards which by the grace of God we are being brought. But this is not a unity of this present life. For it must include all the saints, and only a small minority can be alive on earth in any one generation. The "mature manhood", "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4: 13), is a goal finally to be realized only in the consummation of a life beyond, after the resurrection of the body, and with the number of the elect complete. We ought not, therefore, to hope and work for an achievement in this world, which according to the purposes and providence of God can only be realized in the next. That would be to try to realize too much eschatology.

If, now, we think of the more earthly and visible level of the many groups of Christians meeting as local congregations all over the world, it is significant that such congregations are, in the New Testament, not collectively called "The Church", as constituent parts of an organized earthly institution, but rather "the churches". For example, in Revelation 2 : 7, John writes : "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches". Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 11 : 16, Paul does not say dogmatically (as some would like to talk) "The Church has no such practice", but, "If any one is disposed to be contentious, we recognize no other practice, nor do the churches of God". Nor in the New Testament writings is any earthly centre regarded as the official headquarters or metropolis of the Church on earth. The only city that could possibly make such a claim in apostolic times was Jerusalem. But the earthly Jerusalem is explicitly disowned as a place of bondage. Christians are exhorted to seek rather "the city which is to come"; and to find the proper focus for their love and loyalty in the heavenly Jerusalem; for she is the one free city and the only true "mother of us all" (see Gal. 4 : 25,26; Heb. 13 : 12-14).

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In the hope of making this study less doctrinaire, and more relevant and profitable, let us now seek to appreciate the practical importance for us of the distinction—rightly understood—between the invisible and the visible Church.

This, unmistakably showed itself at the Reformation.

The Reformers needed the awareness afforded by this distinction to support their conviction that they were still in the true Church of God, although they had withdrawn from the great visible earthly institution of the so-called Church of Rome.

This awareness corresponded to their rediscovery of the truth of justification by faith. It was inspired and informed by this truth. Luther realized from the Scriptures that the values that matter are discerned by faith not by sight. He saw that this principle applied not only to the acceptance of the individual in God's sight but also to the standing before God of the true Church of God. Justification by faith, he declared, is the article by which the Church stands or falls. The Church which eternally matters, and to which by grace believers in Christ belong, is not the visible Church which men see but the invisible Church, the Church as it is in God's sight, the Church known to us only by faith.

This distinction between the invisible and visible Church is at the heart of the difference between two types of Christianity (as Archbishop Ramsey has called them\*), which, to look no further afield, are both to be found within our Church of England. For purposes of quick distinction let us call these spiritual and institutional.

The spiritual type emphasizes as fundamental the faith of the individual in response to the Word preached and in direct personal relation to the unseen glorified Lord—issuing in acceptance with God, the incoming of the quickening and indwelling Spirit, and consequent membership in God's family—the invisible Church. Here what is primary, indispensable, and decisive is an unseen spiritual relation with God through Christ and by the Spirit. This is then rightly complemented by relation to one's fellow-believers and particularly to the local congregation—the visible church. Here the unseen relation to Christ is confirmed and sealed both by God to the individual, and by the individual before God and his fellow-believers, by his reception of the sacraments of the Gospel and by his own personal confession of faith in Christ. These complementary activities are visible or openly discernible by men.

The institutional type is primarily church conscious rather than Christ or Gospel or Spirit conscious. Here the visible earthly Church is literally regarded as the Body of Christ, and the proper relation of the individual to it is treated as indispensable to salvation. The distinguishing marks of this visible Church are found in its hierarchical structure—in its possession of bishops and priests, properly consecrated or ordained, upon whose ministries all depend for incorporation, and for the reception of saving and sustaining grace through the sacraments. Relation to Christ and reception of the Spirit by the individual are to be entered into only in this way. In effect the Church points to herself and not to Christ as the effective agent of salvation. So, for instance, when its members die they are said to be fortified not by Christ and the Spirit but by the Church and her rites.

These two types of Christianity clearly differ in the relative position and importance which each assigns either to what is visible or to what is invisible.

The institutional type makes the presence of Christ and the Spirit dependent upon the visible organization. It virtually says, Where the Church is—where the Pope or the Bishop is—there Christ is. And by

\* *Gospel and Catholic Church*, p. 7.

the Church they obviously mean a visible institution distinguishable by its polity, its sacerdotal rites and its episcopal succession. They attach a primary value and an indispensable place to the visible ecclesiastical structure.

In strong contrast to this the spiritual type regards the true Church as constituted by all those believers in Christ as Lord to whom Christ has given His Spirit. It declares that wherever—and only where—the God-given Spirit dwells there are true members of Christ and there is the Church. The primary essence of the Church is therefore invisible. The visible expression of realized fellowship, particularly, in properly ordered congregations follows as an outworked consequence.

To sum up : the institutional type of Christian makes relation to Christ dependent upon relation to the visible Church ; whereas the spiritual type of Christian makes membership in the invisible Church dependent on relation by faith and in the Spirit to the unseen and glorified Lord.

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May I suggest that this distinction between the invisible and the visible Church is directly relevant to the ecumenical movement? It ought to inform and control what we do to further true union and intercommunion between Christians and churches unhappily separated.

In particular may I suggest that a proper recognition both of the priority of the invisible Church and of the limits of the extent to which the Church can become visible is indispensable, if we are to withstand the pretentious—and, as I believe, unscriptural—claims of the institutional Church?

Let us challenge ourselves to fresh thought and to necessary distinction by noting briefly some of the differing opinions of current writers. Let us start with an emphatic insistence on the place of the institutional Church. In his book entitled *What do we mean by Reunion*, C. B. Moss has written :

The nature of the Church is the fundamental issue today, as the Incarnation was in the 5th century, and Justification by Faith in the 16th. We cannot make any compromise about this ; it is a matter of faith not of order. There is one visible Catholic Church which cannot have more than are representative in one place. We (*sc.* Anglicans) are by Divine Providence that Church in Great Britain and no one else can be . . . no sacraments or ministry, however " valid ", however effective, can be accepted by us unless they are the sacraments and ministry of the Catholic Church, and unless their holders clearly repudiate the heretical doctrines of the Invisible Church, the right of secession, and the right of unlimited private judgment.

May I add privately in parenthesis that in my judgment this reveals a conceit and expresses a presumption from which I would pray Anglicans may be delivered?

Someone qualified to speak with much greater authority than I can has warned us against the danger inherent in this kind of emphasis. Professor T. F. Torrance has declared that " the mythologization of

the Church as a '*Christus prolongatus*' and the consequent 'obscuring of Christ by the Church' is a major error and temptation against which we must do battle." He says this is characteristic of Roman Catholicism and also rampant among Anglo-Catholics. He adds: "Wherever this error is found the pre-eminence of Christ as Saviour and God is obscured by the Church". "We must . . . never . . . allow the sacramental enactments in the Church to assume priority over the mighty acts of God in Christ". The Church ought not to become "identified with a hierarchic institution operating with a false objectivity". "Nothing must be allowed to decentralize the Gospel." "We must refuse at any point to exalt the Church as an end in itself, that Christ may have the pre-eminence in everything."\*

The present Bishop of Sheffield once put it in this way: "The Gospel the Church proclaims points beyond the Church to the Church's Lord . . . (otherwise) the Church comes to take the place of Christ, as no longer His representative but His very self . . . claiming to possess in itself the power to forgive sins and to dispense the blessings of the gospel".†

In *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (from which I have already quoted) Emil Brunner contends that by the historical process of 1,500 years the original Ecclesia was transformed or distorted into an institutional church. In consequence what was "a communion of persons" has been replaced by "the legal administrative institution". "If the church is an institution," he continues, "and in some sense all who use the word 'church' mean this—then Rome is the most churchly church, the norm of ecclesiastical life." Also "one must then recognize that the Ecclesia of the New Testament was not a 'church' and had no intention of being a 'church'. For the Ecclesia as '*Koinonia Christou*' and '*Koinonia Pneumatos*', as the Body of Christ, is a pure communion of persons entirely without institutional character" (pp. 16f.).

What Brunner says and suggests is that "because the Holy Spirit is the very life-breath of the Church . . . the Christian society itself is a miracle . . . unintelligible from a purely sociological standpoint". "It is both *Koinonia Christou* or *Koinonia Pneumatos* and 'fellowship with one another', thus combining the vertical with the horizontal, divine with human communion. The togetherness of Christian men is thus not secondary or contingent, it is integral to their life just as is their abiding in Christ." "It flows from communion with Christ." It is a divinely created spiritual organism not a man-made social organization (p. 12).

This means, as I should add, that Christian togetherness is not dependent upon ecclesiastical organization and institutional integration. We are called to enjoy and to express a unity with our brethren in Christ which already exists, to make visible horizontally what is already true though invisible vertically. So, in spite of Brunner's dislike of the terms as some use them, I find some suggestive help in thinking of our vertical fellowship with God in Christ by the Spirit as

\* *Conflict and Agreement in the Church*, Vol. I, pp. 14ff.

† *Evangelicals Affirm*, p. 142.

participation in the Church invisible ; and any enjoyment horizontally of realized fellowship with our brethren in Christ as a manifestation of the Church visible.

In his book *One Body in Christ*, Ernest Best seeks to expound what the New Testament teaches. He says : " Faith creates a status in Christ " (p. 17). He indicates that " the essential of membership is not relation to the community but relation to Christ " (p. 24). The Christian community is primarily a single world-wide one to which every Christian belongs. " The local manifestation of it as a congregation in a particular place is secondary. " " When the Christian travels he is always to be received in Christ. " This means that what matters and should be decisive is not what local congregation or denomination he has previously belonged to, but whether he belongs to the Lord. So, adds Ernest Best, " the Church is not to be described in terms of congregations " (and surely still less of denominations) " but in terms of individual and interrelated Christians "—united by their common relation to Christ. " It is impossible to conceive of a Christian who is not a member of the Church which is related to Christ . . . as His Body " (pp. 189f.).

It is, as I see it, this common membership of all Christians in the one Church invisible by new birth of God's Spirit which ought to be given proper priority in our reckoning over the claims of our individual membership of particular congregations and denominations.

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Finally, let us seek to arrive at some constructive conclusions or at least some tentative suggestions which may indicate possible helps and hindrances to a fuller enjoyment of true church life and fellowship.

Article XIX is, I believe, right. It is an evidence of true discernment and proper restraint. The only way in which the church fellowship which is ours in Christ becomes actually visible, and can be seen functioning in a corporate way, is in a local congregation assembled and active in distinctively Christian practice. There can be on earth no other visible Church, but only a multiplication of local visible churches. Every one of these—including, for instance, the churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, and Rome—is not only very limited in size but also, as the Articles rightly declare, both mixed and fallible in character. They are all prone to err both in faith and conduct. Also, as Article XIX implies, the title " the Church of Rome " describes the congregation of Christian believers meeting in that city. It cannot as " the Church of Rome " normally meet together and corporately function anywhere else.

When the members of such a local congregation think of their fellow Christians beyond the visible limits of their own meeting together, they should think at once by faith of the one Lord and of one Christian metropolis the heavenly Jerusalem, and thus realize their oneness in the Church invisible with the blessed company of all believing people, who are united, whether in heaven or on earth, by their common relation to the one Lord, and their common participation in the one Spirit. Or they should think of all the individuals on earth who confess the name

of Christ and call upon Him as Lord, and of the many local congregations similar to their own in which they regularly meet together.

But they should not think, or wish to be able to think, of one visible world-wide earthly institution to which they all belong. They should not look, or be encouraged to look, to some earthly geographical centre and human head whether of diocese, province, country, or world—whether Durham, York, Canterbury, or Rome. For there is no spiritual or scriptural reason why one earthly city should be a permanent ecclesiastical metropolis, or why the presiding bishop of any local congregation should be regarded as the supreme head of a worldwide ecclesiastical institution.

In the New Testament only one city is metropolitan—the heavenly Jerusalem; and there is only one Archbishop or Chief Shepherd; that is Christ Himself. When Peter exhorted the presbyters of the local churches he did not speak as a pope or archbishop but as a fellow-presbyter. He did not speak of “your care and mine” but of each as having his own portion of the flock of God for the episcopal oversight of which he was directly answerable to Christ as the Chief Shepherd, from whom he would receive his reward.

Those who contend that the visible Church is the only Church say so because they believe in the theological necessity of a hierarchical structure which cannot find support in the New Testament. This structure gives dominant institutional supremacy to archbishops, bishops, and priests, upon whom the majority became dependent. It is the threatened increase rather than decrease of this form of church order that in my judgment is undesirable.

Emil Brunner rightly says that the Anglo-Catholic revival of early catholicism was made easier in the Church of England than in some other Reformed Churches by the fact that at the Reformation we still retained the traditional hierarchial structure (p. 98). It is, therefore, in my judgment, an undesirable development that the Anglican Communion overseas should at present be so busy forming provinces and metropolitan sees; and creating archiepiscopal offices which they have not everywhere got the men to fill and offices which often—to say no more—tend to spoil men who occupy them.

Even in this year's Spring session of the Church Assembly there was weighty expression of a healthy opposition to these tendencies. The Bishop of Exeter said he disliked the decisive voice in episcopal appointments being given to the two archbishops as if they were the voice of the Church. The Bishop of Manchester added that the Report on Crown Appointments seemed to give a picture of the archbishops as the infallible heavenly twins and the bishops as archbishop's curates. We do not want, he said, to be launching a dual papacy just when our Roman Catholic friends are seeing the error of their ways.

I also venture to suggest that any existing denominational association of local congregations, whether episcopal, presbyterian, or whatever, ought not to be spoken of in the singular as a church but rather as a grouping of churches. Next I would suggest that the fuller union or intercommunion of churches now separated ought not to be sought in terms of ministerial status and unified hierarchical structure and

control. For such institutional integration is not an intended manifestation of the Church visible.

In a book recently published, entitled *Missions in a Time of Testing*, R. K. Orchard has written that Christian missions must not "suppose that . . . it is their function to extend a single ecclesiastical structure throughout the world. This is to confuse a political form of universality expressed through a historical institution with the form of Christ's universality" (p. 50).

Right understanding of God's revealed truth and present purpose concerning His Church both invisible and visible ought, as I see it, to make us champion methods which are spiritual rather than institutional, methods in which we look for success not to one visible institutional Church and her hierarchical structure and sacerdotal rites but to the unseen Lord and to the indwelling Spirit, who together unite and vitalize the invisible Church, and can, if followed and obeyed, increasingly make one in realized fellowship the visible local churches.

If it may be allowed, two or three final quotations from Brunner might well conclude this statement. He contends that developed church order is a substitute for the banished Spirit (p. 90); that there has been in church history an evolution from the rule of the Spirit to the hierocracy of the Church (p. 81); and that an organized hierarchy denies true equality and unity (p. 54). So he exhorts us to beware of schemes for reunion which overvalue the church as an institution and favour clericalism (p. 112). Our greatest enemy, he says, is clerical parsonic ecclesiasticism (p. 117). For the purpose of communion with our brethren in Christ we need to be set free from a false ecclesiasticism. What we need is the Holy Ghost and a true *communio sanctorum* (p. 115).

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