

My Search for the Church

“Looking For the City Which Has Foundations,
Whose Builder and Maker is God.”

(Part 1)

By Jack Gray

As a young Christian, as a medical student, and in over thirteen years of medical missionary work in the then Belgian Congo (now Zaire), followed by many years of lay Christian service, I have to admit, with shame, that I never really seriously thought about the question, "What is the Church?" I simply accepted the status quo. Having been brought up in a Christian home with parents who were Baptist in conviction, I had no qualms, after coming to a personal experience of Christ and being baptised, about joining and becoming a member of our local Baptist church. To that church and some of the dear people in it, I owe very much. Particularly do I acknowledge my spiritual indebtedness to a young pastor, who by his utterly dedicated life and by his friendship and encouragement, provided a strong stimulus, in my teenage years, to be wholehearted for the Lord.

A Baptist, and a very loyal one, I remained for many years, but when we left the mission field and took a General Practice in the north of England, there was no local Baptist church, and I became very happily involved in a Methodist congregation. When we came to New Zealand in 1965, Margaret and I made contact with fellow Baptists and worshipped, when possible, in Baptist churches. However, in the Hokianga area where I worked, I again became involved with a Methodist work along with some links with local Anglicans, all without losing my Baptist allegiance.

When we moved to Wellsford in 1972, it was natural for us to join up with the local Baptist church. At this time I was suffering from quite distressing depression, and it was at a very low point that I had a life-changing encounter with God, which initiated in me an intense hunger to know Him in a new and deeper way. This insatiable desire to enter into a truly intimate relationship with the Father led me to an open attitude to the charismatic renewal, which was prominent in New Zealand during those years. I found myself involved too in lay preaching, not only in the local Baptist church, but also in the Church of

Christ, Methodist, Presbyterian and Open Brethren situations. Some of my fellow Baptists were not sympathetic to charismatic things, and they thought me disloyal by involving myself with these other churches. This ultimately led us to leave the Baptist church along with a few others.

It was at this time that that question, "What is the Church?" first began to exercise me. We started a small home-group meeting at that point, and this group was to continue and develop over some eight or nine years. At first it consisted only of those who had left the Baptist congregation, but gradually it became a very open group, to which people of varying denominational loyalties came along. Its central focus was in the Scriptures, and in ministry to and encouragement of each other.

By August 1976, after much and long heart searching, I had become convinced that I should actively seek baptism in the Holy Spirit, and on an unforgettable winter evening in a farm kitchen at Awanui in the far north, two dear friends prayed with and for me, and the blessing fell. I received an overwhelming outpouring of the love of God, and was released into praising Him in a flow of heavenly language. Some months later Margaret had a similar blessing at a charismatic conference. Others in the home group too had entered this dimension. During this time our source of spiritual food and meaningful fellowship was this gathering of Christians around the Lord and His word in our homes. Out of religious habit and a sense of duty we continued to attend church on Sundays, but I became more and more disillusioned and frustrated by the lifelessness of the services we were attending in the Church of Christ. In the Methodist-Presbyterian congregation there were a number of charismatic believers who met on a Sunday evening, and we occasionally joined them.

Around this time I was being invited quite frequently to minister in the Open Brethren fellowship, and one of the elders came to ask me what it was that had happened in my life, as they were aware of a new note and power in my messages. I told him of my experience of Spirit baptism, and how it had been the gateway for me into a new dimension of Christian living. A little later I was invited to join the three Brethren elders in a weekly early morning prayer time. These became very precious and fruitful occasions, when we waited on the Lord together, and also shared what we had been hearing from Him in our private devotions. After some months of such fellowship, the elders asked me if I would be prepared to join them in the leadership of the congregation, but I did not feel then that this would be right for me. I had reservations about the Brethren denomination and some of its emphases, and Margaret also was not happy to become identified with it. I agreed however to continue meeting for prayer and sharing in that early morning time.

Over all this time it seemed that my reading was supernaturally guided. Books came in front of me exactly tailored to my current spiritual searching and needs. In that initial desperation of hunger for God, I picked up A.W. Tozer's "The Pursuit of God." It could have been written specifically for me! Other books which profoundly influenced me over this period were:

1) Watchman Nee's "*What Shall This Man Do?*", a book which had lain neglected on my shelves for many years. I had tried in vain to get into it previously. Now it became alive for me, and his chapters on the Church stirred the first truly eager longings for "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

2) Howard Snyder's seminal book, "*The Problem of Wineskins.*" This stimulated me into thinking about

Church in a new way.

3) "*Brethren Hang Loose*" by Robert C. Girard was another volume that stirred me up to see that there had to be a better way for Church than what we had hitherto experienced.

4) Juan Carlos Ortiz' exciting book, "*Disciple*" was another earthquake shock to my ecclesiological complacency.

5) "*Brethren Hang Together*", a second volume by Robert Girard, recording the pilgrimage of a whole congregation, which led them out of their previous conservative traditions, and even out of their church buildings into simple gatherings in homes, was a further push along the way.

To summarise the progress to this point, I would say,

1) I had come to a new realisation of the priority of knowing God.

2) My baptism in the Spirit had opened the gate into new, exciting dimensions in Christian living, and a realisation of the availability of the spiritual gifts. I found myself being released from spiritual inhibitions into a refreshing freedom of worship and praise to God. I also felt a greater confidence in ministering to and praying with people in the context of my medical practice, as well as in home group situations.

3) I had begun a search for a manifestation of Church that would reflect what I read in the New Testament about it.

With the benefit of hindsight, I would see that in our informal home group we had been experiencing something much nearer to New Testament Church life than anything that I had experienced in formal traditional church of any denomination. This gathering had no name. It owed no allegiance to any particular denomination. People attended simply because they wanted to. Its focus was the Lord Jesus and the Scriptures. In it the needs of folk in the group were met as we began to share our lives and problems with one another, praying for each other and supporting one another in practical ways. No collections of money were needed or made. No religious buildings were required. Homes were our meeting places. We had no designated or official leadership. We saw people grow in the knowledge and love of the Lord, and we loved one another.

Despite all this, I still had difficulties in freeing myself from thinking of church in terms of Sunday activities and of a specific local congregation. In the Brethren fellowship we began to experience a moving of the Holy Spirit. There were conversions through the personal witness of a number of people, and there were baptisms. Numbers attending the services grew, and there was a freeing up of worship. I was again invited to join the eldership of this church, and this time, after much thought and prayer, I felt it right to accept, a decision which was confirmed to me by the Lord in a remarkable way both before and after the acceptance. The other elders were open to moving into fresh expressions of church life as we were directed by the Lord, and we felt free of any denominational pressure. The life and direction of the fellowship were flowing out from our shared times of prayer and waiting on the Lord. They were exciting days.

At this stage also we had some memorable meetings in which a number of the evangelical churches in the town joined, and it was evident that the Lord was directing us towards unity in Him. But we did not hear or act upon the message of the Spirit, and the denominational groups again withdrew to the security of their own back yards. In the Brethren fellowship too, over the following year or so, it became evident that all was not well. There was a core group of older and established members of the fellowship who became increasingly resentful of the encroachment of charismatic forms of worship, and felt threatened by the new Christians, who had no intention of conforming to traditional Brethren patterns. It eventually became apparent that the way through the situation was, for those of us who desired to keep going with the Lord wherever He led us, to leave this church and start a home church. Our desire really was to have a church with the characteristics of the home group which I have earlier noted.

Of course the decision to do this was not reached without much heart-searching and prayer, but it was with rejoicing that, in February 1982 we began our house church with a group of approximately thirty five adults. We did not advertise our existence, but in the first nine months of its life the Lord added numbers of people to us, and there were at least ten baptisms. There was a manifest presence of the Lord in our gatherings, and I felt we were getting somewhere near the kind of church life described in 1 Corinthians 14:26-33. One of the original elders of the Brethren fellowship had withdrawn from our early morning prayer time before the formation of the home church, and he remained with the Brethren, but the other three of us continued to meet and assumed leadership of the new house church, but in a very low key way.

It was a time in New Zealand when independent charismatic fellowships were springing up all over the land, and the pattern seemed to be that they progressed from gathering in homes to renting halls for their Sunday worship. We had contact with a number of fellowships who had done this, and without, I now believe, clear direction from the Lord we followed the pattern and moved from house gathering to publicly advertised meetings in the local High School hall. We also invited a number of men to come and we had a formal ordination of elders in November 1982. Again, with the benefit of hindsight, I would say that this is where we began to veer off the straight road towards New Testament-type church. It all took place very gradually, almost imperceptibly, but by the end of 1984 I knew something was amiss. As numbers in the fellowship had grown, administration occupied more of our time as elders and the undergirding of prayer in times of waiting on the Lord and seeking direction from Him, was no longer as strong as it had been. Also we had formed links with a group of fellowships of similar constitution and I sensed the first hint of a new denominationalism subtly insinuating itself. I was very concerned when a man, from whom we had received much guidance and counsel, became a member of an association of Pentecostal churches virtually as a representative of this "stream" of which we were thought to be a part.

At the end of 1985, after rereading "*Brethren Hang Together*", I became convinced that we had made an error in becoming a public church, and that we should revert to being literally what we had first envisioned, a house church. I proposed to the other elders a plan for dividing the congregation into three such regional house congregations. There was not unanimous enthusiasm for this in the leadership, but the plan was presented to the fellowship. A number of folks greeted it with joy and with a sense that it was the direction of the Spirit, but again there were others who were reluctant for change. As a kind of compromise, it was agreed that we should meet in regional groups on one Sunday in the month, and that the situation be reviewed at a congregational camp some four months later. Thus it was that two rural based groups began again meeting in homes, but the town group continued to use the School hall.

At the fellowship camp in April 1986 the issue was not discussed, but such was the enthusiasm of the two country groups for their house gathering, that we slipped into a pattern of three Sundays out of four in the regional groups. It would be true to say that the elders were not unitedly happy about this, and tensions began to surface.

In the regional group to which I belonged, the Lord spoke to us right at the beginning about a new kind of church life, which would only be obtained as we laid down the old way and came in emptiness to the Lord to be taught afresh. Our meetings did not follow any set pattern. We did not plan for anyone to lead worship or teach, but simply came together and looked to the Lord to lead us into what He desired. No two gatherings were the same. Our most significant times were when we sat together in silence before the Lord, sometimes for up to half-an-hour before various people spoke out what they felt the Lord was saying. Generally it was something simple, direct and practical, leading us on in dependence on our Head. We came to feel that we were moving on to something special, which the Lord had for us, if only we would look to and follow Him.

Around this time, again I believe by God's guidance, I had discovered the writings of T. Austin-Sparks, a man who had deep and prophetic insights into the true nature of the Church. What this man wrote rang as truth in my spirit. The Church is a heavenly creation, an organism with life from above and not an organisation or institution of man. Strong longings stirred within me to know how to enter into such an experience of Church. I felt less and less in tune with what was happening in the fellowship, of which I was still an elder.

It was while I was struggling and agonising over these things that there came a decisive, clear and unmistakable word from the Lord. It all began to happen on the morning of Tuesday October 28, 1986. I had just returned home from an early morning prayer meeting, after which I had been asked to minister at the combined Fellowship meeting the following Sunday. I had replied that I did not feel able to do this because I was working through some critical questions in my own life. I walked into my study and began to cry out to the Lord for guidance.

On my desk lay my Bible, open at the second chapter of Hebrews and verses 17-18 spoke to me. "He had to be made like His brethren in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in the service of God to make atonement for the sins of the people. For, because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted." I called out to Him and said, "Lord I am in a critical test about this matter of Church. I need your help. Please show me Your way."

Almost at once I knew the Holy Spirit had begun to speak. His first word was a question. "What was the fiercest temptation that Jesus suffered?" In thought my reply was that it was in the garden of Gethsemane. There all His temptations climaxed in the bitterest of all assaults of Satan so that He sweated great drops of blood, and in His agony cried, "Father, if it be possible let this cup pass from me." This intensest pressure of temptation ever known was put on Him to by-pass the Cross. But, deep in His spirit, He knew that His mission would only be fulfilled through death, and that death on the Cross, for only through that would come resurrection and exaltation and salvation for men. With his prayer, "Not my will but Thine be done", He accepted the way of the Cross, and the victory was won, but at what cost!

Then I remembered Peter, remonstrating with Jesus, when the Lord had spoken of going to Jerusalem to suffer, to be killed and to rise again. "God forbid, Lord, this shall never happen to you." I noted his lovely language of devotion. "God forbid, Lord." It was so spiritual. But Jesus cut right through that with His, "Get behind me Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are not on the side of God, but of men." The way of Jesus, I saw, was the way of the Cross. We had perhaps understood that fairly well in relation to salvation and also to being identified with the death of Christ in our personal lives as taught in Romans 6, but we had not understood it in relation to church life as we currently knew it.

I felt the Spirit say that church life as I had known it was to go to the Cross, to die, totally expire and be buried. Then, and only then would God give us new resurrection life, which He so desires us to have. There would be no new wine church life until the old had completely run out. I saw that our fiercest temptation also concerns this going to the Cross. We will protest, like Peter, very religiously and very spiritually, "God forbid, Lord, that will never happen to our church or our fellowship. Put our beloved programs and projects to the Cross; do to death our wonderful charismatic services; let our music and drama groups die, and our teaching times expire? Never! Don't you know, Lord, they are all for You?" And I heard the Lord say, "Get behind me. You are a hindrance to me."

Praise God! Our Lord Jesus resisted and overcame that fiercest temptation and "for the joy that was set before Him, endured the Cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2) "Are you willing", I felt the Lord to be saying, "as a Fellowship to endure the Cross? Would you be prepared to have all the old way die, all of it? Are you willing to put it to death, however painful that might be, and however precious some things are to your religious flesh? Are you prepared to endure the shame?" I thought then of the shame to which the Lord was subjected; His lovely hands pierced, His brow torn, His body exposed before all eyes, dying like a common criminal, while the Jewish religious leaders taunted Him. "He saved others. He cannot save himself. He trusted in God that He would deliver him. Let Him deliver him if He delight in him." I could hear the talk, the criticism, the sneers, particularly of religious people and leaders, if we were indeed willing to let the Fellowship as we then knew it, to die and be put in the grave. "We told you so! These groups never last, and to think that they claimed to have got it all together! Look at them now, and think of all the scattered, abandoned sheep!" Yes, there would be a shame to endure. But what lay beyond the Cross, with its pain and its shame? New life! Resurrection life! Joy! Pentecost!

The final scripture that the Spirit put in my mind that memorable morning was, "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone, but if it die, it will bring forth much fruit." (John 12:24)

It was an awesome experience. I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that, in answer to my cry, the Lord had spoken to me, and that He had laid before me a clear choice. I was trembling and weeping with the power of the emotions which the revelation had stirred in me. My inward struggling and tension ceased, for now I knew what we had to do. Immediately I went and shared what had happened with Margaret, and together we experienced the lifting of the burden and the joy of seeing clearly the way ahead, at least the first steps of it. We knew it meant the laying down of my role as an elder in the Fellowship, and our withdrawing from organised church to wait on the Lord for further light on the way.

The next step was to share with the leading elder of the Fellowship, and that I did on the same day. His comment was that the revelation might be for me, but that it did not apply to the Fellowship. I asked him

if he thought I should tell the members of our local group, and to this he replied that if it was in my heart to do so I should do that.

The following morning, just as we wakened, Margaret said to me, "Do you know what is going round in my head?" "No." "It is that song, 'We are standing on holy ground'." I said, "Yes, I do believe that we are standing on holy ground. Let's look up the scriptures about that." We then read the two passages which refer to standing on holy ground. The first in Exodus 3:1-10, where Moses receives his call to deliver his people. God says to him, "I have indeed seen the misery of My people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering." Much of the church is in such Egyptian bondage. Later that day I read Exodus 1:14 and saw its relevance to many church situations. So, the call of God on the holy ground is to be heralds and forerunners out from the Egyptian bondage of the church.

The second passage is in Joshua 5:13-15. This time the holy ground was the place of the call of Joshua to submit totally to the Lordship of the Captain of the hosts of the Lord, there on the threshold of the Promised Land. The other element of the holy ground then, was to do with entering the Promised Land under the captaincy of the Lord.

That evening we met with our local house congregation, some twenty of us, and I shared what I felt the Lord had shown us. Knowing the implications of this, I was unsure of the reactions from the group. I felt it was not a thing we should discuss off the tops of our heads, but that we should all take it before the Lord and seek Him for direction. There was a warm response from the group, and agreement that we should not, at that moment, make it a matter for discussion. However, a young man spoke up and said that his wife had had a similar experience to mine the previous evening, and had so strongly felt the Lord speak to her that she had taken paper and pencil to write it down. "I think she should share with us what she wrote." he said. She produced three bits of paper from her pocket and read to us the following:

“My children will you listen, will you hear My voice?
Stand before Me and make your choice.
Will you follow the world's way or follow My own?
Will you build your kingdoms or establish My throne?
For I set before you a path few have trod,
and this leads to the very feet of God.
I set before you a way unknown.
Take this way and make it your own.
In Me delight, find your pleasure in Me.
My way is light and life and truth.
My way depends not on your situation.
I have provided, and it is up to you to take this provision.
Follow Me, and you will walk in newness of life.
My ways are not your ways. If they were I would not be God.
My ways are far greater than what you could imagine.
They extend far further, far wider than you can take in.
I need your whole heart, your whole strength, your entirety.
Hold nothing back and you will receive in totalness.
My children I love you.

Set your feet in My steps.
Dedicate yourselves totally to Me,
and I will establish what I have begun."

When she had finished reading a deep hush and sense of God's presence came upon us. We stood up together and linking hands we prayed. One of those who prayed was another young man, who used words very close to a verbatim quotation of Isaiah 62:3, "You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God." This had been a scripture which had come alive for me some time before, and I felt it to be a prophetic prayer of confirmation. We parted agreeing to abandon all meetings for a month and each to seek God for further direction.

Next morning, while I was shaving, I felt the Lord begin to speak to me again in the same unmistakable way which I had so recently experienced. He asked me, "Do you remember the verse in John 3 about the wind?" "Yes, Lord, I know it well. "The wind bloweth where it listeth, thou hearest the sound thereof but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." "Now", said the Lord, "What do you think that means?" "It is talking about the Holy Spirit who is like the wind. I have heard some good sermons on that topic." "Is that really what it is about?" asked the Lord. "Say it again!" So, I did and when I came to the phrase, "So is every one who is born of the Spirit", I suddenly saw! Whatever is born of the Spirit of God will be like the wind. I saw that the organised church as I knew it is not like the wind. It is visible, knowable, definable. It can be boxed in. The church born of the Spirit would not be like that. It would have no hierarchy, no buildings, no human organisational structure. It would be powerful, like the wind, and its effects would be evident, but you would never be able to coop it up inside a fence or wall. As an example of the contrast, the Lord caused me to think of the church in China, first in the missionary era, when it had all the features of institutional church. This institution was all dismantled and destroyed by the communists, because they could see it and define it, and so get a handle on it. God, however, had sown the seeds of another kind of church, non-institutional, not owning real estate, meeting in homes. This born-of-the-Spirit church had flourished even throughout the years of antagonism from the communist regime. The communists were unable to get hold of it and destroy it, and the number of believers had steadily multiplied. It was like the wind. Excitedly I went and shared this fresh word with Margaret and another friend who was living on our property. As I was speaking with them, the young lady who had given the prophecy the previous evening arrived to visit our friend, who left to go and see her. Later she told us that Maryanne had come to say that she had had more from the Lord which she had not told us then. He had also spoken to her about John 3:8 about the wind! She then related a similar revelation to the one the Lord had just given me.

The next step was to meet with all my fellow elders of the Fellowship, and to share with them what the Lord had revealed to us. Margaret was with me when I spoke with them. The response we met disappointed and grieved us. We had evidently come to a cross-roads, and the rest of the leadership were not going to take the path we had felt called to. After walking so closely with these brothers over a number of years, I found this quite difficult to cope with. After we got home I drove off to a quiet spot, where on previous occasions of crisis I had had rendezvous with the Lord, and read a passage from the little book, "I Talk Back To The Devil" by A.W. Tozer, a passage which had also spoken to me before in another critical stage of my Christian experience. Here it is: "Now Lord, if I do the things I know I should do, and if I say what I know in my heart I should say, I will be in trouble with people and groups - there is no other way! Not only will I be in trouble for taking my stand in faith and honesty, but I will

certainly be in a situation where I will be seriously tempted of the devil. Almighty Lord, I accept this with my eyes open. I know the facts and I know what may happen, but I accept it. I will not run. I will not hide. I will not crawl under a rug -- and I know that when I am weak, then I am strong. So, I do not let anyone praise me, and I try not to pay attention to those who would blame me. This is how I have learned to stand for Christ and all that He is to His own." Strengthened by these words and by the reading of the first chapter of the prophet Jeremiah, I came home.

These days marked the greatest transition of my life as a Christian, a beginning of the dying out to church as I had known it, to allow God to reveal Church as He would have it. That death has not been sudden and clean, but slow, sometimes painful and progressive. The religious habits of a lifetime and the mind-set of years do not expire easily. The months that followed were not easy, but we constantly received encouragement from the Lord in various remarkable ways, and over the past three and a half years we have been coming to a new understanding and experience of the Body of Christ. What we perceive as yet dimly, and what we are experiencing encourages us not to look back, but to press on. The things we are learning I will share in a future chapter.

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