

Looking For the City

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

(Part 2)

By Jack Gray

In his thought-provoking book, "Rethinking The Work.", that great Chinese Christian leader, Watchman Nee, has this to say: "According to the present-day conception, three things are regarded as essential to the existence of a church, apart from the group of Christians who constitute its members. These three are - a 'minister,' a church building and 'church services.' The Christian world would query the existence of a church if even one of these three were lacking." For more than half a century I would have gone along with that "present day conception" and indeed was tied firmly and devotedly to such church systems. However, the same writer goes on to say, "But what is considered as essential to a church nowadays was considered totally unnecessary in the early days of the Church's history."

This young Church, which we read about in the New Testament was alive, vibrant, growing, suffering persecution, yet increasing in vigour and strength and it was also very different from the church systems of our day. By the grace and mercy of God, there was birthed in my heart, some fifteen years ago, a longing for a way of Church that more fully represented that portrayed in "The Acts of the Apostles" and the Epistles. Nowhere are such longings as I then experienced better expressed than by Thomas Kelly, when he wrote, "I believe we live in a waiting age when multitudes are convinced that something vastly deeper than they know in the present church is fundamentally needed. The land is full of seekers; the church is full of seekers.... Over the horizon men dimly see something glorious, they know not what. But what they see is Christ walking again in lowly simple love, recapturing the church for Himself, rebuking the Scribes and Pharisees, who sit in Moses' seat, tenderly leading men to share in His immediacy and enthrallment in God."

I have described in a previous writing my personal pilgrimage, initiated by these divinely-implanted longings, and how it led into a wholly new walk, in which the old way of church had to die with all the parasitic religious paraphernalia that went with it. With Margaret, my wife, I was called to abandon church-the way-we-had-known-it and to wait on the Lord seeking His way of Church as revealed in His word, until He brought it to life for us out of the grave of the old.

Eight years have now passed since, with trepidation and yet joyous anticipation, we took that momentous step. In this writing I want to share some of the insights these years have brought, as we have continued our search for "the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

Church membership.

No longer am I a member of any religious organisation. My name is on no church roll here on earth. I do not "go to church." I have no Minister or Pastor in the official sense, and church services, for me, are a thing of the past. How then, you may well ask, can I profess a longing for the Church? What is my relationship to the Church? My answer would be that I believe I am now more in the Church than I have ever been, and for this position I have sound New Testament confirmation. Let us look at a few Scriptures:

a) "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body." (1 Corinthians 12 vs. 12-13) The Spirit, then, has baptised me into the one Body of Christ. That was done for me, when, by faith, I acknowledged Jesus as Saviour and Lord. In other words it is the work of the Spirit to incorporate me into the body, and I am a member of that body. Joining a humanly organised church can do nothing to make me more a member of the body than I already am. Note too that it is not into some denomination that the Spirit has baptised me, but into the 'one body'.

b) "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." (1 Corinthians 12 v. 27) "You are", says Paul. It is already a fact. We are joined to the Church by God Himself. There is not a word in the New Testament from end to end to justify any plea such as "you must join a church." If you are a Christian and have the Spirit of Christ within, you are in the Church, full-stop!

c) "You have come to the church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven." (Hebrews 12 v. 23) And, hallelujah, my name is inscribed on that roll in heaven!

"What church do you belong to?" people ask me. Praise God, to the Church that Jesus loves and gave Himself for, to the one organic body of Christ of which He is the Head. Every born-of-the-Spirit believer is my brother or sister. As a result of the pilgrimage of these past eight years my "body consciousness", to use a phrase of Watchman Nee, is more acute than ever before.

What about Fellowship ?

Because we do not "go to church" people have said that we do not "fellowship." In another article I have written at more length about the New Testament view of fellowship, which is very different from popular views current in organised churches. Put briefly, in a thorough search of all the uses of the word fellowship and related words in the original N.T. Greek, I could not find one that had reference to organised religious meetings. The primary emphasis of the New Testament is that our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Christ Jesus and with the Holy Spirit. Because all Christians share in that common relationship-life, they have fellowship with each other. The Epistles next show that, in the early Church, fellowship had much to do with sharing ones goods and money with brothers and sisters in need. And another emphasis is on sharing, or having fellowship in Christ's sufferings. To have fellowship in any of these New Testament ways has nothing to do with going to church. Having said that, however, it is obvious in the New Testament that there was a wonderful togetherness about the early Christians. They belonged to the Lord and to each other and wherever they existed in numbers they were like a community of love.

How did that loving community come together? It was not a humanly organised thing like the formation of a club or society, but rather it was a divinely created and divinely sustained togetherness. As Christians they did not have the modern choice of varied flavours of church. When they were birthed into the life of Jesus they were incorporated, as we have seen, by the Spirit into the one and only existing Church. Jesus had told Peter, "I will build My Church", and He did it, as His name was proclaimed and people received the message. That same Peter later wrote, "Come to Him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2 vs. 4-5) and Paul in Ephesians ch.2 vs. 19-22, has this to say, "You are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit." In both of these scriptures please note that the believers are being built into the Church. It is something that is done to them. The verb is in the passive mood.

What a revelation it was to me one day, after laying down all responsibilities in the organised church, to see what Jesus had really said in stating, "I will build My Church." I saw that for years I had subconsciously been mishearing His statement. On the one hand I had been hearing Jesus say, "I will build your church." And I had joined with others in praying that Jesus would do

that, build and increase "our church." On the other hand, I had sometimes been hearing, "You will build My Church", and I had given of my time and energies in order to attempt to do for Jesus what He had said He Himself would do. It was a liberating experience to lay aside these misinterpretations and to release responsibility for the Church to its rightful owner, builder and ruler (see Hebrews 3. vs. 1-6). Since then we have seen that Jesus, when we trust Him to, does exactly what He said, builds His Church. As we have surrendered ourselves into His hands as "living stones" he has joined us spirit to spirit with many others in a network of love. And all this in the total absence of any human organisation or institution!

At this point I must mention another saying of the Lord Jesus, which has taken on new meaning for us. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." In my days of belonging to organised church I had adopted one of the concepts current in modern Christendom that "bigger is better." At gatherings of Christian leaders it was noteworthy that numbers were important. The bigger the church or fellowship the greater the "mana" (reputation) of the pastor or leader! I seem to remember that the most common use of that saying of Jesus, which I have quoted, was to present it to Him as an excuse that so few had turned up at the meeting, but never mind, He would still be there! But in these last eight years I have learned that, once again, Jesus meant what He said to be taken literally. He did not say "two or three" for nothing. He could have said "twenty or thirty", or even "two thousand or three thousand", but He did not. Over these past eight years we have begun to enter into the truth of that saying in a new way, as the Lord has provided fellowship with other Christians in just such situations of "two or three being gathered together in His name", at table together, as guests or visitors in our home, in encounters on the street, and other ways of His devising. Such fellowship has been face to face, heart to heart, eye to eye, and often as we have shared and prayed together there has been a sweet and blessed awareness of Jesus in our midst. Watchman Nee again expresses our experience most vividly, commenting on "Song of Solomon" Ch.5 vs.9-16. "Is it not true that as believers gather to talk about their Lord, He is in very close proximity and listening with a pleased ear? And surely at the very time of speaking His worth, He will spontaneously reveal Himself in living presence." Likewise the prophet Malachi is surely thinking of such "twos and threes" situations when he writes, "Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another; the Lord heeded and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before Him of those who feared the Lord and thought on His name." (Malachi 3. v.16).

Even as the "living stones" are "being built", so this fellowship with the living Christ in the midst is for those who "are gathered together in His name." Once again this is something divinely arranged and brought about. The verb in the Greek is in the passive. This too has been an element of our experience, as again and again we have seen the Lord arrange circumstances to put us together with others who love Him, and as we have been drawn together by Him, He has fulfilled His promise and manifested His presence. So now, when people ask me the inevitable question, "Where do you fellowship?" I answer with joy, "Wherever and whenever two or three are gathered together in His name." That may be any day of the week, any hour of the day, as the Lord plans, and not in some regular slot of time humanly organised. Margaret and I are constantly encouraged by such experiences, and we become increasingly convinced that Jesus does indeed know how to fit together His "living stones."

Evangelism.

While we were in the church system we were constantly being urged to pursue programmes of outreach. This usually meant trying to invite people to attend church based functions, outreach dinners, barbecues, evangelistic meetings etc. Generally people were fairly cagey about accepting such invitations. They were not slow to see the hook in the bait, and often excused themselves, because, I believe, they feared being pressured into joining a religious organisation. Also, after years and years in the system, we had few real friends who were not Christians. We really lived in a kind of Christian ghetto. Our lives revolved around the meetings and functions of the church or fellowship to which we belonged. We did not have time for outside friendships. Since abandoning that old way we have found that, for the first time in years, we are forming friendships with neighbours who do not share our faith, and learning to relate to them as people. Bridges are being built and a basis established for testimony to the primacy of Jesus in our lives, without their having to be wary that involving them in some religious organisation is our ultimate aim. Others of our friends too have found that there is much greater openness to talking about Jesus and the gospel in such circumstances. We have only Jesus to offer. No religious package comes with Him. He is truly all we need.

In these recent years we seem to have met more and more Christians whose conversion and new birth were brought about solely by the work of the Spirit of God, with no assistance from any of the outreach tools to which I have previously referred. Characteristic of these believers is that they go on and grow rapidly in the knowledge of God, without having to be propped up by repeated "ministry" or counselling. This is in contrast to the tremendous drop out rates of those who make commitments or decisions in the traditional evangelistic environment.

God's New Creations.

These last remarks lead on to another revelation of these years in the organic Church. Organised churches tend to produce believers who conform to a pattern. Often one can tell to which particular denomination or stream people belong to by the way they talk, the phrases they use, their manner of praying etc. One could almost speak of denominational clones. But that is not what God intends. Each believer is, in Christ, a new creation, an original. Moving outside of organised church, we have seen this Divine creativity expressed in refreshing and exciting ways, and Christians in this free atmosphere are distinguished by a wonderful uniqueness in ministry and lifestyle. There is reality, and a lack of stale religious conformity about such disciples. They are "His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that they should walk in them." (Ephesians ch.2 v10), the product of an infinitely creative God.

Planted by the Lord.

The name of the game in church circles today is church planting. There is a kind of religious free market, with competing denominations each striving for a greater market share. One denomination has set itself the goal of so many new churches by the year 2000. Another, I heard, had a target of establishing a fellowship under their name in every town of more than 1000 inhabitants. Another group wants to see a "live" church for every 500 New Zealanders. The consequence is ever-proliferating names and groups. In country towns with which I am familiar, where there were perhaps three denominational churches fifteen years ago, there are now as many as ten or even more groups of differing flavour, cheek by jowl with each other. Often, it seems the local Christians are playing musical chairs among the groups, with now one and now another drawing the biggest congregations. Where in the New Testament can you find anything like that?

Those who, like us, have felt called to leave the denominational camps in order to seek for "the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God", find ourselves scattered throughout the country, often in relative isolation. As I meditated on the reasons for this I was given some light from the scripture concerning God's way of planting. First, why were so many such seekers disseminated in this way? The answer, I found in Jesus interpretation of the parable of the wheat and the tares: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom." (Matthew ch.13 v.38) The Divine method is to sow people in the world. Further light came from a picture presented to my mind of a large field, ploughed and harrowed, in which, widely dispersed, were solitary green emerging shoots. Looking at these tender isolated green plants, I could sense their feeling of loneliness, as reflecting the thoughts of some of these scattered brethren. Then it was as if I heard the Lord say, "Yes that is what the situation is now. You are isolated and widely separated. But, do not fear, for I have sown the whole field, and soon all will be green." God's purpose is for a united corporate people.

Yet more light came from Isaiah ch.60 vs.21-22, "Your people shall all be righteous; they shall possess the land for ever, the shoot of My planting the work of My hands, that I might be glorified. The least one shall become a clan, and the smallest one a mighty nation; I am the Lord; in its time I will hasten it (or 'do it swiftly.')." So much church planting is the result of human planning and human endeavour. It is really just like starting up a kind of religious club. There is usually promotion, publicity, and advertising in order to get it going. And once it is going lots more human effort is needed to maintain it! With God it is not like that. He Himself is the planter. Planting is the work of His hands, and it is for His glory. The scattered brethren seem, at the moment to be "the least" and "the smallest", but the promise of God is that there will be great multiplication and growth. And that, when God's time comes, will happen very quickly.

The Centrality and Supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The last article to come from the pen of that prophetic preacher, A.W. Tozer was entitled, "The Waning Authority of Christ in the Churches." The whole can be read in "God Tells the Man Who Cares." (Christian Publications Inc.) Here are a few quotations representative of its main thrust: "The present position of Christ in the gospel churches may be likened to that of a king in a limited, constitutional monarchy... He is lauded feted and supported, but his real authority is small. Nominally he is head over all, but in every crisis someone else makes the decisions... Among the gospel churches Christ is now in fact little more than a beloved symbol... Because of long and meticulous organisation it is now possible for the youngest pastor, just out of seminary, to have more actual authority in a church than Jesus Christ has... The idea that the Man Christ Jesus has absolute and final authority over the whole church and over all its members in every detail of their lives is simply now not accepted as true by the

rank and file of evangelical Christians... The truth is that today the Lord rarely controls a service, and the influence He exerts is very small. We sing of Him and preach about Him, but He must not interfere; we worship our way, and it must be right because we have always done it that way, as have other churches in our group.

May it not be that one of the reasons for which God is calling people by His Spirit to leave organised churches and come out to Him is to restore that supremacy and centrality which the Lord Jesus had in the New Testament Church? I believe it to be so. He is training us to listen for, to hear and attend to His voice and to obey Him. He is restoring His absolute "shepherdship", if a word can be coined. If, as we have before maintained, He is building His Church, our whole responsibility is just to follow Him and let Him do it. Outside of organised church those who do not have a vital living growing relationship with the Lord Jesus quickly fall away. Inside the organisation the stimulation of being part of a crowd, the emotional uplift of congregational singing and other group activities may be sufficient to make good church members, but if the props are pulled out only a genuine relationship with Jesus will ensure survival.

So, as I see it, the Lord is training people in that absolute dependence on Him. He is wanting to teach us that He and He alone is appointed "Head over all things for the Church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all." (Ephesians ch.1 v.22) And, "We are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love." That is the kind of Church I am seeking, one that is truly a "whole body" as in the New Testament; one that is "joined and knit together", not fractured and divided by names and sects and parties; one which works properly and grows, building itself in love, not being built by the application of the latest church growth techniques or religious gimmicks.

The passage of these eight years since laying down the old way of church leaves many questions to which we do not yet have clear answers. A powerful manifestation of a unified organic body of Christ is yet to be seen, that body for which the Lord Jesus prayed, "That they may all be one; even as Thou Father art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that Thou hast sent me. The glory which Thou hast given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as We are one, I in them and Thou in Me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that Thou hast sent Me, and hast loved them even as Thou hast loved Me." Therein lies the secret to unlock a revival greater than any yet seen, when we cling to Jesus Christ alone, allow His Spirit to bind us together in that perfect unity and let Him be truly Head. May God hasten the day!

I cannot do better than close this section with another quotation from that final article of A.W. Tozer. "What are we to do? Each one of us must decide, and there are at least three possible choices. One is to rise up in shocked indignation and accuse me of irresponsible reporting. Another is to nod general agreement with what is written here, but take comfort in the fact that there are exceptions, and we are among the exceptions. The other is to go down in meek humility and confess that we have grieved the Spirit and dishonoured our Lord in failing to give Him the place His Father has given Him as Head and Lord of the Church. Either the first or the second will but confirm the wrong. The third, if carried out to its conclusion can remove the curse. The decision lies with us."

Every Day Living.

In his devotional classic of some 250 years ago, "A Serious Call To a Devout and Holy Life", William Law has this to say in its very first chapter: "It is very observable, that there is not one command in all the gospel for public worship; and perhaps it is a duty that is least insisted upon in Scripture of any other. The frequent attendance at it is never so much as mentioned in all the New Testament. Whereas that religion of devotion which is to govern the ordinary actions of our life, is to be found in almost every verse of Scripture. Our blessed Saviour and His apostles are wholly taken up with doctrines that relate to common life."

Another thing that God seems to be doing with those of us whom He has called out of organised churches is to restore every day Christian lifestyle. In the church system Christians are so often graded on their performance levels in the "service" situation. Are they frequent attenders, never missing a meeting? Do they enthusiastically participate in the worship? Do they willingly submit to the leaders? There are a hundred and one such church-performance based criteria. But that is not where the New Testament emphasis lies, as William Law points out so graphically. There, the emphasis is on every day life and relationships in the family and community. God is weaning us off that performance thing into daily Christian lifestyle in the home, the workplace and the playing field. We are to be, as Paul says, "letters of Christ, known and read by all men." That call is both liberating and challenging. It frees Christian living from the confines of church buildings, services and organisations, releasing it into the

common stream of life, and it demands a humble self-crucifying walk in the Spirit. "In the past", as someone has said, "We used to live in the world and go to church. Now we live in the Church and go to the world."

In conclusion, having shared these things; what lies ahead? I do not profess to know how the Lord's purpose will be worked out "until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." But, I do know that, for me, there is to be no turning back to the old way. God has given us glimpses of a glory yet to be revealed in the Church, and so, like Paul, "forgetting what lies behind (in our experience of traditional church) and straining forward to what lies ahead, we press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

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