

## *Introduction*

With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Lord Jesus Christ, as an integral part of the new covenant, brought into actual existence the *ekklēsia* which he had promised a while before (Matt. 16:18). At first, under the apostles, the believers enjoyed what might be called a ‘Golden Age’ (Acts 2:42-47; 4:32-37). But this time was short-lived. Before long, trouble broke out. The Jewish authorities vented their spleen against the infant *ekklēsia* (Acts 4:1-31). Then hypocrisy reared its loathsome head among the believers (Acts 5:1-11). That matter having been dealt with, in no time at all serious internal racial-disagreement erupted within the *ekklēsia* (Acts 6:1-6). That was put right. But then outright Jewish persecution was not long in coming, wreaking havoc among the believers, scattering them far and wide (Acts 6:8, and on). Of course, wherever these believers settled, assemblies sprang up. Nevertheless, it did not take long before Judaisers – false brothers, the *pseudadelphoi* – began to infiltrate the various assemblies, and their nefarious activities cost Paul, in particular, much anxiety. He not only personally experienced their disastrous intrusion among the believers in Antioch (Acts 14:24 – 15:35; Gal. 2:1-10), but he soon found that they were doing immense harm in almost every assembly.<sup>1</sup>

As for the trouble at Antioch, all had been well until the *pseudadelphoi* had appeared. But when they got to work, even Peter was affected. So much so, he stopped eating with Gentile believers, and Barnabas was swept along in his wake. Consequently, Paul had the heart-rending task of making a

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<sup>1</sup> See my *False*. See my ‘A Disaster Averted: Romans 14:5-6’ on my [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com) page. Apostolic resistance to false teaching and false teachers is written large across the New Testament (Acts 15:1-35; Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Cor. 2:17; 4:2; 11:1-15; 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 6:3-10; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; 2 Pet. 2:1-22; 3:3-4; 1 John 2:18-27; 4:1-6; 2 John 7-11; Jude 3-23, for instance).

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public stand; which, for the sake of the gospel (Gal. 1:6-10; 2:4-5), he did:

When Cephas [that is, Peter] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all: 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?' (Gal. 2:11-14).

Please note that the Spirit did not try to hide any of this. It was an episode in the sad endless saga of believers failing. And it is pleasing to read that with the passage of time a reconciliation took place.<sup>2</sup>

But, alas, this was not the only time Paul and Barnabas disagreed. The two men, with the blessing of the Antioch believers, took the problem of the *pseudadelphoi* back to where it belonged; namely, the *ekklēsia* in Jerusalem (after all, the trouble had only blown up in Antioch when 'certain men [had come] from James') (Acts 15:1-5). When all was settled (or so it seemed):

...Paul said to Barnabas: 'Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are'. Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches (Acts 15:36-41).

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<sup>2</sup> See Col. 4:10; Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:13.

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And so it went on. Paul in the last chapter of his final letter to Timothy, showed that things had changed between him and Mark (had Mark benefitted by Paul's rebuke?). But that is not all it showed. Paul was lonely. He pleaded with Timothy, and the anxiety racking his heart is patent:

Do your best to come to me soon. For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry. Tychicus I have sent to Ephesus. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, also the books, and above all the parchments. Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message. At my first defence no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so that through me the message [that is, the preaching of God's revelation, God's word] might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth. The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed and bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen (2 Tim. 4:9-18).

No! It was not all sunshine in the apostolic day.

As for conversions under gospel preaching, the contrast between Acts 2 – 4:4; 6:7; 9:35,42; 12:24 with Acts 17 and Acts 28:17-31 is palpable. In the early days, the preachers of the gospel saw many converts under their preaching. Within a few years, it was not so. I am not saying there was no blessing (Acts 19:10,20), but conversion-work, in general, became much tougher, and less successful.

But it was in-house where the real trouble lay, within the *ekklēsia*.<sup>3</sup> Although Paul definitively demolished the teaching and principles of the *pseudadelphoi* – and we have his arguments laid out in Scripture – as the years passed, again and

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<sup>3</sup> See my 'The Church Attacked: When, and Without or Within?' in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume Thirteen*.

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again their descendants would re-appear in assembly after assembly.

And, let us not forget, Christ had severe criticisms and warnings for most of the seven *ekklēsia* of Asia Minor (Rev. 2 & 3).

I have not finished with the way the *ekklēsia* degenerated during the time of the apostles, but since this is but the ‘Introduction’ I leave it there – for the moment.

False teachers seem to possess the mythological power of the Lernaean Hydra!<sup>4</sup> In particular, during the second to the fifth centuries the theological philosopher-politicians known as the Fathers ruled the churches, and they grievously and irreparably adulterated the new covenant by going back to the old covenant and making that the norm and pattern for the *ekklēsia* and the gospel. They also adopted pagan ideas.<sup>5</sup> In other words, they Judaised and paganised the new covenant. If all that were not enough, bitter Roman persecution was unleashed against the believers throughout the Empire.

This catalogue of trouble came to a head in the fourth century with the ‘end’ of Roman persecution brought about by the so-called conversion of the Emperor, Constantine. But the price tag was excessive: the *ekklēsia* suffered a massive, root-and-branch alteration. Constantine, and a later Emperor, Theodosius I, in cahoots with Church dignitaries, made Christianity the State religion, forging Church and State into one religious-political commonwealth, a Judaised-cum-Paganised juggernaut. The *ekklēsia* has never recovered from this devastating move.

What do today’s believers think of the history of the *ekklēsia* these past 2000 years? If believers think about those years at all, I guess most of them think that while the church – however ‘the church’ might be defined – has had some very serious times of crisis, rocky decades – even centuries – in the main the

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Greek legend, when one head of the monster was cut off, two grew in its place.

<sup>5</sup> See my *The Pastor; Battle*.

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needle has always swung back to the right upward course. Their key supporting texts (though, in my view, they are commonly misunderstood) are probably found in the prophecy of Daniel and in the words of Christ:

In the days of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed, nor shall the kingdom be left to another people. It shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand forever (Dan. 2:44).<sup>6</sup>

And:

I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18).<sup>7</sup>

Some believers, however, go further; much further. They think the last 2000 years have been – admittedly with some downs – a history of growing prosperity and expansion for the church and the spread and influence of the gospel.<sup>8</sup> They gladly sing – should that be ‘*glibly* sing’? – the words of Sabine Baring-Gould:

*Like a mighty army  
Moves the church of God;  
Brothers, we are treading  
Where the saints have trod.  
We are not divided,  
All one body we,  
One in hope and doctrine,  
One in charity.*

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<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 1.

<sup>7</sup> A much debated statement. I think ‘the gates of hell (Hades)’ refers to death (Job. 38:7; Isa. 38:10); the *ekklēsia* – nor, of course, individual believers – will ever be defeated by death. I will come back to this.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Edwards, for one: ‘By each of these comings of Christ [that is, events in church history], God works a glorious deliverance for his church. Each of them is accompanied with a glorious advancement of the state of the church’ (Jonathan Edwards: *History of Redemption*). See Appendix 2.

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Really? How then, one wonders, can they also sing these words by Samuel John Stone:

*Though with a scornful wonder,  
Men see her sore oppressed,  
By schisms rent asunder,  
By heresies distressed...*

Others think the last 2000 years – especially since the introduction of Christendom – have been, in general, a time of fearful defection from the gospel.<sup>9</sup>

Roman Catholics see the past 2000 years as a time of much progress for the Roman Church as – so they believe – Christ has continued to reveal new truth by the Spirit; that is, he has, they think, revealed that new truth to the ruling party – the Curia – of the Roman Church.<sup>10</sup>

And what about the future for the *ekklēsia*? How do most believers see that? What do they think Scripture tells us to expect? Some think that Scripture promises a glorious history

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<sup>9</sup> John H. Gerstner: ‘My conviction as a student of Scripture and of church history is that most of the latter is a departure from the former’ (John H. Gerstner: ‘Handout Church History, Conclusion notes 8 and 9’). For other witnesses, see Appendices 3, 4 and 5.

<sup>10</sup> In 1845, John Henry Newman published *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Newman used the idea of [the] development of doctrine to defend Roman Catholic teaching from attacks by those who saw certain elements in Catholic teaching as corruptions or innovations. He relied on an extensive study of the early Fathers to trace the elaboration or development of doctrine which he argued was in some way implicitly present in divine revelation; that is, as he saw it, in Scripture and Tradition. Newman’s thinking had a major impact on the Second Vatican Council and appears in its statement that ‘the understanding of the things and words handed down grows through the contemplation and study of believers... which tends continually towards the fullness of divine truth’ (adapted from Wikipedia). Stephen K. Ray: ‘Development of doctrine is a key and crucial responsibility of the Church’ (Stephen K. Ray: *Crossing the Tiber: Evangelical Protestants Discover the Historical Church*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1997, Mumbai 2010 edition, p71).

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for the church preceding Christ's return – a time, if not of unbroken and rising prosperity, at least a period when the church will flourish, so that, when Christ returns he will find a church, a kingdom, that is a mighty power in the world, exercising untold influence for good. To be specific, such believers envisage the widespread conversion of Jews leading to a widespread conversion of Gentiles, signalling the triumph of the kingdom. One way such believers justify this is by funnelling a host of Old Testament prophecies into Romans 11, seemingly ignoring – or not even noticing – Paul's stated purpose in writing Romans 9 – 11, or the way the post-Pentecost writers use those prophecies.<sup>11</sup>

Others think almost the very opposite – that Scripture speaks of the preservation of a faithful minority – the remnant<sup>12</sup> – while the professing church in general will be guilty of appalling widespread apostasy. While they can envisage occasional bright spots, they anticipate a general defection from the apostolic gospel. Things will get even worse before Christ comes.

Yet others seem to take refuge in their expectation of a 1000 year Jewish kingdom centred on Jerusalem with Christ as king. The preceding time has simply to be endured.

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<sup>11</sup> See Iain H. Murray: *The Puritan Hope: Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1971. For my response, see my *Romans 11*. I have taken the following from the blurb for a Texas Conference to be held in 2024: 'America will have Christ, or it will have chaos. All over the world, Christians are waking up to this reality. Many are embracing the idea of "Christian Nationalism"'. 'At this conference, we'll be focusing on the blueprint for establishing the New Christendom. Seven doctrines for ruling the world'. Hmm.

<sup>12</sup> The remnant in the day of the new covenant is not the so-called invisible church within the visible, like the faithful in the nation of Israel in the day of the old covenant (see 'Lloyd-Jones Interview with Aneurin Talfan Davies'), but believers in the world, especially in Christendom.

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These are the kind of questions and issues I am concerned with in this book.

But let me make it clear that I want to write nothing more than a brief introductory tract for believers who have hardly – if ever – really explored Scripture on such things.<sup>13</sup> They have, maybe, simply absorbed the received wisdom and tradition in which they find themselves. That, and ‘the church’ they ‘attend’, is the norm, and it has been ever thus, and ever will be, world without end. If nothing else, I hope my work may disabuse them of this and provoke them to take off the blinkers and adopt a Berean spirit, and eagerly search the Scriptures to see if these things are so (Acts 17:11).

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Let me summarise where we are. For those who have thought about these matters, opinions are sharply divided into two main camps: those who see the church’s history (past, present and future) as glorious – tempered, of course, by seasons of setbacks – but in the main, one of triumphant progress. This group divides again: some fall back on the comfortable cop-out of the Reformed invention of visible and invisible churches;<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> I am not being modest when I say that many others are better qualified to tackle these themes, but I feel compelled to throw my two mites into the treasury.

<sup>14</sup> See my *Infant*. Emil Brunner, writing in 1952, commenting on the difference between the *ekklēsia* of the New Testament and the church of today, said: ‘It is... a well-known fact that dogmatists and church leaders [not excepting evangelicals – DG]... are only too ready to bridge the gulf between “then” [that is, the New Testament] and “now” [that is, our present experience] by a handy formula such as that of development [that is, Newman’s “solution”], or by appealing to the distinction between the [so-called – DG] visible and invisible church, and thus to give a false solution to this grave and distressing problem. But while many theologians and church elders are able to quieten their consciences by such formulae, others are so much the more aware of the disparity between the Christian fellowship of the apostolic age and our own “churches”, and cannot escape the impression that there may perhaps be something wrong with what we

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the visible carries all the downside, and the invisible all the good. Evangelicals including the Reformed, while they may not be eager to admit it, expect development, as God reveals more truth to succeeding generations in the church,<sup>15</sup> and this allows them to add evangelical glosses – visible and invisible church, house of God, ecclesiastical structures, synods, and the like – all for so-called advance, of course.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, there are those who look upon the history of the church as a record of how man has molested the work of God, thereby causing untold damage. This, of course, does not mean that nothing good has come this past 2000 years, but the general course of the church has been depressing, at the very least. As for the future, such believers are much struck by Christ's rhetorical question:

When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?  
(Luke 18:42).

In this work I want to try to encourage thought on such issues.

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now call the church' (Emil Brunner: *The Misunderstanding of the Church*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1952, pp5-6). With the passage of seventy years, things have not any closer to a resolution. Calvin, following Cyprian, taught that outside the church there is no salvation. Brunner rightly dismissed this: 'The idea of the invisible church is foreign to the New Testament, while the interpretation of the real visible church as a merely external means of salvation is not only foreign to it but completely impossible... The thought of Calvin, that the church is an external support for faith, is utterly unintelligible... The *ekklesiā* of the New Testament... is precisely not that which every "church" is at least in part – an institution, a something. The Body of Christ is nothing other than a fellowship of persons... where fellowship... signifies a common participation a togetherness, a community life. The faithful are bound to each other through their common sharing in Christ and in the Holy Ghost, but that which they have in common is precisely no "thing", no "it", but a "he", Christ and his Holy Spirit... The Body of Christ... has nothing to do with an organisation and has nothing of the character of the institutional about it' (Brunner pp9-11; see also Brunner pp14-18).

<sup>15</sup> Such believers are adopting Newman's idea – see earlier notes.

<sup>16</sup> The list is endless: the moral law, threefold division of the law, Christian sabbath... For Stephen K.Ray's list, taunting evangelicals, see Ray pp42-43.

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Why should we be interested? Well, what we think about such things seriously affects our present way of living, and the way we face the future – no mean consequences.