



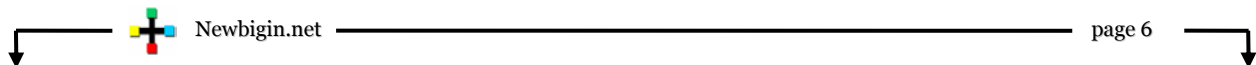
The Church – ‘A Bunch Of Escaped Convicts’

1990

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This issue of *Reform* will come into most readers' hands on the day of Pentecost, when we thank God for the gift of the Spirit and remember that the Church lives only in the power of the Spirit. In the Fourth Gospel, when Jesus shares the Spirit with his disciples he says 'As the Father sent me, so I send you'. That is the birth of the Church, its launching into the life of the world to continue the mission of Jesus.

We can describe that mission in a threefold way. Jesus embodied the presence of the kingdom of God in his own life and death; the Church is called in the power of the Spirit to, do the same. Jesus did mighty works of healing and deliverance; the Church, in the power of the Spirit, is to do the same. Jesus announced the kingdom and taught people its ways; the Church must preach and teach because even the best of good works and good examples do not explain themselves. We have to point to the source from which they come.

The Church does not exist for the sake of its members; it exists to continue the mission of Jesus. But this does not make the Church a mere programme agency. The Church continues the mission of Jesus first by being itself a foretaste of the kingdom, a community in which the freedom and joy of the kingdom are already tasted and celebrated in praising and adoring God. It can thus also be a sign of the kingdom, pointing beyond itself to God's love and holiness. And it may also be an instrument which God can use (among other instruments) for doing his will in the world.

So the Church is neither to be identified with the kingdom nor separated from it. Jesus did not manifest the kingly rule of God by taking over the government of the world. That remains in the Father's hands. Jesus manifested it by his perfect obedience to the Father's will. The Church is called to do the same. But the kingdom is not to be set against the Church, as though we could seek the kingdom of God by looking elsewhere than to Jesus. The Church, in the power of the Spirit, is called to be sign, foretaste and instrument of the kingdom.

The Church is a company of forgiven sinners. We might put it bluntly and say that the Church is a bunch of escaped convicts. (That is why laughter is so big a part of church life when it is healthy – see Psalm 126).

As church people we are not an impressive lot. The glory of the Church is the glory of the Lord who is with us when we gather in his name. The Church is always a paradox, holy and sinful at the same time. It is the paradox of grace.

We are not to dissolve it by making a distinction between the 'institutional Church' and something called the 'real Church' which is more impressive but quite invisible. As a visible society the Church has an institutional aspect. It has limbs and organs which can become arthritic. But when I develop arthritis I do not distinguish between the real me and the arthritic me.

The invisible Church exists only in my mind, which is very convenient because I decide who are the 'real' Christians. In the visible Church we have to cope with the ones God has chosen, not the ones we would have preferred. This is what is meant by calling the Church 'catholic'. It is for everybody. The 'invisible Church' is merely an extension of my (no doubt very spiritual) ego.

We confess belief in 'one holy catholic and apostolic Church'. But the Church is divided, sinful, sectarian and lazy about its mission. We can only continue to confess this faith because God is mighty and merciful and is able to raise the dead and 'call into existence things that do not exist' (Romans 4:17). But it is a terrible thing to abuse God's mercy and think we can get away with it.

It is God who will finally decide who are the 'real' Christians. We are good at evasion and procrastination, nowhere more than in the matter of unity where we like to claim a 'spiritual' unity as an escape from actually sharing a common life. The Pentecostal Spirit is given to us at this season in order that we may be, in active truth, one, holy, catholic and apostolic.

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