

Chapter Six

GOD'S COVENANT COMMUNITY

The point of this chapter is to try to discern whether there's some sort of blueprint for what the Lord intends for his people: how we're meant to be, think, behave, and come across to others. My approach involves tracking through those events and ideas in Scripture which have particularly caught my eye as I've read through it. Others will have been struck by a somewhat different list of things, I imagine. If we can see a divine pattern or plan, then maybe we can have some reasonably objective means of assessing the story of the Church in Europe and the West, and that of Western societies that have understood themselves to be Christian, over the last two millennia.

After the Fall

Basic to God's answer to the Fall was the raising up a family for himself, who'd be set apart from the rest of corrupted humanity. When Abraham responded to the Lord's word to him, he was just an individual – but one who'd father a family which, in turn, would become the nation Israel. And Israel was meant to be a family of families, not just another nation-state.

The Lord calls Israel 'my son' (Hosea 11:1). In another image, he refers to himself as Israel's husband (e.g. Is 54:5; Jer 3:14). Under the Old Covenant, we can see, close family relationships best describe how God expects to interact with his people. The language he uses in the Old Testament concerning this relating can be very emotional; for instance Jer 31:20: "Is not Ephraim [Israel] my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still

remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I have great compassion for him,” declares the Lord.’ God’s covenant offer is of love towards his people – and he looks for their love in return (Deut 5:8). Moreover, those within the covenant he expects to love one another (Lev 19:18).

The covenant set up with Israel was based on grace. An extraordinary promise launched Abraham on his adventure away from security, and into the unknown (Gen 12: 2-3). Before being given the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel were reminded of their deliverance: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Ex 20:2). The Old Covenant, despite what is so often said, wasn’t designed as a religion of works. The pattern, rather, was that the people of the covenant would first experience heaven’s kindness and help, and only then be expected to respond in appropriate ways, and with gratitude. The ‘law’ (Torah) outlined appropriate – as well as required – ways of response within this covenant of grace. High on the list of what was expected were obedience to the Lord’s commands, and holiness, individual and corporate.

Practical ways were made available for maintaining relationship with the Lord. The most obvious one was the offering of prescribed sacrifices – which, above all, dealt with the problem of sin, which cuts human beings off from God. Another was prayer, which was more assumed than commanded in early Israel. So Moses could appeal to the idea that for them, the covenant people, “the Lord our God is near us when we pray to him” (Deut 4:7); which was not the case with the gods of other nations. The privilege offered to Israel was that of being ‘a kingdom of priests’ (Ex 19:6). At this time, so far as we know, Israel had no formal priesthood. The idea here was that everyone would be a priest – or, at least, all the males (though the text only implies that). After the human race had fallen, there was a need for individuals who could represent God to human beings, and human beings to God – in whatever appropriate way. The covenant’s intention was that all Israel should be in this privileged position. And, as a priestly people – which implied intimacy with God – they’d be ruled over him as by a king.

This introduces a rather contrasting element in Israel's life. Kingship isn't inevitably stern and dictatorial – but that's what it would have been in those days. The Lord didn't manifest two separate characters in his dealings with his people, of course – rather, he intended to show what a very *different* kind of king he was. But if the family images implied intimacy, then God as (righteous) king and (just) judge portrayed him in his difference and distance from us: his transcendence. Covenant was an unequal arrangement – governed by what the Lord, not Israel, required. He set testing standards for his people – and expected them to be met. Some of the penalties for law-breaking were drastic (whilst others seem eminently reasonable, even to us today). And, for matters not dealt with in the here-and-now, the Lord specified a 'Day': his day of reckoning, when justice really would be done. The earliest reference we have to this – from the mid-700s BC – is in Amos 5:18-20. The Day of the Lord was to be regarded with apprehension. Indeed, what the Lord required from his people was that they lived a life characterised by holy, God-given fear (e.g. Ps 111:10; Jer 32:40). Perhaps the words 'fear' and 'awe' combined would convey what is meant here.

Some might object: it's either love or fear – it can't be both. Well, it can be both, and it is both. The Lord may use paradox – seeming opposites – to convey truth, but the very existence of the term 'paradox' (as opposed to contradiction) suggests that we know the phenomenon well-enough. On occasion, both philosophy and science have to speak paradoxically to do justice to the truth they need to convey. The Bible, inevitably, has to reflect such a reality too. The challenge we face is to become comfortable with paradox – so long as it doesn't mask real contradictions. The point needs making, because ignoring the Old Testament and being embarrassed by 'the God of the Old Testament' are increasingly common in the Christian community. This is no minor matter, and too close to what the early Church had to label heresy¹ for comfort.

¹ The Gnostic teacher Marcion (excommunicated AD 144) rejected both 'the God of the Jews' – who, he argued, was different from 'the loving Father of Jesus' – and the Old Testament, and

Israel's institutional life

There was a simplicity about how Israel was to relate to the Lord, and no images of him – such as would be found in the religions of other nations – were allowed. The way of dealing with sin, though, would shock us if we could visualise it: so many animals sacrificed at times that vast quantities of blood flowed (which constituted a major practical challenge for the Jerusalem Temple, in particular). But Israel's spiritual life was also about feasting. And it can be quite a surprise to discover that, when families took their tithe to the designated sanctuary, the instruction was: 'Use [some of] the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine or other fermented drink. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord and rejoice' (Deut 14:26). A substantial body of instructions – in the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) – guided Israel on these and many other matters, and a fair amount of the thinking (the theology) behind this 'law' was provided along with it.

Beyond the personal and family priesthood the Lord gave Israel, he instituted a formal, sacrificing priesthood (Ex 28, 29). In parallel with this religious leadership, he had Moses – at his father-in-law's prompting – set up a leadership structure of elders for the administration of justice and other practical aspects of life (Ex 18). These two kinds of leadership in combination were designed to serve the life of a confederation of twelve tribes. The idea was that authority lay with God, their king, with some of this being delegated to his appointed representatives.

Separate from those who had such delegated authority were individuals who came to possess visual² or verbal gifts of prophecy. Abraham was recognised as such a person (Gen 20:7). Moses would be the standard by which all future prophets were judged (Deut 18:15-20). Significantly for the future, Moses had the

those parts of the New which he thought suffered from Jewish influence. Similar positions were adopted by other Gnostic teachers of the time.

² Particularly dreams and visions.

authority – under the Lord – to prescribe for the whole nation how it should live. At the other end of the scale there were the unknown prophets such as the ‘man of God’ who came to Eli to prophesy to him the disaster coming upon the priesthood in general and Eli’s own family in particular (1 Sam 2:27-36; cf 3:1b).

Given what we read in the New Testament about the powerlessness of the law to enable obedience in us, it’s evident that the Old Covenant system was more designed to point to an ideal – intended to become a reality at some stage – than to be fully workable. Anyway, it didn’t work. The Book of Judges is often as depressing as it’s an exciting read. Time and again we read that ‘the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord’ (2:11 etc.). Faithfulness, such as Gideon showed when the people wanted him as ruler over them, was all too rare. “I will not rule over you,” he said, “nor will my son rule over you. The Lord will rule over you” (Judg 8:23). Most of Israel, though, it became increasingly apparent, simply couldn’t live as God intended. The closing observation in Judges reads: ‘In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit’ (21:25). This was a serious indictment. Among other things, it amounted to a vote of no-confidence in Israel’s existing leadership.

Towards the end Eli’s time, the Lord acted in judgement against the priesthood he’d instituted – for their faithlessness. Israel as a whole, no more faithful than the priests, paid a bitter price too. When Eli’s daughter-in-law Phinehas named her newborn son Ichabod – ‘Where has the glory [the Lord’s presence] gone?’ – her observation that the glory had departed from Israel applied equally to Israel’s priesthood (1 Sam 4:21). In the first instance, the remedy for the failure of the priesthood took the form of another Moses: Samuel.

But before we look at Samuel and what followed, let’s observe in passing something about instituted or designated authority. The priesthood wasn’t given mere functional authority (simply a job, that is). Rather, if you were a priest you were a priest for life – and whether you were one or not was a matter of being

born into a particular family line within the tribe of Levi. In the time of Samuel, although the priests' privileged position wasn't actually removed from them, the place of the priesthood in the scheme of things seems to have been significantly downgraded. Given the behaviour of Aaron (Ex 32) and his sons Nadab and Abihu (Lev 10:1-5), maybe it's surprising this didn't happen earlier. Later, through the prophets, the Lord would have some very harsh things to say about the priests. This is how he can, and sometimes does, treat his designated leaders. The expected standards for leaders are even higher than those for the rest of the people. Even serious failures – as in the case of Aaron – can be passed over. But, sooner or later, the Lord acts against unsatisfactory leadership – sometimes drastically. For him, leaders don't possess authority simply because of their formal positions. Their authority is conditional upon their faithfulness – because delegated.

Samuel was a Levite (1 Chron 6:26), from that part of the tribe of Levi, the Kohathite branch, that helped the priests in their work by caring for the articles associated with the sanctuary. Hannah, his mother, dedicated to Lord's full-time service at Shiloh the little boy he'd given her in answer to her desperate prayer there earlier. Young Samuel worked and slept in the sanctuary at Shiloh. In that place, after some time, the Lord revealed himself to him, and told him about the judgement coming upon Eli and his family. And, as he grew into adulthood, 'all Israel ... recognised that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the Lord' (1 Sam 3:20). In due course, the nation recognised him as its leader (7:5-6). His being raised to such a position signified a basic change within Israel. From the time of this second Moses onwards, the prophets – with their charismatic gift of speaking in the Lord's name, as compared to the formal authority of priests and elders or kings – would constitute (except during David's and Solomon's reigns, and until prophecy ceased in Israel) the most significant element in the nation's leadership.

“When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as judges for Israel” (8:1). For once, it seems, Samuel hadn’t consulted the Lord, but had followed the tradition he knew. His sons seem to have been little better than Eli’s. The people wouldn’t accept them; and they demanded a king instead (vv3,6). Samuel wasn’t happy. The Lord had to explain to him that the people’s call for a king wasn’t a rejection of Samuel, but of himself as king over them (vv7,8). A king they could have, if they insisted (v22). Samuel, though, was told to warn the people what being subject to one would mean for them (vv9-18). They were in no mood to listen.

The Lord chose for Israel the most impressive young man in the nation, humanly speaking – Saul (9:2,16-17). He’d have the ability to deal with the menace posed by the nation’s enemies, the Philistines (v16). But, in Saul, spiritual anointing wasn’t matched by spiritual character. His behaviour became increasingly erratic, showing itself in self-will, rash actions and downright disobedience towards the Lord. Disobedience led to the Lord choosing another king, David – and having him anointed by Samuel, even whilst Saul was still ruling (16:1-13). Another example of how the Lord deals with those with formal authority who stray far outside his will. The Lord even sent an evil spirit to torment Saul (v14)!

With David came further change in the way things happened. Although David was of ‘fine appearance’ (v12), God’s criterion for selecting this particular king for his people was made explicit: “The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” (v7). If David was capable of gross sin, and (partly in consequence of this) made a poor head of his family³, he proved himself otherwise to be of the calibre of Joseph, Moses and Samuel. Flawed though he might be, he was still ‘a man after the Lord’s own heart’ (13:14). In David’s case, his anointing with the Holy Spirit and power (16:13) did go with character. In an age when a man’s firstborn son was supposed to be the most important, the Lord chose the youngest. He also chose the unpopular brother (17:18;28,29 – cf Joseph). Why is David’s red hair

³ And did he really need so many wives?

mentioned? And why was he consigned to the lowly job of tending the family sheep? Because he had a different mother from that of his brothers? Possibly from an encounter of Jesse's with a woman not his wife (as some have suggested)? We don't know, but there's something a bit strange in the story here. Anyway, looking after sheep turned out to be a most effective, if unconventional, training course for kingship (17:32-37) – like Moses' preparation for his work.

Although the Lord didn't want a human king over Israel, he used David to model aspects of kingship that would foreshadow the coming of Messiah. If John the Baptist was another Elijah, Jesus was in some ways another David – and content to be known as 'son of David' (Mk 10:47 etc.). David was at heart a worshipper. He knew how to deal with his, and his people's, enemies. He didn't try to snatch at the reality of the kingship he'd already been anointed for (commissioned to) – but honoured the formal authority Saul still possessed. In this in-between period he demonstrated great patience and wisdom.

Some of the conventional ideas about kingship – unhelpful ones – began to influence David. He decided to build himself a palace. Then the disparity between the splendour of his palace and the mere tent (tabernacle) in which the Lord's presence resided, and where worship was offered, started to bother him. So he conceived the idea of building the Lord a temple. A thoroughly ambiguous dialogue started between David and the Lord about whether the Lord wanted a 'house' [in the sense of 'temple'] or not (2 Sam 7:1-16) – and, if so, whether he was the right person to build it (1 Chron 28:2-3,6; 29:1). David wanted to build a 'house' [temple] for the Lord. The Lord told him that, no, he would build a 'house' [royal dynasty] for David. Even so, the building of a temple – by David's son Solomon – was permitted. And, when it was consecrated, the Lord sent his glory to fill the place (2 Chron 5:11-14). But was the building ever really authorised? Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin (Acts 7:47,48) is hardly clearer on the matter than the OT accounts. But it certainly highlighted the extent to which constructing a physical temple for the one-and-only God missed the point. Temples are where

gods-that-are-no-gods are supposed to live. No man-made temple could ever house the God of Israel. The true temple, Stephen is implying, is Jesus – in whom the Lord’s presence really resides. The point about the tabernacle, by contrast, which was God-ordained, was this: it was designed to instruct us about the nature of heavenly reality (Heb 8:1-6).

The outcome

David had introduced the DNA of empire into the life of God’s people – which we’ve never managed to rid ourselves of since. He’d brought a particularly subversive element from life in the world system surrounding Israel into what was meant to be a kind of family life they lived with their far-from-imperial God. After David, kingship was demonstrably on the road to ruin. Although Solomon had been granted an extraordinary gift of spiritual wisdom for governing, the institution was showing itself flawed, because of the fallen human nature of the kings. Solomon didn’t seem to have the wisdom needed to help him govern his personal life. For instance 1 Ki 11:1ff: ‘King Solomon ... loved many foreign women ... They were from the nations about which the Lord had told the Israelites, “You may not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods.” Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray ... his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God ... So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord ...’ After him, the nation split into two, ‘Israel’ in the north, and Judah in the south. Few of the kings who ruled over either part were remotely satisfactory – their disobedience being matched by that of the people. Overall, they achieved little other than lead their people towards exile.

As for the priesthood, Isaiah prophesied that, when catastrophe came, ‘It will be the same for priests as for people ...’ (24:2): devastation would strike those specially set apart for God as much as anyone else. Jeremiah (a priest as well as

a prophet) denounced the whole leadership of his nation: ‘As a thief is disgraced when he is caught, so the house of Israel is disgraced – they, their kings and officials, their priests and their prophets’ (2:26); ‘A horrible and shocking thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy lies, the priests rule by their own authority, and my people love it this way’ (5:30,31); and much more in this vein. In his commissioning as a prophet Jeremiah been told: “Today I have made you a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall to stand against the whole land – against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.” Ezekiel (also a priest as well as a prophet), like Jeremiah, attacked the whole leadership of his nation: ‘There is a conspiracy of her princes within her [Jerusalem] like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things, and make many widows within her. Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things ... Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations’ (Ezek 22:25-28). Ezekiel spoke about how the Lord had rejected the leadership of Israel, and would henceforth care for the people himself: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: “I am against the shepherds [of Israel] and will hold them accountable⁴ for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths ... I myself will search for my sheep and look after them ...”’ (33:10,11). In ch 8 Ezekiel reported on the ‘detestable things’ and idolatrous worship the Lord showed him were going on in the Temple. So, in ch 10, we’re not surprised to read that he was also shown the Lord’s glory departing from the Temple (v18).

Jer 26:18 is only one of many prophecies that spells out what is about to happen: ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Zion will be ploughed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.”’ Is 5:13 is just one of many warnings from the prophets that exile lies ahead.

⁴ In Scripture, accountability is from leaders towards the Lord, not from those led towards human leaders – unlike what is so often suggested today.

Not the end of everything, however

Isaiah prophesied exile for his people (5:13). 'Unless the Lord Almighty had left us some survivors,' he says, granted a vision of the future, 'we would have become like Sodom ... [and] Gomorrah' (1:9). More positively, these survivors would form 'a remnant', in whom the Lord's plans and purposes would be carried into the future. 'Though your people, O Israel, be like the sand by the sea, only a remnant will return [from exile]' (10:22); even so, ' ... a remnant of the house of Judah [the southern of Israel's two kingdoms] will take root below and bear fruit above' (37:31). Long before, for Israel, Egypt had been an 'iron-smelting furnace' (1 Ki 8:51; Jer 11:4). The coming disaster, and exile in Babylon, would be another experience of the refiner's fire (48:10).

The books of Daniel and Esther give us some idea of the trials and challenges exile could involve. In Ezra and Nehemiah, after migration back to the land, we read of the rebuilding of the Temple, confession of sin and repentance (a renewing of the covenant, in effect), the rebuilding of Jerusalem's city wall, the reading of the Law of Moses to the people, and further confession of sin and repentance. Israel was more than just back in the land. But how well was the nation actually doing? And were they really seeing prophecy fulfilled?

The prophet Haggai (ch 1) had urged those who'd returned from exile not to continue giving priority to the construction of their own homes, but rather to give priority to rebuilding the Lord's house. If they did that, they'd prosper, instead of experiencing constant frustration. In ch 2 he'd prophesied:

'This is what the Lord Almighty says: "In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land, I will shake all the nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with my glory," says the Lord Almighty. "The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house," says the Lord Almighty. "and in this place I will grant peace" ... (vv6-9).

But Haggai's words, about the Temple, at least, wouldn't have a literal fulfilment – not in the sense that his hearers must have expected. Archeological evidence, for example, suggests that this Second Temple was smaller than Solomon's. We know that the ark of the covenant (the very heart of the Temple) had disappeared at the time of the Exile, and was never recovered or replaced. And not only is there no evidence that the Lord's glory ever came to fill it, but in the time of Antiochus IV Epiphanes, on 15 December 167 BC, the 'abomination of desolation' (a pagan altar or statue) was set up inside it. Its replacement, Herod's Temple, begun in 19 BC, was indeed impressive – but that was built for political reasons, and by an alien, Idumean king who reigned over the Jews. Moreover, it was barely completed (AD 64) before it was destroyed (70). Mk 13:1-2, where Christ prophesies its destruction, serves as an adequate commentary on it.

The prophet Zechariah was contemporary with Haggai. His prophecies pick up on the situation prevailing in his day – but speak of a future order which is far beyond a restoration of what Israel had before the Exile, or a development from it. In his visions, Jerusalem is 'a city without walls' because of its greatness; "And I myself will be a wall of fire around it," declares the Lord, "and I will be its glory within" (Zech 2:3-5; cf Neh 3-6, on the one hand, and Rev 21-22, on the other). Is this even the geographical city of Jerusalem? Rescue, for the exiles ('the Daughter of Zion'), is salvation of a different order from what actually occurred at that time in history: "Shout and be glad ... for I am coming, and I will live among you," declares the Lord. "Many nations will be joined with the Lord in that day and will become my people ..." (vv10-11). In this context, what are we to make of v12: "The Lord will inherit Judah [the remnant of Israel] as his portion in the holy land and will again choose Jerusalem."? Given the context, this can hardly be taken literally. In ch 3 'Joshua the High Priest', Joshua ben Josedach, whose filthy clothes need replacing, can only prefigure Jesus, the true (and sinless) Joshua and true (and eternally effective) high priest. And his 'associates seated

before him' (3:8), we're told explicitly, are 'symbolic of things to come'. In ch 4-6 what the prophet sees becomes yet more other-worldly.

Of course, Ezekiel's prophecy about a new temple (ch 40 – 47) was available to Israel even in exile. To this temple, the glory he'd seen departing from Solomon's Temple (10:18) returned (43:4-5) – and filled it. From its altar flowed the river of life (47:1-12). But this was a temple that would never be built – not in any physical sense. It's a vision, it would transpire, not a blueprint.

Imagine yourself as someone who'd returned from the Exile. Daniel's literal reading of Jeremiah's prophecy of the return home after 70 years had been fulfilled (Dan 9), even if the fulfilment hadn't been particularly impressive. Now there were other prophecies – about a dramatic restoration of Israel's spiritual life, above all. Presumably these were to be taken reasonably literally, too. But the reality turned out to be of a different order from what was supposed to have been promised. Worse than that, the gift of prophecy was withdrawn. For some 400 years, from Malachi – if he was the last – until John the Baptist, there was no prophet in Israel. The question I posed was: How well was the nation actually doing? The answer: it was turning religious; it was seeking, by keeping to the rules this time, to avoid ever having to endure exile again; and, through the dreaming of apocalyptic visions, it was looking for 'a new world order', in which Israel would be top dog. All this to cope with deep disappointment, frustration, and a sense of God being far away.

The new world order

As we've been told so often, when the time came for God intervene decisively in world history, he did it in a way no one would have expected: through a baby, conceived in an irregular way, and born in less-than-ideal circumstances. Some shepherds, responding to what angels told them about the birth, went to visit the child. (Shepherds were little respected by their fellow-Jews). Some Persian

astrologers, representing the Gentiles, sought him out and offered him devotion. By giving him gold, incense, and myrrh, these foreigners with strange beliefs and practices functioned as true prophets. When the little boy was duly presented in the Temple (Herod's), a spiritually-alert old man and an elderly widow-prophetess, representative of a tiny, faithful minority in Israel's life, were led by the Holy Spirit to greet him – in place of those, particularly the High Priest, whose official duty it was to recognise and welcome Messiah when he came. The prophet raised up to prepare the way for this man, John the Baptist, lived 'an alternative lifestyle'. And if the common people flocked to hear John, the religious establishment didn't like him.

It seems strange that the Son of God should spend his first thirty years living a relatively ordinary life before his only-three years of ministry. Perhaps God doesn't understand efficiency and productivity like we do. 'We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with us in our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin' (Heb 4:15). 'Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him ...' (5:9). The Bible is as realistic about Jesus's (real) human nature as it is about his being God. He had to go through the processes of growing up, learning, and dealing with the difficulties and challenges of life, if he was going to fulfil his calling: to 'save his people from their sins'. This work of rescue had to be done in complete obedience to the way his people, the Jews, had been required to live; and to other particular things, beyond that, his Father required of him.

In passing, it's worth observing that: David seems to have become king at around the age of thirty; but Abram was seventy-five when he set out for the Promised Land; and Moses was forty when he left Egypt for the desert, and eighty when he returned to Egypt to lead his people out of slavery. Perhaps we can learn something about preparing people for 'ministry' in all this – and the timings and life-stages we regard as 'ideal'.

It's said of John the Baptist that he was full of the Holy Spirit from within his mother's womb (Lk 1:15). Biblical scholars have pointed out that less than this can hardly have been true of John's relative, Jesus, given who he was⁵. If so, Jesus came into this world full of the Holy Spirit. At his circumcision, when eight days old, he was formally brought into the covenant Israel had with Yahweh. So his 'baptism' at John's hands was very different from any Christian baptism – which is about entering the covenant, and dying to our old life of sin⁶. John's baptism, anyway, was 'for repentance' (so that Jews could properly become part of the covenant they'd already been formally incorporated into). But Jesus was 'without sin'. His baptism could only have a unique meaning: he was, as part of his call, identifying with the sin of his people, prior to dealing with it. 'Drowning' in the water, symbolically, pointed to the all-too-real death he'd have to face a few years later. Immediately after this, as he was praying, the Holy Spirit came upon him – for ministry; and then led him into the desert to be tested by Satan. There he countered all that was thrown against him, taking his stand three times on Scripture: "It stands written, Satan ...". At this point the full power of the Holy Spirit was released in him. In the synagogue in Nazareth he announced his programme (which was his commission): good news 'to the poor'; freedom for 'the prisoners'; recovery of sight for 'the blind'; release for 'the oppressed'; and all this because the time had come for 'the Lord's favour' to be shown. He was quoting from the prophet Isaiah (61:1-2 = Lk 4:18-19). It sounded more like a social and political agenda than a religious one. It was meant to. Jesus was talking about relationship with the Heavenly Father, not religion; religion being merely the counterfeit of true relationship with God.

He'd come to rescue people from disaster. The situation was this: whoever had not put their trust in Christ 'stood condemned already' (Jn 3:18) with respect to

⁵ On the basis of his precocious behaviour in Lk 2:41-52, it seems that he must have been filled with the Spirit as he entered his teenage years, at least.

⁶ If Jesus is the pattern for our lives, and he was full of the Spirit from his mother's womb, then presumably this should be the norm for the children of Christian parents. If so, it seems to follow that infant baptism for the children of Christian parents should be the norm too.

the coming Day of Judgement. Such people would 'perish' (v 16). The Son of God, though, had been sent not to judge people but to save them (v17).

The community of the Kingdom

"Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom, and what came was the Church," observed French church historian Alfred Loisy. Indeed, it's surprising just how little Jesus had to say about the Church. We – if we're not careful – project back into the gospels the 'Christian' reality we know: the framework and the dynamics. Jesus, however, was talking about a different framework and different dynamics. What is this Kingdom that preoccupied him so much? At its simplest, it's where the Father's will is done in everything 'on earth as it is in heaven'; where a state of affairs that reflects heaven breaks out here on earth. It looks very like Is 61:1-2 = Lk 4:18-19; and very unlike what most of think of as Christianity, or church, or religion. The Kingdom relates to all of life – where all of life is understood as spiritual (with no sacred-secular divide).

And Kingdom people are a mystery, Jesus explained to Nicodemus: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8). He'd just told him that only spiritual rebirth into a new life would allow people even to see the reality of God's Kingdom, let alone enter into it (vv 3,5). For this very different kind of people, a very different kind of leader would be required: the servant-leader. "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them," Jesus said, "and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mk 10:42-45). Because of the way Kingdom people are – like the blowing wind – these servant-leaders have to be able to read people spiritually (as Jesus could, e.g. Jn 1:47-48) and see what's happening in the spiritual realm

generally (likewise, e.g. Jn 5:19-20; Mk 8:33), otherwise they lack the key competence for ministry⁷.

In the Son of God – come into the world as Jesus of Nazareth – Israel is redefined, and the ‘Israel project’ relaunched; in a way that’s both continuous with what has gone before, and radically different from it⁸. This sameness and difference comes across clearly in the Sermon on the Mount. Continuity: “Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them” (Mt 5:17). Discontinuity: “You have heard that it was said ... But I tell you ...” (5:21-22, 27-28; etc).

To renew Israel, Messiah establishes a new community. ‘ ... Jesus went out to a mountainside to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles [i.e. commissioned] ...’ (Lk 6:12-13). He already had a larger group of followers, ‘disciples’, who were both male and female. Now, from these, he chose twelve of the male ones – part of whose role would be to ‘judge the twelve tribes of Israel’ when, ‘at the renewal [lit ‘rebirth’] of all things’, the Son of Man would sit on his glorious throne (Mt 19:28). (Is this meant to refer to the new heavens and new earth?) In the meantime they were to be his close co-workers, and, in due course, would come to exercise authority in his name: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you ...” (Jn 20:21-23).

‘Friends’, Jesus calls them, not ‘servants’. Trusted friends, at that: they will ‘know the Master’s business’, and so be partners with him (Jn 15:15). He looks for them to relate in sacrificial friendship to one another, too: “Love one another as I have loved you,” he tells them. “Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his

⁷ The reason, of course, for so much ministry failure today.

⁸ Many significant disagreements between different parts of the Church arise from differing estimates of how much continuity, and how much discontinuity, we’re to see between the OT and NT: e.g. infant or believers’ baptism; an intimate relationship between Church and state, or a separation between them; teaching that believers should tithe their income to ‘the church’, or that giving is a much more flexible (and voluntary) matter; Sunday as sabbath and/or observing a church calendar, or seeing all days as holy; and the place of the Jews in the scheme of things.

life for his friends” (v12). And this is family-type friendship: ‘Both the one who makes [people] holy and those who are made holy are of the same family,’ the writer of Hebrews tells us. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers [and sisters]’ (2:11).

When we come across the term ‘church’ in the New Testament, we too easily read the idea of ‘institution’ or ‘organisation’ into it – which is why those who plant or pastor ‘churches’, almost without exception, build institutions and organisations, however much they protest that this is the last thing they’d do. That’s the model imprinted in our corporate Christian consciousness, that’s what our DNA carries. But ‘church’ (ekklesia), in the New Testament, means: ‘family, characterised by intimate and costly friendship’ – with all that that implies.

There’s a greater focus on the individual in the New Testament than in the Old, and personal faith is more emphasised. The challenge of accepting or rejecting the Kingdom will split human families (Lk 12:51-53). Discipleship is seen, ultimately, in individual terms (14:26-27): a person who wants to come to Christ and follow him has to be prepared to leave family ties behind, and live a life of self-sacrifice (‘carry their own cross’). Jesus talks to Nicodemus about the necessity of being born again (or ‘from above’) in individual terms – and this is how Nicodemus understands him to be speaking (Jn 3:3-5). John’s baptism of repentance, which was commissioned to prepare Israel for such teaching, looked for individual response.

Yet, in an important way, the (human) family is seen as the basic unit of the Christian family (Church). In Acts 10 it isn’t just Cornelius as an individual, nor even his immediate (‘nuclear’) family, who hear with faith what Peter has to say, and experience the Holy Spirit coming on them, but the whole of his extended family group. When the distressed Philippian jailer asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved”, Paul and Silas answered: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household”. The whole family came to faith – and he and

they were all baptised there and then (Ac 16:30-33). Little children included, in each of these cases? Servants and slaves too? It would seem highly likely. One man (the head of the household), it appears, can believe in such a way that the whole family comes through.

The next level of existence up in the life of the Christian community seems to be the 'city church' – or, perhaps, 'the church in a geographical area'. Both the risen Jesus and Paul write to Christian communities that are defined by the places they inhabit: Thyatira, Galatia, Rome, Sardis. These communities seem to have met in a range of venues of varying sizes – as convenient – but they clearly weren't arranged in the 'cells' (or 'house churches'), 'congregations' (denominational or independent), 'streams', or whatever, that we know.

At a level above this, we may be meant to recognise church life in a particular people group or 'nation'. This is more implicit than explicit in Scripture, but the concept of 'nation, tribe, people and language' is more important than is usually recognised (Rev 7:9; 11:9; 13:7; 14:6) – and needs to be given proper consideration when we discuss the nature of the Church.

Finally, there's the global Church, the one Body of Christ – the extension of Jesus' person into life on earth – called to live in observable unity (Jn 17:20-23). Paul understands disunity to arise from 'worldliness' (1 Cor 3:1-4). Again, in another image, the (one) Church is Christ's fiancée. When he returns for her, she is to be his spotless bride.

This implies three values: holiness, intimate love and obedience. Jesus was quite clear that loving him and obeying him went together (Jn 14:23). Few ideas cause Christians more difficulty today than that a wife should obey her husband (Eph 5:22; 1 Pet 3:1-6)! As regards holiness, Christ set for us an absolute standard of perfection, Mt 5:48 (cf Lev 19:2), even if we can't attain to it fully in this life. In the

New Covenant, holiness is above all about the purity of our inner life and motivations. Intimate love, though, is not an idea this generation finds difficult.

Leadership for the Kingdom community

The Church's life is designed to be nothing less than Christ's own life projected into the world – as his own earthly life was an expression of his Father's. Jesus didn't act on his own initiative: his words and actions reflected those of the Father (Jn 5:19-20; 7:16-17; 14:10-11). It's unfortunate that what we know as 'The Acts of the Apostles' – a name it was given a century or so after it was written – isn't entitled 'The Acts of the Holy Spirit'; because it records the Spirit's initiatives and achievements. The latter title would be much more appropriate. In the earliest Church, the Holy Spirit initiated what went on in the Church – with or without designated leaders being present. (See, for instance, Ac 11:19-23; 13:1-3). The leaders tended to recognise the voice and actions of the Spirit; and when they recognised them, they co-operated with them. And, of course, what the Spirit was doing and saying was what Christ was doing and saying. "I am with you always, to the very end of the world," the risen Jesus had said as he gave his Great Commission to the apostles (Matt 28:20). The gospels recorded what Jesus 'began to do and to teach' (Acts 1:1). Acts, by implication, relates what Jesus continued to do and to teach – through the Holy Spirit, the apostles, and the Church generally – after his ascension into heaven. The further implication is that this was the way it was meant to continue after the time of the apostles ...

The life of the Church began with a powerful impulse of the Holy Spirit. There's an extent to which the Church's designated leaders 'received' (to possess) the Spirit for ministry (e.g. Jn 20:22) – the Catholic understanding; and, to a degree, the Pentecostal one. But there's an even greater extent to which the Spirit works sovereignly in the Church and the world, and Christian leaders simply have to co-operate.

The Church was given a facilitating and overseeing form of leadership: in the form of deacons, who organised the practical side of church life, elders, who exercised oversight locally, and apostles, who possessed a wider authority. Together with this, the Lord released a ministry leadership for the Church, based on spiritual gifts – which was rather wider than suggested by the list of apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers⁹. Significantly, apostle is common to both lists – much as love is both a gift and a fruit of the Holy Spirit. The early Church never seems to have known how to integrate these two kinds of leadership, formal and spiritual-gift-based. Paul's two letters to the church at Corinth show the difficulties he, at least, could experience in overseeing a Christian community – but there's reason enough to suppose that this was a widespread problem. By the time he writes Romans, a few years afterwards, he's referring to leadership as 'governing' (12:8). In 1 Timothy, written later still, a key qualification for eldership is that a man can 'manage' his family¹⁰ well (3:4), and Paul keeps telling Timothy to 'command' things of people (4:11; 6:17,18). The charismatic principle, as illustrated earlier in the New Testament, has been rather overshadowed in tough times by the hierarchical one. Not only is this tendency not corrected when that becomes possible, but it grows to be a serious distortion in the life of the Christian community; and feeds the spirit of empire brought into the life of the Lord's people by David.

But the word for 'church', in the Greek New Testament, is *ekklesia*. According to Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon (abridged), this means: 'an assembly of the citizens summoned by the crier, the legislative assembly'. In other words, the Christian community is having a term from the democratic Greek city-state applied to it. So 'church', by definition, isn't meant to be hierarchical¹¹. We don't have to understand *ekklesia* (church) as a voting democracy – but we do have to understand it in the sense of an every-believer involvement in church life and government, and as the very opposite of a top-down system.

⁹ The structure of the Greek suggests that this is one gift, not two.

¹⁰ Note the implication here that family is the basic unit of church life.

¹¹ *Hierarchy*, confusingly, means (literally) 'rule by the priests (or bishops)'.

The outcome of the Kingdom impulse in New Testament times

A word about method, here: Acts is often treated as if it's a history of the NT Church. But it isn't a history, as such¹². Indeed, we don't have any systematic account of this period. What we have is some useful evidence, both within the New Testament and outside it.

The Kingdom impulse could be dramatic. Information about the performing of signs and wonders in the New Testament Church isn't confined to Acts. In Galatians, Paul appeals to his readers' or hearers' experience of them (3:5), as does the writer of Hebrews to his (2:4). Indeed Paul, in Rom 15:18-19, seems to link his performing them with his assertion that he'd 'fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ'. The city Ephesus witnessed a high-level spiritual power-encounter, which led to the conversion of many who'd been practicing witchcraft (Ac 19:11-20).

When people received the Holy Spirit, this seems to have a dramatic and observable experience. Simon the Sorcerer was so impressed that he wanted to buy for himself the apostles' power had to impart the Spirit: 'When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." (Ac 8:18-19)' The church in Corinth became overly-impressed with the dramatically-spiritual – this was doubtless a hazard elsewhere, too. But the power of the Spirit seems, more normally, to have imparted the sense of shared life, the love, the joy, the holiness, and the power for witness – even to the point of accepting martyrdom – which made the early Christian community so distinctive and influential.

¹² Consider what it doesn't tell us. E.g. what the Twelve did over the years, for most of the time, or to which distant nations they travelled – such as Thomas going to India, John to Ephesus, and Peter to Rome; or how James, the Lord's brother, came to replace Peter as leader of the church in Jerusalem, or that he died as a martyr by stoning in AD 61.

Here was certainly a group in the Mediterranean world worth persecuting. Exactly how much persecution there was is disputed. There was more than enough, though, to make both an impact both human and spiritual: spiritual, in the sense of winning spiritual territory for the Church; and human, in the sense of impressing onlookers. Persecution was, of course, at its root, a spiritual battle. The kingdom of evil spirits which held people in its grip could see the threat the Kingdom of God's advance posed to it – and stirred up opposition to the Church accordingly. But, since the logic of the Cross applied, this proved highly counter-productive.

The gospel had spread through Jerusalem and the Jewish nation (Israel) from Pentecost onwards. Now it penetrated such major centres as Antioch, Alexandria (the great Greek city in Egypt, named after Alexander the Great), Athens, and Rome. What began as seemingly insignificant communities grew in each of these cities, with the possible exception of Athens, to be highly influential – although this would become evident only much later. What Jesus had said about his disciples being salt and light in the world, and about the growth of the mustard seed as illustrating the power of the Kingdom to grow, was being proved behind the scenes even in New Testament times. Eventually the life of the Christian community would transform the Roman Empire around the Mediterranean, and the Western world that sprang from it.

Problems

During Jesus' ministry, he had experienced a high degree of conflict with the Jewish religious authorities. In the end, they pushed the Roman authorities into judicially murdering him. As the Christian community grew rapidly after Pentecost, the Jewish establishment took action against its leaders, seeking their deaths when they could. Additionally, the rabbi Saul of Tarsus (soon to become the apostle Paul) launched a very personal, and pro-active, general persecution against believers. When, through his dramatic conversion, he changed sides, he

soon found himself strenuously opposed. In due course, as the Gentile element within the Church outgrew the Jewish part, the Church's response to (extensive) Jewish hostility degenerated into an anti-semitism similar to that which was widespread around the Roman Empire.

Besides this, there was considerable mistrust on the part of most Jewish followers of Jesus, of Gentile Christians who, unlike them, didn't keep the Law (Torah). The Council of Jerusalem (Ac 15) provided a temporary solution to the tension between the two sides – but this was never followed up, as it needed to be. Sadly – because he was the only one with the understanding even to attempt this seriously – Paul, who had a designated ministry to his own people as well as to the Gentiles (Ac 9:15), was never given the opportunity to hammer out with both sides all the issues which divided them. (There really is a need for gifted, believing theologians in the Church ...).

Paul saw, as no one else did, how Israel and the Gentile part of the Church related to one another. To the latter he said: "... you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the [true] olive root ..." (Rom 11:17). He wanted to make clear to Gentile believers: "You do not support the root, but the root supports you" (v 18) – implying that humility was required. Unbelieving Israel (branches broken off the true olive tree, v20), in the case of those who did not persist in unbelief, could – and Paul implied would – be grafted back in again (vv 22-23). Indeed, he looked to a time when "all Israel will be saved" (v 25) at the point in history when Israel would come to experience 'fulness' (v 12). He didn't, tantalisingly, define what he meant either by 'all Israel' or 'fulness' – where are we on the scale from 'a remnant' (the situation as he wrote) and every single Jew¹³? – but his general meaning is clear enough.

¹³ There is, of course, the significant practical problem today of defining just who is a Jew, to know – even in theory – how many 'every single one' would be.

In Ephesians, Paul spelt out the relationship between the Gentile part of the Church and the Jewish part – which constituted the ‘remnant’ of Israel, then as now. The Gentiles were reminded that, before conversion, they’d been ‘excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world’ (2:12). “But now,” after conversion, he told them, “in Christ Jesus, you who were once far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ [the blood of the New Covenant]” (v13). In his death, Jesus had destroyed both the hostility between Jew and Gentile and the barrier of radical difference that separated them (vv14-15). So ‘he has made the two [believing Jewish remnant and Gentile believers] one’ (v14). Now Gentile believers were ‘no longer foreigners and aliens’ but ‘fellow-citizens with God’s [Jewish] people and members of God’s household’ (v19). In other words, to be a Gentile believer is to have become part of God’s holy nation Israel – but in a situation where the Jews are a natural part of Israel, and the Gentile believer is only ‘grafted in’.

Is all this really important? Yes it is. We Gentile Christians – for historical reasons – have a distorted sense of our own situation and status. We’re not the primary focus of God’s attention – nor ever have been, despite what we’ve thought. Jesus said to the Twelve when he sent them out two by two: “Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Mt 10:5). Jesus said of himself to the Canaanite woman from Tyre and Sidon: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel” (15:24) – even though, in the event, he helped her. It is Israel that is fundamental in the Lord’s purposes. The Jewish part of the Church, which had been entrusted with the Great Commission, may have failed in NT times through its never coming to understand properly what the gospel implied either for them or for Gentile believers. But there was a parallel failure on the part of the Gentile Church, which involved an attitude problem towards Jewish fellow-Christians, and an inability to see Jewish Israel as the Church’s root. In due course a ‘replacement theology’ would arise, which wrongly asserted that the Lord had replaced [Jewish] Israel

with the [Gentile] Church. The consequences of that, down the centuries of the Church age, have proved disastrous.

Allow me to digress at this point. One might expect, from the above, that Jerusalem, in particular – especially Mount Zion (the Temple Mount) – and ‘the Holy Land’, in general, would be accorded a privileged place in the scheme of things, comparable to that enjoyed by the Jews. Such is not the case. The New Testament is surprisingly ambivalent – at best – about them. Mt Zion is indeed of importance – but only in the sense of the spiritual Zion¹⁴ to which believers have come, and as contrasted with physical Mt Sinai (Heb 12:18-24). The Jerusalem on which the New Testament focuses is ‘the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband’ (Rev 21). The Promised Land, in the Old Testament, was, amongst other things, a place of ‘entering God’s rest’ (Ps 95:11). The New Testament picks this idea up in Heb 3:7-4:11. The place of God’s rest, as indicated in Hebrews, is very different from any physical territory: it’s a state of life, such as people facing persecution, and even martyrdom (such as the target audience in Hebrews), can enter into; it’s the product of trusting Jesus the true High Priest as Saviour and Lord.

Conversely, physical Jerusalem is given something less than a place of honour in the New Testament. Gal 4:24b-26 and Rev 11:8 will suffice to show this: ‘One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: this is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.’ In Rev 11:8, physical Jerusalem, ‘where ... [the] Lord was crucified’, is likened to Sodom and the Egypt of Israel’s slavery!

¹⁴ Jesus himself being the true, New Testament Temple.

The point of the digression has been, in part, to indicate how far the increasingly-influential Christian Zionist worldview seems from what the New Testament actually says – if the NT is allowed to govern our interpretation of the OT, where appropriate, as it ought to be¹⁵.

A general decline from the principles Christ taught can be observed even within the New Testament. For instance, his own focus was on the Kingdom – but the the Church’s focus shifted over time to itself. And the Church’s life migrated from a vibrant, family-type existence towards the static life of an institution.

It’s often been thought that what we see portrayed in the New Testament is the Church in its pristine state. On closer inspection, though, immaturity, dangerously-incorrect beliefs, and strife abound. For instance, the Galatians and the Christian community to which Hebrews was written were – for different reasons – giving up on the gospel and reverting to Old Covenant Judaism. The church at Corinth suffered from – among other things – moral lawlessness, super-spirituality, and division. At Colosse there was a serious problem with a pre-Gnostic heresy. Paul even had to rebuke Peter for being inconsistent with what he knew to be true – and had to expose the ‘super-apostles’ for not being true apostles at all. Besides, there was plenty of personal friction, such as that between Paul and Barnabas. The power of God was at work dramatically – but the perfect Church was not on show, ready for us to copy. Things were more messy in the Church as overseen by the apostles than we’ve tended to admit.

¹⁵ Christian Zionism suffers from this defect in its theological method in particular: it reads the Bible only from front to back. This is to ignore the authority of Christ and the apostles (and that of the New Testament, in consequence) to reinterpret the Old Covenant – and transpose it, as necessary, into another form. The theologian-philosopher Kierkegaard once observed that, though life can only be lived forward, it can only be understood backward. Something similar seems to be true of Scripture: it can only read forward, but understood backward.