

The Church

Rob Yule, 1996 - 2000

This message shows what a remarkable organisation the Christian church is. The church is the world's most ancient institution, yet still displays surprising vigour today. At once stable and dynamic, the church provides a basis for local community, yet continually spawns specialist mission and social agencies to serve humankind.

The Christian church often gives God a bad press, by its shameful compromise, judgemental attitudes, and moral failures. Yet Jesus promises that this flawed, fallible and all-too-human community will be the instrument of his redeeming purpose in the world. The triumph of the church is one of the great paradoxes of human history, bearing witness, even in its weakness, to the grace and faithfulness of God.

Comparing the life of the church with a living organism - individuals and institutions often go to extremes. On the one hand we find a driven-ness and activism that can lead to burnout; on the other a self-absorption or indifference that can lead to social irrelevance. Jesus, when he established the movement we now call the Christian church, skilfully avoided both extremes.

The Christian church often seems encrusted in centuries of tradition. A significant recent development, however, has been the rediscovery by many churches around the world of forms and dynamics of church life drawn from the early church, as described in the book of Acts. This message

As a human institution, the church is influenced by forms of social organisation popular at different times in history. But the Bible's descriptions of the church point to dynamics of community life which go beyond secular models of social organisation. The church is not just an assortment of isolated individuals. It is a divine society, in which individuals find their unique fulfilment as members of a larger whole, and their selfishness is overcome in God's workshop of personal transformation.

Today, as in the ancient world, people are busy advancing themselves and climbing the ladder of success. Jesus revolutionised our understanding of leadership by standing such ideals of self-advancement on their head. Instead, he advocates an approach to leadership based on attitudes of servanthood, a willingness to take on menial tasks, and the surprise value of deeds of kindness. This message talks about the transforming impact of servant leadership.

The multitude of different Christian denominations and sects, 33,800 at last count (David B. Barrett, International Bulletin of Missionary Research, January 2000, p. 24) is often invoked by critics as invalidating the church's message of God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ for all peoples of the earth. But disunity is not limited to the church. It is a widespread human phenomenon, reflected in marriage breakdown, family discord, social disintegration, class struggles, civil wars, and international conflict. Unity is as rare as it is needful in human relationships. Rob shares some practical experience and biblical insights about unity, including the relevance of what he calls 'Jesus' Disputes Procedure.'

The longest recorded prayer of Jesus is his prayer to God for the unity of his followers, so that 'the people of this world will believe that you sent me.' In this address, Rob Yule, expresses his dismay that more Christians aren't concerned about the negative impact of their disunity, and shares the different levels, from local to global, where unity needs to be worked out.

The Christian church does not exist for its own sake, but to serve its founder in making the message of God's saving love in Jesus Christ known to the peoples of the earth. In this message, Rob Yule addresses some of the fears and misunderstandings of evangelism that hinder believers from being more effective witnesses for Jesus.

Enormous economic, social and cultural changes are sweeping the world. Christian churches are not immune from these changes, which pose great challenges for their identity, mission, and survival. Rob Yule gives his perspective on how the church can meet these challenges and his view of the prospects of Christianity in the third millennium.

Burning, Not Yet Consumed

Paradoxes of the Church (1 Corinthians 12:12-18)

Rob Yule, minister of St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, is Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand for 2000-2002. This message shows Rob's insight into what a remarkable organisation the Christian church is. The church is the world's most ancient institution, yet still displays surprising vigour today. At once stable and dynamic, the church provides a basis for local community, yet continually spawns specialist mission and social agencies to serve humankind. Rob gave this message at a Leprosy Mission commissioning service at St Albans on 20 February 1996, and revised it for this series on the nature of the Church.

The burning bush is the emblem of the Church of Scotland and of many Presbyterian churches descended from it. It comes from the biblical story of the shrub in the Sinai Desert which arrested Moses' attention when he saw that it was burning, but did not burn up (Exodus 3:2). The burning bush symbolises the paradoxical nature of the Christian church. The church of Jesus Christ is an ancient community two thousand years old, but it displays an amazing capacity for self-renewal. It is an institution whose demise is continually predicted, yet its survival, growth and vitality down the centuries and today continues to confound its critics and surprise its members.

1. The Church is Old and New

Lord Macaulay, the nineteenth century British historian, commented eloquently on my first paradox. The Church is simultaneously old and new, more ancient than any other human institution, yet displaying a remarkable capacity to renew itself, and still showing a youthful vitality, mission and growth today:

'The history of [the] Church joins together the two great ages of human civilization. No other institution is left standing which carries the mind back to the times when the smoke of sacrifice rose from the Pantheon, and when camelopards and tigers bounded in the Flavian amphitheatre. The proudest royal houses are but of yesterday, when compared with the line of the Supreme Pontiffs. That line we trace back in an unbroken series, from the Pope who crowned Napoleon in the nineteenth century to the Pope who crowned Pepin in the eighth; and far beyond the time of Pepin the august dynasty extends, till it is lost in the twilight of fable. The republic of Venice came next in antiquity. But the republic of Venice is gone, and the Papacy remains.

'The Papacy remains, not in decay, not a mere antique, but full of life and youthful vigour. The Catholic Church is still sending forth to the farthest ends of the world missionaries as zealous as those who landed in Kent with Augustine, and still confronting hostile kings with the same spirit with which she confronted Attila. . . . Nor do we see any sign that the term of her long dominion is approaching. She saw the commencement of all the governments. . . that now exist in the world; and we feel no assurance that she is not destined to see the end of them all. She was great and respected before the Saxon had set foot in Britain, before the Frank had passed the Rhine, when Grecian eloquence still flourished at Antioch, when idols were still worshipped at the temple of Mecca. And she may still exist in undiminished vigour when some traveller from New Zealand shall, in the midst of a vast solitude, take his stand on a broken arch of London Bridge to sketch the ruins of St Paul's.'

(Essay on Leopold von Ranke's *History of the Popes*, quoted by Hans Kung, *The Church* [London, Search Press, 1968], pp. 24-25)

What is the reason for this surprising paradox? I believe the secret of the Church's antiquity and continued vitality is the faithfulness of God, and the presence of the Holy Spirit renewing its life and energising its mission in every generation. One of the best expressions of this paradox is the second form of the Shorter Litany, a beautiful prayer in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*:

'O God of unchangeable power and eternal light, look upon thy whole Church, that wonderful and sacred mystery; and by the tranquil operation of thy perpetual providence carry out the work of man's salvation, and let the whole world feel and see that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are returning to perfection through him from whom they took their origin, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.'

The church is the human community called into being and led by Jesus Christ its risen Lord, who says, 'See, I am making all things new.' (Revelation 21:5)

2. The Church is Local and Missional

Another paradox of the church is its existence in two forms: as a geographical or local church community, and as a para-church or mission agency. Sociologists describe these two forms respectively a *modality* and a *sodality*. A modality is the static or geographical form of the church, the church as a local or regional community. A modality is the mobile or missional form of the church, the church as a specialist social or mission agency.

The modality is represented in the Bible by the church in Jerusalem and the church in Antioch, the church in Ephesus and the church in Rome; and in history by the parish church and the community church, St Albans Cathedral, Herefordshire, and St Albans Church, Hokowhitu. The sodality is represented by Philip the evangelist and Paul and Barnabas; by the medieval friars, the Catholic orders, Protestant missions, and Christian aid agencies.

These two forms of the church have not always recognised each other. A lot of suspicion exists between them. But in fact they need each other and complement each other, and they need big-hearted leaders who will network between them and get the best from their co-operation. We need the church in its local gathering or assembly, the *ecclesia* or 'congregation'; the static form of the church; the church in its 'inreach' or nurture, worshipping God and caring for its members. But we also need the mobile arm of the church; the church in its outreach or mission, evangelising unbelievers and serving humankind.

3. The Church is an Organisation and an Organism

My third paradox consists in the two ways we can look at the Church: as a human institution, and a divine organism.

As an institution we can consider the church as a human reality: an organisation that needs leadership, management skills, resources of people, buildings and finance, and involves teamwork, co-operation, friendship and sacrifice to work together and accomplish its goals. Biblical pictures of this are the appointment of the first deacons in Acts 6, or the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15: the church using principles of delegation and consultation to overcome internal disputes or external challenges.

As an organism, the church is a divine mystery: a living organism, the Body of Christ, comprising different organs which work together to compliment each other, all indwelt by the animating or life-giving reality of the Holy Spirit, the presence of the risen Christ. This is the church pictured in Paul's metaphor in 1 Corinthians 12 of the one body comprising many members. It is the church pictured in organic terms in Jesus' parables in Mark 4: of the seed growing 'automatically', of its own accord, through its own inner life, without any effort from the farmer; or of the mustard seed growing from tiny and insignificant beginnings to a glorious conclusion.

The Christian church, small and obscure when it began with Jesus and twelve nondescript followers in the first century, overcame the power of the Roman Empire in three centuries, and today numbers one third of the world's population: just under 2 billion Christians in mid 2000, 33.0% of the total world population of slightly more than 6 billion, according to statisticians David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson ('Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission: 2000,' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, January 2000, p. 25).

From small beginnings in an obscure frontier of the Roman Empire, the Christian enterprise has become a world-class movement, spreading, as its founder foresaw, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). As the great open-air evangelist and revivalist George Whitfield put it three and a half centuries ago, in a sermon preached on 6 April, 1742, the year Abel Tasman sighted my country of New Zealand, the first European to do so: 'The beginnings are amazing; how unspeakably glorious will the end be!' (quoted by Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, [Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1971], p.106).

I Will Build my Church

Jesus' Founding of the Church (Matthew 16:13-20)

The Christian church often gives God a bad press, by its shameful compromise, judgemental attitudes, and moral failures. Yet Jesus promises that this flawed, fallible and all-too-human community will be the instrument of his redeeming purpose in the world. The triumph of the church is one of the great paradoxes of human history, bearing witness, even in its weakness, to the grace and faithfulness of God. Rob Yule preached this message, second in a series on 'The Church', at the Annual Meeting of St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 8 August 1999.

When we look at the church, we see many obvious faults and failings. Terrible things have been done in Christ's name. In the past: Crusades, pogroms, forced baptisms, inquisitions, witch hunts, coercion. Today: leaders falling into immorality, or denying fundamental Christian doctrines; lay Christians becoming either materialistic and comfortable, or hardline and judgmental. The Ned Flanders wet-around-the-ears milksop Christian, also gives Christ a bad name. The sins of the church are many, obvious, and easily seized upon by our critics.

This raises a fundamental and perplexing problem. How can God use such a fallible and flawed group of people as the instrument of his redeeming purpose in the world?

The Church is a Divine Mystery

There is a divine side to the church, hidden from the eyes of its secular critics and observers. We could call this 'the glory of the church.' The church reveals a divine mystery. This is powerfully expressed in Jesus' commendation of Peter. 'Good for you, Simon, son of John! For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven.' (Matthew 16:17).

'Peter, you haven't worked this out by going to going to university. You haven't sussed this through human ingenuity or wisdom. This has been revealed to you by my heavenly Father.' In other words, the church is not a merely human creation. It is an instrument of God's divine purpose, revealed by God, to human beings, through faith.

The church's stupendous claims and cosmic significance are based on its divine calling. The Bible calls the church - not some university - the 'pillar and bulwark of the truth' (1 Timothy 3:15). The Bible calls the church - not *Star Trek* or *The Matrix*- 'the mystery hidden throughout the ages and generations and now revealed to the saints' (Colossians 1:26). It's the church - not monetarist economics- that holds the future of humanity in its hands.

The Church is a Human Society

But the church also has a human side: it is made up of fallible human beings. Sometimes we're ashamed of the church. We could call this aspect 'the shame of the church.'

Peter graphically represents this aspect of the church. This Galilean fisherman has no sooner been commended for his faith, than he is being rebuked for his failure. 'Get away from me, Satan! You are an obstacle in my way, because these thoughts of yours don't come from God, but from man.' (Matthew 16:22-23).

Peter is just like us. One moment he expresses a profound insight into the divine nature of Jesus and his saving purpose through the church. Then shortly after he is expressing very human motives in trying to dissuade Jesus from going to that date with destiny through which that saving purpose would be accomplished.

We are no different from Peter. We are fickle. We fail our Lord often. We are fearful, and out of our love of comfort put obstacles in the way of the sacrifices necessary to fulfil our Lord's will on earth. The church is made up of people just like ourselves: fickle, fearful, faithless; easily tempted, often lazy or selfish or lustful, bringing our Lord's name into dishonour and his work into disrepute.

The Church is What God Uses

God is at work in the church. The church is what God uses. Despite all its faults, God has chosen to work out his saving purpose for the world through the church, this unique divine-human society, called of God but comprised of weak and sinful human beings like ourselves.

Jesus makes Peter an amazing promise. 'I tell you Peter, you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will be able to overcome it.' (Matthew 16:18). Jesus promises to build an invincible, unconquerable, triumphant church - on this rock of Peter's faith, on his confession of Jesus as God's chosen Messiah and Saviour of the world.

The church will be triumphant - not because of itself, but because of Christ's promise; not because it isn't fallible, but because God is faithful; not because it isn't imperfect, but because God is able to fetch glory to himself from imperfect people. The church is like a rag rug, or a patchwork quilt. It's made up of odds and ends, bits and pieces; but together, they make a work of art, a bold and splendid tapestry.

Jesus' promise is the basis of the church's calling, the reason why the church will ultimately triumph. Through all our failures, God is working out his purpose. 'In all things God works for good with those who love him, those whom he has called according to his purpose.' (Romans 8:28).

The Church will Ultimately Triumph

The church will ultimately triumph, whatever appearances to the contrary. A vivid illustration, through weakness and appalling adversity, is the church's triumph over atheistic Communism. For two generations, from 1917 to 1987, the church in the Soviet Union was persecuted, savaged, slaughtered, exiled, and deprived of legal existence, in a massive, state-sponsored atheistic campaign, the likes of which the world had never seen before.

Nicolas Zernov was a member of that group of Russian emigres who fled to the West just after the Russian Revolution. He later became Spalding Lecturer in Slavonic and East European Studies at Oxford University. In a series of lectures in 1942, when the outcome of the Second World War was far from decided, let alone the struggle with Communism, he said these words:

'The strength of the Church lies, not in the ability of its leaders, not in their learning, not in organisation, but solely and uniquely in personal knowledge of Christ. For as long as Church members are in communion with him, every one of them is a living example of Christ's victory over disunity, disease and death, and there is no power on earth or in heaven which can separate these human beings from the source of divine life. The atheists in Russia have been defeated because they met a force which is stronger than man. All those things which are human in the life of the church they destroyed at one stroke, but when they expected the church to collapse as a result of their easy victory, their hopes were frustrated, for they were confronted no longer by men and man-built organisation, but by the church of the living God . . . giving them personal experience of Christ's life.' (*Three Russian Prophets*, London, 1944, p. 166)

Jesus' promise, 'I will build my church', is our hope. Some Christian leaders may deny Christ's divinity or resurrection. Other Christian leaders may betray him by their actions, by immorality, abuse of power, neglect of their sacred calling. Ordinary Christians can give God a bad press, by their prejudices, by being judgmental, by uncaring or crusading attitudes, by moral failures, by intellectual pride, by laziness or complacency. But Jesus has promised that he will build his church on the rock of faith in his divine purpose - despite our sins and failures. It is his church. He is building it. Death and hell itself cannot defeat it. Jesus' church - 'the church of the living God' (1 Timothy 3:15) - will surely triumph.

Worship and Mission

The Heartbeat of the Church (Mark 3:13-19)

Individuals and institutions often go to extremes. On the one hand we find a driven-ness and activism that can lead to burnout; on the other a self-absorption or indifference that can lead to social irrelevance. Jesus, when he established the movement we now call the Christian church, skilfully avoided both extremes. Comparing the life of the church with a living organism, Rob Yule's third message in his series on 'The Church' was given at St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 15 August 1999.

A Living Organism

The church of Jesus Christ is a living organism. You cannot understand the church if you think of it as something static or inert. It is something alive, vital, dynamic. The church continually surprises us with its ability to rejuvenate itself when seemingly exhausted, when its critics have written it off, and when its friends have given up on it. The church confounds people by reinvigorating itself even when seemingly overwhelmed by inner problems or external pressures.

The main characteristic of a living organism is a beating heart. There's a classic line in the Marx Brothers' movie, *A Day at the Races*, when Groucho, a horse doctor, poses as a real doctor and takes the pulse of an attractive young woman. 'Either you're dead, or my watch has stopped,' he pronounces solemnly! If you're reading this, your heart is beating!

Diastole and Systole

A heart beats with a double motion, diastole and systole. Diastole is when the heart dilates or relaxes, allowing the heart to fill with blood. Systole is when the heart squeezes or contracts, expelling blood from the heart and pumping it out through the arteries and around the body. By this simple, continual, double movement the body lives, is oxygenated and provided with nourishment and energy.

Our Bible passage tells us that the church, a living organism, lives by this same double motion. When Jesus chose his twelve disciples, he called them firstly 'to be with him', and secondly 'to be sent out' (Mark 3:14). This is the diastole and systole by which the church lives. Jesus expands his sympathies, and draws this motley collection of individuals to be with him. Then he puts the pressure on them, and sends them out into a hostile world to be his witnesses. 'Ca-poop', 'Ca-poop'. 'To be with him', 'To be sent' - this is the heartbeat of the church.

Being and Doing

We are drawn together to get to know Jesus, to be with him. We fulfil this by our worship, our fellowship, our relationships. This is the church's *being*. This is the church gathered, the church visible, the church as light.

We are sent out to make Jesus known, to be his witnesses. This is the church's *doing*. We fulfil this by our service, our witness, our mission. This is the church scattered or dispersed, the church diffused throughout society and the world, the church as salt.

Contemplation and Action

Both movements - the drawing together and the dispersing - are important. The church lives by both movements - not just one or other, but both together. There are activists who are impatient with church gatherings, and there are contemplatives who disparage Christian action, but both are important, and both belong together.

Pastoral churches - and many traditional churches - place a great emphasis on the church gathered: the church worshipping and caring. But the church also needs to be involved in mission, otherwise it becomes just an in-group. Purely pastoral churches become introverted.

Mission churches - and many contemporary churches, place a great emphasis on the church scattered: the church involved in action, service and mission. But the church also needs to remember the importance of intimacy and relationships, of love and worship, otherwise we run the risk of extroversion and burnout. Purely mission churches can become burnt out.

Church Leavers

A recent issue of the Bible College of New Zealand magazine *Reality* (Vol. 6, No. 32, April - May 1999), examined the issue of why people leave churches. My own conclusion reviewing this research is that people tend to leave churches from one or other of these errors I have been considering. They become frustrated with a church that just gathers together and loses its cutting edge in the society round about. Or they become so busy in projects and causes that they become exhausted, drained, and worn out.

The best antidote for imbalanced churches and imbalanced Christians is to remember this fundamental basis of life - the beating heart. The church lives by a pulsing heartbeat. Jesus draws us together to be with him, and sends us out to make him known. 'To know Jesus and make him known' - the Navigator motto is a great motto for every church, for every Christian group, for every individual Christian. 'To be with Jesus', 'To be sent .' 'Ca-poomp', 'Ca-poomp'. 'Be with Jesus', 'Go for Jesus'.

Self-Evaluation

Evaluate the balance of your own life by this principle. Are you drawing life from being with Jesus? Or are you always giving, wearing yourself out with your activism? Are you taking Jesus' life out into the world? Or are you always at church services and Christian meetings, always receiving, never giving out to others?

There are two basic principle of life here. Firstly, *you can't give what you haven't got*. An activist who doesn't drink from the wells of salvation will never bring waters of life to a thirsty world. But secondly, *you'll never receive, unless you give*. Water can never enter a pipe, unless water is flowing out of the pipe at the other end.

We have nothing to offer the world, if we haven't first been with Jesus. And we're not sharing the life we receive, if we're not going out into the world to share Jesus with others. A living church is a church that lives by this double movement, this pulse, this beating heart. A living church is where every member knows Jesus, and where every member makes him known. If we all did this, what a pulsating, dynamic, vibrant church we would be.

'He appointed twelve, to be with him, and to be sent out.'

Springtime of the Church

The Church as a Vital Community (Acts 2:42-47)

The Christian church often seems encrusted in centuries of tradition. A significant recent development, however, has been the rediscovery by many churches around the world of forms and dynamics of church life drawn from the early church, as described in the book of Acts. In this message, preached at St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 11 May 1997, Rob Yule examines the life of the early church and its relevance for us today.

The book of Acts gives us a picture of the Christian church in its beginnings. Like a mountain stream near its source, it flows pure and clear, sparkling fresh and beautiful in the impulse of the Spirit, unpolluted by later accretions of tradition. It radiates a vitality that is extraordinarily attractive, inspiring countless renewal movements throughout subsequent Christian history.

In recent times, particularly under the influence of the Charismatic Renewal movement, many churches throughout the world have discovered afresh principles and patterns of church life based on the early church, as described in the pages of the New Testament. Freeing themselves from sometimes centuries' old tradition, they have been rediscovering dynamics that made the church so effective in its infancy, turning society upside down in the 1st century of the Christian era.

A Biblically Functioning Church

One such church is the Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago, now the largest church in the United States. It began from a homegroup in the nineteen seventies, as its founder pastor, Bill Hybels, sought to put into practice the vision of the early church inspired in him by his theological teacher, Gilbert Bilezikian, in a course on the book of Acts.

At his seminar, 'Building a Church for the Future,' held in Palmerston North on 28 April 1997, Bill Hybels outlined ten features of what he calls 'A Biblically Functioning Church':

1. Anointed Biblical Teaching, proclaiming the full counsel of God.
2. Evangelistic Orientation, recognising that lost people matter to God.
3. Culturally Relevance, using contemporary art forms and media.
4. Manifest Authenticity, involving the minimum of pretence and cringe.
5. A Culture of Service: 'Is there any way I can serve you?'
6. Loving Relationships: 'What would be the loving thing to say or do?'
7. Commitment to Small Groups.
8. Excellence, which is both honouring to God and inspiring of people.
9. Leadership by People with Leadership Gifts.
10. Full Devotion to Christ and his Church as normal for every member.

For Hybels, whole-hearted sacrifice should be the motive for all we do as Christians. These values inform the whole vast organisation of the Willow Creek Church. Murray Robertson, Senior Pastor of Spreydon Baptist Church in Christchurch, New Zealand, who visited Willow Creek with a team in 1996, tells me he has never seen any organisation so universally informed by a culture of servanthood, tenderness and compassion. As he looked along the row, he saw his entire team weeping, so moved were they by the experience.

The one significant omission from this list, though, when compared with the descriptions of the Bible itself, is the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit. The book of Acts attributes the life and energy of the early church, its beauty and attractiveness, to the presence and action of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-4, 14-18). If we are to reproduce a Biblically Functioning Church today, we must not overlook this fundamental dynamic. Looking at the description of the early church in the book of Acts, we can sketch the elements in what I would prefer to call a 'Spirit-Filled Biblical Church' (Acts 2:42-47).

A Spirit-Filled Biblical Church

1. It was a Learning Church

Luke, the author of Acts, tells us that 'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching' (Acts 2:42). Unlike the current mood of anti-intellectualism in Christian circles, John Stott points out that these new converts 'were not enjoying a mystical experience which led them to despise their mind or disdain theology. Anti-intellectualism and the fullness of the Spirit are mutually incompatible, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth.' (*The Message of Acts* [Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 2nd ed., 1991], p. 82).

Stott says that 'Since the teaching of the apostles has come down to us in its definitive form in the New Testament, contemporary devotion to the apostles' teaching will mean submission to the authority of the New Testament. . . . The Spirit of God leads the people of God to submit to the Word of God.' (p. 82).

A truly Spirit-filled church is a community of believers in love with the Scriptures as God's authoritative communication to them. In the early days of the Charismatic Renewal movement one of the most beautiful things was the discovery by Catholics of the joy of Bible study.

2. It was a Loving Church

Luke says that 'They devoted themselves to the . . . fellowship' (Acts 2:42). Christian fellowship has a double dimension. The triune love of God is what we share in. The practical love of other people is what we share out. The bridge between the two is the Holy Spirit, who brings the love of God into our lives. 'God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (Romans 5:5).

Though originating in the Holy Spirit, this love is not mystical, but intensely practical. The Greek word for 'fellowship' (*koinonia*) is also the word Paul used for the collection of money he was organising among the Greek churches (2 Corinthians 8:4, 9:13), and the related word *koinonikos* is the Greek word for 'generous'. These first Christians shared their possessions with one another. 'All who believed were together and had all things in common. They would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need' (Acts 2: 44-45).

Here is amazing evidence of the transforming love of the Holy Spirit, freeing people of acquisitiveness and selfishness, giving them an impulse to share their lives and possessions. James K. Baxter, our leading New Zealand poet, had a transforming experience of the Holy Spirit just months before he died. He says, 'The first Christians did not start to share their goods in a free and full manner till after the bomb of the Holy Spirit exploded in their souls at Pentecost. Before then, they would be morally incapable of this free and joyful sharing. The acquisitive habit is one of the deepest rooted habits of the human race. To say, "This is ours, not mine," and to carry the words into effect is as much a miracle of God as the raising of the dead.' (*Thoughts About the Holy Spirit* [Wellington, Futuna Press, 1973], p. 11).

Unlike Communism, which this passage inspired, this sharing was free, not forced; voluntary, not compulsory. In the Old Testament there is a strong tradition of care for the poor, and the Israelites were to give a tenth of their produce 'to the Levites, the aliens, the orphans and the widows' (Deuteronomy 6:12). 'How could a Spirit-filled Christian give less? . . . It is part of the responsibility of Spirit-filled believers to alleviate need and abolish destitution in the new community of Jesus.' (Stott, p. 84).

3. It was a Worshipping Church

Luke records that 'They devoted themselves . . . to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2: 42). The reference is to the Lord's Supper, which was originally part of a larger meal, and the definite article indicates that 'the prayers' were probably prayer services or prayer meetings rather than private prayer.

The early church was balanced in its worship, combining formal, structured or organised worship 'in the temple courts', and informal, unstructured, and spontaneous worship 'in their homes.' These early Jewish believers continued to worship in the temple. They didn't cut themselves off from the institutional life and worship of Judaism, but worshipped and witnessed within the setting of their Jewish culture - just as Messianic Jews are seeking to do today. But they also preserved the Jewish tradition of worship in their homes, among families and

friends, in more personal settings. So their worship was both formal and informal, structured and spontaneous, institutional and intimate.

This balance is also evident in the comment that they worshipped God 'with glad and sincere hearts' (Acts 2:46). Their Spirit-filled worship was both joyful and purposeful - not mindless and over the top like some Pentecostal worship today, but intelligent and sincere, as well as full of joy.

4. It was an Evangelistic Church

The early church was not an introspective church. It was outward-looking, motivated by the impulse of the Holy Spirit to reach out across its own boundaries and across cultural barriers. 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses. . . .' (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit, and the early church, inspired by the Spirit, was consequently a missionary church.

It is God who is here described as the principal evangelist, adding daily to the church's numbers (Acts 2:47). This is a valuable corrective to modern-day pride and arrogance that thinks we can build the church by our own church-growth techniques and communications technology. The church is the creation of God, through the Holy Spirit.

It is also interesting to see the link in the early church between salvation and church membership. Those 'added to their number' were those 'who were being saved' (Acts 2:47). There was no *nominal* Christianity - people added to the church's number who were not saved. And there was no *solitary* Christianity, people saved who were not added to the church's number, like the vast numbers in today's individualistic society of loners (who are unattached to any church) or drifters (who float like flotsam on the tide of fashion, from church to church, depending which is the flavour of the month).

What is especially remarkable about the early church is that unlike us today, where conversions are rare or occasional, it experienced steady, uninterrupted, and continuous conversion growth.

Here is an ideal to aim at, a benchmark to measure our achievement by, a target to pray for, a goal to work towards. Our aim should be to see unchurched or secular people regularly being added to the numbers of the local church, as faithful and effective disciples of Jesus Christ.

Organisation or Organism?

Biblical Images of the Church (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

As a human institution, the church is influenced by forms of social organisation popular at different times in history. But the Bible's descriptions of the church point to dynamics of community life which go beyond secular models of social organisation. The church is not just an assortment of isolated individuals. It is a divine society, in which individuals find their unique fulfilment as members of a larger whole, and their selfishness is overcome in God's workshop of personal transformation. This message, fifth in a series on 'The Church', was given by Rob Yule at St Albans Presbyterian Church, on 22 August 1999.

Non-Biblical Models of the Church

Before we look at biblical pictures that show what the church of Jesus Christ should be like, we would do well to note three widespread, popular models of the church that the Bible does not validate.

1. The Lecture Room

The standard picture of the church in our Protestant or Reformed tradition is that of a lecture room. Seats are arranged facing a central, elevated pulpit, formerly sometimes literally 'six feet above contradiction', from which a preacher reads and expounds the Bible to a largely passive congregation. This pattern is intellectualistic, has disenfranchised God's people from active participation in worship services, and has contributed to the modern backlash against sermons. 'Poor, talkative Christianity,' lamented E. M. Forster in *Passage to India*.

2. The Theatre

In contrast to Protestantism, the Catholic Church has used the model of the theatre. The church service is a high drama, involving choral music and processions, led by people dressed in colourful costumes, with visible props like candles, crucifixes, pictures, and statues. There is a strong aesthetic appeal in these kind of services, but again a performer / spectator disjunction that is at variance with the New Testament descriptions of the church as a vital fellowship.

3. The Corporation

Today, in our entrepreneurial society, the secular model claiming the church's attention is more likely to be a business or management model - the church viewed as a corporation, managed and promoted like a successful business. Some American church growth literature reflects this model; for example, in recommending that the church survey its 'market' and that it package and promote itself to meet the needs of the surrounding community.

Each of these models has elements we can learn from. The one nearest to the New Testament is the first, which can claim some support from the Jewish synagogue. But none of them reflect the real essence of the church as described in the New Testament itself.

Biblical Models of the Church

New Testament scholar Ralph P. Martin, in his book *The Family and the Fellowship: New Testament Images of the Church* (Exeter, Paternoster Press, 1979, pp. 112-21), contrasts the foregoing secular models of social organisation with the characteristic biblical descriptions of the church.

1. The People of God

The Greek word for 'church' is *ekklesia*, from which we get 'ecclesiastical'. It means 'a calling out' or 'those who have been called out'. It is the word used in the Greek translation of those passages in the Old Testament which refer to the great assembly (*qahal*) of Israel - when Israel was called out of Egypt to meet with God and worship God at Mt. Sinai, and then live as distinctive and holy society among the nations. The nation of Israel was the 'people of God', God's 'called-out ones', God's distinctive or 'peculiar' people (1 Peter 2:9).

The people of God are not only 'called out', but 'called together'. The church is not just a collection of isolated individuals; it is a group of people called by God to live together as a community to model a new way of living. Michael Griffiths points out that the word 'saint' occurs sixty one times in the New Testament. Sixty of those references are in the plural, 'saints'. Only once is the singular used and that is in the phrase, 'greet every saint' (Philippians 4:21)! So Griffiths concludes, 'The concept of a solitary saint is foreign to the New Testament writers.' (*Cinderella with Amnesia* [London, Inter Varsity Press, 1975], p. 24). Christian experience is essentially social or communal.

When we are called by Jesus to believe in him we are also called to belong to a great corporate society, the people of God. Hans Kung, the German Catholic theologian, says, 'The church begins, not with a pious individual, but with God. Pious individuals cannot by themselves achieve the transformation of isolated sinful people into the people of God. How could an atomised crowd of pious individuals be a home for the homeless and isolated people of today.' (*The Church* [London, Search Press, 1971], p. 24).

2. The Body of Christ

Today this is perhaps the best known biblical image of the church. It wasn't always so. Before the Charismatic Renewal Movement of the 1970s, this term was never heard of outside of Catholic and Anglo-Catholic circles, where you would sometimes hear the church described as the 'mystical body of Christ'.

Today by contrast we refer almost glibly to the church as 'the Body', without really pausing to think what the term means, and what it implies for our relationships together as Christ's people. The term 'body of Christ' implies three things:

- The church is not just a social organisation or institution. It is an *organism, a living entity*, animated by the very life of God himself. When we become Christians and are born again of the Spirit, we receive God's life. God's life is abundant life, able to overcome life's difficulties; and it is eternal life, capable of overcoming death itself. This is the secret of the church's amazing ability to rejuvenate and renew itself, just when it has been dismissed as outmoded and irrelevant.
- The church doesn't just follow its own policies or agenda. We are *attached to Jesus Christ as 'head'*, and should seek to receive our instructions and directions for life from Christ himself. Just as the brain and central nervous system gives direction to the body, so Jesus Christ as head gives guidance and leadership to his church.
- The church is not all the same, but is made up of *different members*, an incredibly diverse and varied collection of people, as diverse in their function and purpose as are the different parts of a body. Each 'member' has a distinctive part to play in the life of the whole community. '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. . . . Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many.' (1 Corinthians 12:12).

This is a challenge to us - not to be a dyslexic organism, but a healthy body in which all the members play their part. We all consciously need to pull our weight, to make our own personal contribution to the life of the fellowship, and at the same time honour one another's distinctive contributions.

3. The Household of God

Paul also refers to the church as 'the household of God' (Ephesians 2:19, 1 Timothy 3:15). The biblical concept of a 'household' is wider than our modern nuclear family. The New Testament *oikos*, 'household', was an extended family, like the Maori *whanau*, including relatives and friends, perhaps several generations of a family, and also domestic servants and resident aliens.

Today the term 'Christian Family' is being used by many churches, even as part of their church title. But sometimes those very same fellowships are using 'Christian Family' in an exclusive rather than an inclusive sense. If the church is God's family, then this is bigger than our modern concept of a family. The church family, for example, is not just for married people, but for singles too, not just for domesticated and conventional people, but for social misfits and unconventional people as well.

God has given us a new birth into his household, his extended family - whether our background experience of our own human families has been all it should be or not. Social outcasts as well as the socially successful, the poor as well as the rich, singles as well as marrieds - all are called by God into this wonderful divine family. Indeed, the early Christian movement spread particularly among the servant classes, and this may be how the Christian faith reached even the household of the emperor in Rome (as John Rutherford suggests, 'Caesar's Household,' *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, ed. James Orr [Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1946], pp. 537-8).

Family life of course can be challenging. Paul says we need to know how we ought to behave in God's household (1 Timothy 3:15). It's been observed that 'You can choose your friends, but you can't choose your family!' It needs grace, humility, and cooperation to get on with our fellow Christians. Living with them rubs off the rough and angular corners of our personalities.

The Gemstone Tumbler

The church as God's family is like a machine owned by a woman in my previous congregation in Christchurch. It was a gemstone tumbler - a rotating drum like a horizontal concrete mixer. Inside was placed abrasive sand paper. Into it were put the semi-precious stones she gathered from the exposed beach at Birdlings Flat on the east coast of New Zealand's South Island, where the Canterbury Bight meets Bank's Peninsula. It was plugged in and switched on - then left rotating for 36 or 48 hours. The stones tumbled and banged together, and were worn smooth against one another and against the abrasive paper. Their rough edges were smoothed and polished. At the end of their treatment they emerged splendid and beautiful.

That is what God is doing to us through our life together in the church. Our common life may not be pleasant for our individualism. We may complain and make lots of noise - like the din of the pebbles protesting their treatment in the rotating gemstone tumbler. But God is transforming us through our life in community into human beings of great splendour. The church is his laboratory for transforming humanity.

Servant Leadership

The Community that Exists for Others (John 13:12-17)

Today, as in the ancient world, people are busy advancing themselves and climbing the ladder of success. Jesus revolutionised our understanding of leadership by standing such ideals of self-advancement on their head. Instead, he advocates an approach to leadership based on attitudes of servanthood, a willingness to take on menial tasks, and the surprise value of deeds of kindness. In this message, sixth in a series on 'The Church', given in St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 29 August 1999, talks about the transforming impact of servant leadership.

Room Service

The weather is hot and the roads are dusty. The travellers are sweaty and grimy from a long journey on foot. They're tired and in no mood for helping each other. The room service is non-existent at the low-cost hotel. So the team leader takes a plastic container and towel and individually washes his followers' smelly feet. One of them objects. 'You'll never at any time wash my feet!'

When Jesus washed his disciples' feet it wasn't just an insult to Peter's pride. It was an offence to the attitudes of the entire ancient world. It would never have occurred to anyone in the Roman Empire of Jesus' day, where a third of the population were slaves, for a leader to take the role of a slave. Manual work was regarded as below the dignity of free men, let alone a distasteful, menial task like washing feet. When Benedict in the sixth century included manual work in his new Rule for monks, it included manual work - an unprecedented thing for free citizens to be asked to do.

Down the centuries menial work has remained an offence to aristocratic and cultured people. The nineteenth century German philosopher Nietzsche hated the 'slave mentality' which he saw commended by Christianity. The Presbyterian Church in New Zealand has been running seminars recently on 'Servant Mission Leadership'. They've been criticised for being politically incorrect. But are we any different? How many people at a church camp volunteer to clean toilets or urinals?

God's Way of Being Among Us

The washing of feet in the ancient Middle Eastern world of Jesus' day was an unpleasant, menial, but necessary task, normally done by a domestic slave. But what makes this example so much greater is that it was done by one who calls himself their 'Teacher and Lord'. This example is that of the Son of God himself. 'I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you' (John 13:15). This action is totally surprising. It demonstrates God's way of being among us. 'What if God was one of us?' sings Joan Osborne. This is how God would act if he was one of us. He would get on his knees and serve us.

What extraordinary humility! What intimacy! What an affirmation of us!

Our Pattern of Leadership

Jesus' action also provides us with a pattern of leadership to emulate. Today we are commissioning new elders. Being an elder is demanding on time and energy. Paul says that elders are to 'keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock which the Holy Spirit has placed in your care' (Acts 20:28). Every Christian is responsible for keeping watch over themselves. Elders have the additional responsibility of keeping watch over others in the church as well. This involves a burden of responsibility. We, the congregation, should honour them and pray for them. And they, the elders should give a lead in serving us.

Jesus gives every leader a challenging standard to live up to - or, perhaps we should say, live down to. Jesus calls us to have no airs, to be willing to take the lowest place and do menial tasks, in short, as my sister Natalie Yule-Yeoman puts it in one of her songs, to be 'downwardly mobile':

Now there was one who came right down to earth
He never put himself into first
And he was downwardly mobile and he gave all his love
while others had theirs in reserve.
There were many don't like his choice of friends
But he stood with them right to the end
For him the only way round was with those who were down
And he calls us now to live his life again.

At the bottom of the pile
He's sure to change your style
He has no bottom line

(Natalie Yule-Yeoman, 'Downwardly Mobile', from album *Laughter and Pain*, 1989)

An Effective Way of Reaching People

Jesus' action also provides us with a very effective pattern of witness. Serving others is a surprisingly effective way of reaching people. If each of us were to take initiatives in unexpected acts of friendship, kindness and caring for those around us, there is no telling how many unchurched people in the community would be influenced for Jesus Christ.

Graeme Reid is now on the staff of Spreydon Baptist Church in Christchurch, heading up their almost legendary Community Ministries. He came to faith as a result of a number of women from the church praying for him and demonstrating their compassion by leaving steaming casseroles on his veranda. He hated these women, but loved their casseroles! He didn't want to acknowledge that he couldn't manage his own life or look after his own family. But finally their love, expressed in these practical acts of kindness, brought him to a change of heart and he was dramatically converted. He is now on Spreydon Baptist's pastoral team.

Let's prove and demonstrate the famous dictum of William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury at the time of the Second World War, that the Church is the only organisation that exists for the sake of those outside it. There are many ways of doing this. Not only by a casserole service. Also by baby-sitting or child-minding, by mowing people's lawns, by cleaning their house, by repairing their equipment, by helping with their computers.

It's the very unexpectedness of practical service like this that is such a powerful witness. When you consider how busy everyone is living their own lives and doing their own thing, it is quite surprising, even miraculous, for people to encounter such selfless behaviour.

An Antidote When Life is Trying

Life today is full of busyness, stresses, uncertainties over employment and income. We all face a dramatic shortening of discretionary time. It's easy to think we don't have time or opportunity to help others. There are too many things to do.

But think about Jesus' example. This was the opening episode of the final chapter of his life. The foot washing took place at the rendezvous Jesus had arranged with his followers just before he died. He had set aside time to meet with them, to share his last will and testament. At the very point when he could have been expected to be thinking of himself and his own forthcoming anguish and death, he was thinking of others instead.

Many of you are doing outstanding deeds of kindness for others. Keep it up. Others of you think you have not enough time. I challenge you: do something for someone else. It's a wonderful antidote to listlessness and boredom.

Gift and Task

Unity in the Church (Ephesians 4:1-7, 11-16)

The multitude of different Christian denominations and sects, 33,800 at last count (David B. Barrett, International Bulletin of Missionary Research, January 2000, p. 24) is often invoked by critics as invalidating the church's message of God's reconciling love in Jesus Christ for all peoples of the earth. But disunity is not limited to the church. It is a widespread human phenomenon, reflected in marriage breakdown, family discord, social disintegration, class struggles, civil wars, and international conflict. Unity is as rare as it is needful in human relationships. In this message, seventh in a series on 'The Church', Rob Yule, minister of St Alban's Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, shares some practical experience and biblical insights about unity, including the relevance of what he calls 'Jesus' Disputes Procedure.'

The temperature was crisp, hovering around zero, and a weak sun lit the yellow plaster walls and orange tiled rooves, as I made my way by tram through the historic Central European city of Prague, with my friend Pavel Tuma, first post-Communist director of the newly-reestablished Czech YMCA, to visit the famous Strahov Monastery and Library. The tram rumbled past Letenska - the large open area where a million people gathered in one of the great demonstrations that brought about the collapse of Communism in Czechoslovakia in November 1989.

Pavel spoke to me of his memories of that momentous time. What struck him most, he told me, was the extraordinarily 'gentle mood' and sense of togetherness that he experienced in that vast crowd at that time. People, he said, were incredibly tender and courteous to one another, as they waited patiently for buses, trams and trains to demonstrations. The Communist authorities, of course, refused to schedule extra services for an event targeted at them. But there was no pushing or shoving for the few public transports that were running.

Only on three occasions in his life, Pavel Tuma reflected, had he experienced such togetherness. One was in 1945, at the end of the Second World War; another was in 1968 during the Prague Spring; and the third was in November 1989 during the Velvet Revolution, so-named on account of its gentleness and absence of violence.

Unity as a Gift and a Task

Unity is never simply a human achievement. As my Czech friend's memories indicate, unity always has an element of sheer grace, something miraculous about it. Unity is something given by God, but it is also something, paradoxically, we are called to seek after and maintain.

The God-given aspect is stressed in Ephesians 4:4, 'There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to the one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.' The human task is expressed in Ephesians 4:1-3, 'I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.'

Jesus earlier, in his final prayer for his followers, in John 17:22-23, also spoke of unity as both a gift and a task. 'I pray for those who will believe in me...that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are one in me and I am in you....I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one, I in them and you in me.' He prayed that their unity, worked out among them in their relationships, would be a reflection or outworking of the unity that already existed between himself and the Father. Their unity, the task which they would have to work at, was to be based on the already established unity of Father and Son in the Trinity, and of Jesus and his followers.

Unity as the Responsibility of Leaders

Paul uses an interesting metaphor to illustrate the challenge that unity is to elders and Christian leaders in the local church. He urges them to avoid deceitfulness and dishonesty in relationships and instead to speak candidly to one another in love: 'speaking the truth in love we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is

Christ. From him the whole body, *joined and held together by every supporting ligament*, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.' (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Ligaments suggest both strength and suppleness. They are the part of the body that holds other members or limbs together, giving flexibility, allowing movement, absorbing jarring, yet strong enough to hold the body as one organism. That is exactly the role that leaders play in the community of believers, the Body of Christ. Leaders have to be strong and resilient enough to survive the pressures and responsibilities of their job, yet also to be flexible, adaptable enough to know when to give ground and when to hold ground on an issue.

A former Director of Education in New Zealand, Charles Beeby, used to have on his desk the slogan: 'Sail by the compass, but lie by the wind.' That expresses exactly the kind of wisdom and flexibility leaders need to have. Some leaders have no goals; they don't sail by the wind, but are too compliant, vacillating back and forth, going nowhere. Other leaders are too rigid or goal-orientated; they don't have the patience or flexibility to tack back and forth to achieve their objectives. To hold a church together in unity, leaders must be like ligaments or cartilage, simultaneously strong and flexible at the same time.

Unity involves Everyone

But unity is not only the task of leaders. It is the responsibility of everyone in the Body of Christ. We all have a part to play in 'maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.' Jesus spelt out what is involved for us as believers in living in unity with one another, in Matthew 18:15-17:

If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Here, in what I call 'Jesus' Disputes Procedure', are three clear stages we should use in handling conflict or settling misunderstandings that could give rise to disunity between people:

1. Don't spread gossip or talk to other people about someone else. First go directly to the person who has offended you and talk directly with them. You will often be able to quickly resolve the matter, or you may indeed find that your concerns are groundless or are misplaced rumour or hearsay. Sadly, most people ignore Jesus' counsel, and talk to everybody else except the person concerned - and this only inflames misunderstanding and disunity.
2. Secondly, if the person won't respond to your going to him or her directly, take along another friend as a possible mediator or witness, to observe the person's reactions, and if possible persuade them themselves to be more responsive to your concerns. Only if this fails are you permitted to go to the third stage, namely,
3. Take the matter 'to the church' - that is, to the church leadership or eldership, to formally or judicially hear and decide the issue. This should be the last step, and only the official ruling body in a church has the power of excommunication, 'to treat him as a pagan' or an outsider.

If we observed these procedures in our everyday relationships as Christians, most potential sources of disunity would be avoided, and the blessings of unity spoken of in Psalm 133 would be experienced: 'How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!...For there the Lord ordained [or, as the Authorised Version renders it, 'commanded'] his blessing, life for evermore.' If we would only get our act together, and live in unity with one another, revival would be a common occurrence. The tenderness and gentleness experienced by my friend Pavel during the Velvet revolution, would be an everyday reality among us.

The Broken Body

The Challenge of Christian Unity (John 17:9-24)

The longest recorded prayer of Jesus is his prayer to God for the unity of his followers, so that 'the people of this world will believe that you sent me.' In this address, Rob Yule, minister of St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, expresses his dismay that more Christians aren't concerned about the negative impact of their disunity, and shares the different levels, from local to global, where unity needs to be worked out. First given at St Albans on 10 October 1999, this message was repeated at a combined churches' gathering in nearby Ashurst a week later, 17 October.

As a child I remember attending the Keswick Convention at Pounaweia, in the Catlins district of the southernmost coast of New Zealand's South Island. The banner over the speaker's platform was 'All One in Christ Jesus'. Expressing the fellowship of Christians from all kinds of church backgrounds, that motto has had a great impact on my attitude to Christian unity. I experienced from childhood a genuine unity with other Christians.

Later this was enhanced by involvement during my student years with the New Zealand Inter Varsity Fellowship (later renamed Tertiary Students Christian Fellowship), especially at their outstanding annual conferences. In 1971 my wife and I looked after the guesthouse for a while of the Community of the Transfiguration, an ecumenical monastic community based at Roslin, in Scotland. Later still I was employed as an Ecumenical University Chaplain, working with Christians of every variety, from Catholic and Anglican to Brethren, Quaker, and Pentecostal.

Growing up I could therefore never understand evangelical suspicion of the quest for Christian unity represented by the Ecumenical Movement, and I often found myself a lone evangelical voice supporting Christian unity. Today the situation is almost totally reversed, and I find it equally hard to comprehend how the ecumenical vision seems to have been lost or abandoned by many of its erstwhile supporters.

The Lord's Prayer

Unity was one of the great concerns of Jesus, according to what should really be known as 'the Lord's Prayer'. What we call 'the Lord's Prayer' is in fact 'the Disciples' Prayer' - the prayer he gave as a model for us. But the prayer recorded in John 17 is truly our Lord's own prayer. It reflects his concerns for his followers, just before death removed him from them.

Unity is not Jesus' only concern in this prayer. He is concerned for the total welfare of his followers in a hostile world, whom he is about to leave as he returns to his Father. So he prays for us to be kept safe from the world (11-12), to be protected from the evil one (15), to be sanctified or dedicated to God in the truth (17).

The Basis and Purpose of Unity

Evangelicals and liberals each seem to uphold half-truths when it comes to Christian unity. Evangelicals emphasise the importance of spiritual unity, but often avoid the hard challenge of working this out in visible unity. Liberals maintain - or used to maintain - the importance of visible unity, but in practice have often minimised the importance of unity in spirit and in truth.

Jesus joins what evangelicals and liberals divide. He says unity is both spiritual and visible. The *basis* of our unity is spiritual. It is the unity of the Godhead. We are to be one as Jesus and his Father are one. 'Keep them safe by the power of your name . . . so that they may be one just as you and I are one' (11). 'I pray that they may all be one. Father! May they be in us, just as you are in me and I am in you' (21). But the *purpose* of our unity is visible. It is to impact the world. 'May they be one, so that the world will believe that you sent me' (21).

Jesus says that both the basis and the purpose are important. 'I gave them the same glory you gave me, so that they may be one, just as you and I are one: I in them and you in me, so that they may be completely one, in order that the world may know that you sent me and that you love them as you love me' (22-23). The *basis* of our unity comes from an intimacy with God, from sharing God's own life and the fellowship of the persons of the Godhead.

The *purpose* of our unity is to demonstrate a quality of unity that the world doesn't normally experience and yet desperately needs, at every level - in marriages and families, in local communities, between social classes, in cities and nations, and between nations. This is not a faceless, depersonalised, prescribed uniformity. What Jesus is praying for is a genuine unity in diversity, a rich diversity of persons united in an unbreakable bond of love - just as the Father, Son and Spirit, distinct persons, are one in the Godhead.

This unity needs to be worked out at various levels:

1. Local

For local unity to happen among Christians and churches, ministers, pastors and Christian leaders need to begin to get to know one another, humble themselves, pray together, and support one another. From that basis of personal friendship the trust grows to stage combined local events and win cooperation between local communities of Christians.

In my first parish, Hornby Presbyterian Church, Christchurch, we experienced a major church split after an elder took a number of fellow-elders and church members to found a new church round the corner. The experience nearly broke me, testing but finally proving my convictions about Christian unity. In the worst of that dark time I was visited and sustained by the prayers of the local Anglican vicar, the local Catholic priest, and the local Catholic Sisters of Mercy. That might not seem very special - except that my congregation had previously stood aloof from the other churches of the area, and had no dealings with Catholics. From those prayers grew a weekly interchurch pastors' prayer meeting. From those meetings grew a series of significant inter-church events. And from that experience grew a trust that overcame many hurts and barriers between local Christians - including between myself and the pastor who led the church split. One of the greatest rewards of my ministry was when all the churches of the district, from Catholic and Anglican to Brethren and Pentecostal, met together for my farewell from Hornby in 1987.

2. Church and Parachurch

Partnership of local church with translocal ministries is very important in our time. The proliferation of groups is a reflection of the cultural diversity of our society and the diverse and specialist ministries necessary to reach it or meet its needs. It needs generous-hearted leaders to build bridges of trust and network together with understanding and cooperation. This is similar to the way the Catholic Church has maintained unity over the years by devolving a great deal of autonomy to its various religious orders.

3. National

With the loss of influence in my own country of the Council of Churches in Aotearoa New Zealand (CCANZ), there is a vacuum at national level which is scarcely being filled by recent meetings of heads of churches, or informal networks like those represented by the three Vision New Zealand conferences. National level unity needs a lot more work. I personally believe that the Presbyterian Church has an important role to play in this, as a bridge between the more national and historic churches (Catholic and Anglican) on the one hand and the more independent or gathered churches (Baptist, Brethren, and Pentecostal) on the other.

4. Bilateral

At present, in attempts to achieve Christian unity at the global level, more seems to be happening through bilateral discussions between churches, than under the auspices of the World Council of Churches and the Ecumenical Movement. On 31 October 1999, Reformation Day, an international agreement on justification by faith was celebrated between the Roman Catholic Church and the Lutheran Church, settling the major issues over which the Reformation took place, 482 years to the day after Martin Luther nailed his Ninety Five Theses to the church door in Wittenburg.

There are other important discussions occurring, for example, between Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, and between Roman Catholic and Anglican Churches. When I was at the Church of Scotland headquarters in Edinburgh recently, I suggested to them that the greatest contribution they could make to Christian unity would be to open dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church - the only church - other than too many quarrels among ourselves - we Presbyterians have ever quarrelled with.

5. Global

In the important quest for Christian unity throughout the world, I feel troubled that an indispensable ingredient has been ignored in ecumenical discussions. This is the foundational role and place of the Jewish people. In Romans 11:18 Paul uses the image of a tree. 'You don't support the roots', he says, 'the roots support you.' He reminds us Gentiles that we are branches, who do not have an independent existence but are supported by the root, the Jews. The Ecumenical Movement and earlier attempts at Christian unity have attempted to unite the branches synthetically among themselves. But the only way for branches to be united is organically through a living attachment to the root and trunk of the tree.

My theology Professor at New College, Edinburgh, Thomas F. Torrance, a strong advocate of the Jewish basis of Christian unity, has this to say on this matter ('The Divine Vocation and Destiny of the Jews in World History,' in David W. Torrance, ed., *The Witness of the Jews to God* [Edinburgh, Handsel Press, 1982], p. 92):

This is something which it is more imperative than ever for us to take seriously, namely, that the Christian Church is *Church* only in that it is grafted like branches onto the trunk of Israel, and that it is the trunk that bears the branches and not the branches the trunk (Romans 11:18). Since this is the case, the deepest schism in the one People of God is not that between East and West or Roman and Protestant Christianity. The bitter separation between the Catholic Church and the Synagogue that set in after the Bar Cochba Revolt in the second century . . . was one of the greatest tragedies in the whole of our history, not only for the people of God but for all western civilisation. . . . The proliferation of schism, whatever may be its alleged justification, must surely be traced back ultimately to the radical split between Gentile Christians and Jews. Only with the healing of that split in a deep-going reconciliation will all other divisions with which we struggle in the ecumenical movement finally be overcome.

We must pursue unity at all these levels, if we are to be true to the prayer and longing of Jesus that we his followers may be one, so that the world might believe our message about him.

Power for Service

The Mission of the Church (Acts 1:1-11)

The Christian church does not exist for its own sake, but to serve its founder in making the message of God's saving love in Jesus Christ known to the peoples of the earth. In this message, ninth in a series on 'The Church', preached at St Albans Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North, New Zealand, on 12 December 1999, Rob Yule addresses some of the fears and misunderstandings of evangelism that hinder believers from being more effective witnesses for Jesus.

'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' (Acts 1:8). This short statement, part of Jesus' final message to his followers, corrects three common misunderstandings of our role as Christians and of the mission of the Church.

1. 'I don't have the knowledge or training.'

The first misunderstanding is that we have to be knowledgeable and highly trained people, in order to share our faith.

But this passage tells us that our main job as Christians, and of the Church as a whole, is to be Jesus' 'witnesses'. The *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 9th. edition, defines a 'witness' as 'a person present at some event and able to give information about it'. A secondary meaning is 'a person attesting another person's signature to a document' - someone who vouches for another's identity or character.

The first Christian witnesses, the apostles, were those who knew Jesus personally, who experienced and could attest the impact of his life and personality, his teachings and miracles. 'We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and of Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen - by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.' (Acts 10:39-41).

The primary event that we Christians witness to is the event of Jesus' death on the cross for our forgiveness and resurrection from the dead to give us eternal life. The secondary event that we testify to is what Jesus has done in our lives. We bear witness to the impact of Jesus' life and character, and to the life-changing transformation that his forgiveness has brought about in our lives.

Many Christians think they can't give a testimony because they don't know enough, haven't studied enough, or aren't eloquent enough. That's a misunderstanding of what a witness is. A witness doesn't have to say anything about what he or she doesn't know. A witness simply gives an account of what he or she does know. They don't have to use other people's words - just put it in their own words, and express it in their own way. The more artless and uncontrived a person's testimony is, the more it reflects their own personality and perspective, the better and more convincing it will be.

2. 'The task is too big for me.'

A second misunderstanding is that the task is too big for us. We think we have to change the world, or change society, or change people's attitudes - and because that's too enormous a responsibility, we give up, and don't even do what we can do.

A basic planning principle is to break a project down into manageable bits. That's exactly what Jesus does here. Jesus was a realist. He simply says, 'Start where you are and reach out from there.' 'Begin where you are, and let your influence grow as your experience develops and as your witness becomes more widely recognised.' He told the disciples to be his witnesses first in Jerusalem, then in Judea and Samaria, and finally to the ends of the earth. Since they were living in Jerusalem, he was telling them to start where they were and reach out in ever-increasing circles or spheres of influence until the whole world was evangelised.

In effect, Jesus tells us to start modestly, begin where we are, do what we can. Rome wasn't built in a day, and it won't be evangelised in a day. But Rome did get eventually get built, and one day Rome was even evangelised - when the fourth century Emperor Constantine was converted, the persecutions ceased, and his successor Theodosius made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. Line upon line, precept upon precept, bit by bit, one person at a time, the world can be reached for Jesus Christ.

The concentric circles of mission that Jesus refers to are strategically chosen:

- 'Jerusalem' represents home, family and close friends, where you live and where you are well-known. Jerusalem also represents religious orthodoxy, people who think they know it all already and don't need to change. Your 'Jerusalem' is always the hardest place to be a witness. But it's where you must start, and earn your credibility. You can't pull the wool over the eyes of your family and close friends. If you profess to have changed as a result of what Jesus has done in your life, you need to demonstrate and prove it to those around you, who've seen all your short-lived enthusiasms before and are waiting for this one to wear off too. Around home is where you must begin.
- 'Judea' represents your kind of people, people of your faith, culture, language and basic outlook on life. Your Judea is your local church and your local community. Many want to be missionaries who've never learned to serve in the context of their local church or neighbourhood. But if you're not an effective Christian witness in your local situation, among your own kind of people, in your own culture and language group, you'll never become one by going overseas. Crossing the Indian Ocean in a Jumbo jet, or the Sahara Desert in a 4X4, doesn't make you a missionary.
- 'Samaria' represents cultural, racial and religious diversity. The Samaritans of Jesus' day were descendants of the underprivileged people left behind after the deportation of the Israelites to Assyria in the 9th century BC, who subsequently intermarried, adopted other religious practices and in due course became frowned on by orthodox Jews. Today, it is often among new immigrants, people of other faiths, the underclass of migrant workers or new people who've moved into your district, that there is the greatest openness to the Gospel. Such people appreciate friendship, and are curious about what you believe. Befriending them will be your quickest and surest way to make disciples of Jesus Christ.
- The 'ends of the earth' represents global or cross-cultural mission, going to areas that are geographically isolated, with different languages, cultures and religions to your own. Evangelising them is a huge challenge. You'll never succeed at it if you haven't mastered the first principles back home. That's why Jesus wants you to do your apprenticeship at home base first, to walk before you run.

3. 'I haven't got the energy or resources for the task.'

A third misunderstanding is that we have to do this task of witnessing for Jesus in our own strength and in our own understanding. To the contrary, Jesus told the disciples that they would receive divine power for their mission. 'You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses.' (Acts 1:8). 'You are witnesses of these things. See, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city *until* you have received power from on high.' (Luke 24:48-9). The disciples were not to charge off to evangelise the world in their own strength and according to their own lights, but in the energy and wisdom of the Holy Spirit. God's work is not meant to be done in human strength. It is to be done in God's strength.

I was baptised in the Holy Spirit on a Friday night at the end of October, 1981. I will never forget the following Sunday night. I prepared the same as usual. I preached as usual. But that night something was different. The power was on. Two Punk girls walked in off the street, and one was converted! I'm not sure who was more surprised - me, the girls, or the congregation! My usual preparation and delivery was enhanced by a mysterious element that made my preaching more effective - the enabling and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, God's appointed resource for witness and mission.

Not even Jesus did God's work in his own strength. Before his baptism, Jesus was an unknown, a Galilean carpenter's son. After his baptism, when the Holy Spirit came upon him in physical form like a homing pigeon returning to its loft, Jesus performed miracles of healing and deliverance, people's lives were changed, and his fame spread far and wide (Luke 4:14-15). Now here's a disturbing thought: if Jesus, the Son of God, needed the

empowerment of the Holy Spirit before he began his public ministry, what about you and me, who are mere human beings?

Next Church

Christianity in the New Millennium

Enormous economic, social and cultural changes are sweeping the world. Christian churches are not immune from these changes, which pose great challenges for their identity, mission, and survival. In this article, final in a series on 'The Church', Rob Yule, minister of St Alban's Presbyterian Church, Palmerston North and Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, gives his perspective on how the church can meet these challenges and his view of the prospects of Christianity in the third millennium. It was originally published as '*Christianity in the New Millennium*', in *Crosslink*, monthly magazine of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches of New Zealand, (Vol. 13, No. 8, September 1999, p. 8).

I am confident about the future of Christianity in New Zealand. I do not say this lightly, for our churches face enormous challenges today. Yet, amid the waning of Western Christendom, the breakup of traditional institutions, and the catastrophic decline in the last thirty years of historical denominations, a new kind of church is being born. Still largely unnoticed by the secular media, new forms of Christian worship, community and social service are emerging across this country in response to the challenges and to minister to the needs of our fast-changing society.

The Persistence of Religion

My first reason for confidence about Christianity's future is that human beings are incurably religious. There is a religious longing, a sense of incompleteness or unfulfilment, in every one of us. 'You have made us for yourself,' wrote St. Augustine in his *Confessions*, 'and our hearts are restless till they find rest in You.' Even when denied by secular society, this longing finds expression in popular culture. 'What if God was one of us?' 'There can be miracles when you believe.' Contemporary music bears witness to this fundamental longing.

As our society becomes increasingly fragmented and loses its moral purpose, a resurgence of religious faith is occurring in this country. The recent International Social Survey of religion carried out here by Massey University's Department of Marketing indicated that a surprising 80% of New Zealanders have a religious belief of some kind. A majority (61%) believe in a personal God, with one third (31%) admitting no doubts about God's existence. A further one fifth (19%) believe in some kind of impersonal higher power. Though New Zealand is often thought of as a secular society, the survey indicates that there is a vigorous religious interest in this country. Three quarters of New Zealanders (74%) would prefer children to have religious education in state primary schools, and over half (55%) would like to see religious education in state secondary schools.

The survey also reveals a fascination for alternative religions, occultic beliefs, and plain old-fashioned superstition. It showed, for instance, that 40% of New Zealanders believe that fortune tellers can foresee the future, 30% that a person's star sign, or horoscope, can affect their future, and 30% that charms sometimes bring good luck. This rag-bag, eclectic religiosity, which began in the Counter-Culture of the late sixties and early seventies, has today entered the cultural mainstream, even gaining cover status in a recent *New Zealand Listener* ('Psychic Power: Why Spiritualism is Big Business', 8-14 May, 1999).

More a mood than a movement, New Age religion encompasses a diverse, even bizarre range of alternative spiritualities, therapies, beliefs and practices, often deriving from the eastern religions. While some of this represents a disenchantment with churches and western Christianity, it also indicates a new climate of spiritual openness and searching that provides us with significant opportunities for presenting the Christian message to our contemporaries.

Measured against the resurgent spirituality of our day, the prophets of secularism are shown to be wide of the mark. In the seventies, when I was chaplain at Victoria University of Wellington, atheistic Marxism was the ruling ideology, and religion was out of fashion. Now the Berlin Wall is only a memory, and the oft-predicted demise of religious faith has turned out, as Paul Johnston says in his *History of the Modern World*, to be 'the outstanding non-event of modern times.'

The Pervasiveness of Truth

My second ground for confidence is the persistence of truth questions concerning the meaning of life. As far back as 1980 *Time* magazine was reporting a remarkable renaissance of religious belief:

In a quiet revolution in thought and arguments that hardly anyone could have foreseen only two decades ago, God is making a comeback. Most intriguingly, this is happening not among theologians or ordinary believers . . . but in the crisp, intellectual circles of academic philosophers, where the consensus had long banished the Almighty from fruitful discourse. Now it is more respectable among philosophers than it has been for a generation to talk about the possibility of God's existence.

The same quiet revolution has been happening among scientists. Twentieth century scientific exploration into the origins of the universe and of life has created a climate of openness to Christian faith unparalleled since the eighteenth century. Edwin Hubble's great discovery in 1929 that other galaxies are receding from ours, for instance, has theistic implications still to be fully grasped by the wider community, because it indicates that the universe is expanding, came from a finite point and must have had a beginning.

Similarly, modern scientific research into the physical conditions within which life is possible has shown how finely-tuned the universe is for sustaining life on earth. Scientists now widely use the term 'Anthropic Principle' to describe this 'just right' universe, so delicately ordered to an extraordinarily narrow band of variables within which human life is possible. A simple example is what I call the 'freeze-fry factor': a change in the earth's distance from the sun of as little as 2% would destroy all life on earth, freezing if it was further away or evaporating if it was nearer all water necessary for life's existence. Such examples of fine-tunedness give evidence that our earth and universe are indeed products of supremely intelligent and loving design.

The Resilience of the Church

My third reason for confidence in the future of Christianity is the astonishing resilience of the Christian Church. The forms of an earlier age may die, but the faith continually rises up invigorated to meet new challenges and situations. The Church endured the Roman persecutions, survived domestication as the Imperial religion, and outlasted the fall of Rome. It flourished in the social chaos of the early Middle Ages, renewed its vigour in the break-up of medieval Christendom, and spread worldwide in the age of European expansion. In our day Christianity has shed its Western trappings and prospers in a thousand ethnic cultures as the first truly indigenous yet global faith in world history.

John Henry Newman, leader of last century's Anglo-Catholic revival in England, observed in his *The Idea of a University* that 'True religion is slow in growth and, when once planted, is difficult of dislodgement; but its intellectual counterfeit has no root in itself; it springs up suddenly, it suddenly withers.' In this age of instant solutions we are inclined to forget that the growth of the church, like the seed growing to harvest in Jesus' parables, is normally slow and steady rather than sudden and spectacular.

The movement which began twenty centuries ago with an itinerant Jewish preacher and a dozen motley followers, in an obscure province of the Roman Empire, today, according to statistician David Barrett, numbers just on 2 billion people, fully one third of the world's population, set to pass 6 billion for the first time in history as the new millennium is ushered in. The Christian movement exists in such diverse situations, survives under such persistent hostility, and displays such extraordinary capacity for self-rejuvenation, that it defies secular analysis or explanation. To understand this remarkable phenomenon, we seem driven to invoke its founder's promise: 'I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not overcome it.' (Matthew 16:18)

The Re-emergence of Community

The emergence of Western society from the Christendom era is creating many challenges for traditional institutions, including churches. But it is also showing that the church can survive, indeed flourish, under any social system - not just when subsidised or supported, but even when marginalised or disestablished. As our pluralistic, postmodern society becomes more fragmented, losing its moorings of truth and value, churches that keep their message but adapt their medium will shine like lighthouses in a sea of change. Tradition-bound churches may be dying, but the Next Church is being born. Centuries of European heritage and Christian habit

are being abandoned, as new, indigenous, entrepreneurial congregations emerge to meet today's needs and opportunities.

In August 1995 the *Atlantic Monthly* carried a cover story on 'The Next Church', the result of more than a year's research on the new large churches which are transforming the religious and social life of America. Author Charles Trueheart commented:

Social institutions that once held civic life together - schools, families, governments, companies, neighbourhoods, and even old-style churches - are not what they used to be. The new congregations are reorganising religious life to fill that void. The Next Church in its fully realised state can be the clearest approximation of community, and perhaps the most important civic structure, that a whole generation is likely to find anywhere in an impersonal, transient nation.

Havens of community in a world falling apart, forums of truth in a confused and fragmented society, beacons of hope in a fast-moving and despairing age - this will be the shape of the church in the next millennium.