

But even these Emerging Churches could become the next-generation denominations with new religious bureaucracies. Today's denominations were a church phenomenon born with the modern era in Europe and which were later exported by European and North American missionaries. Every culture and generation emerges with forms and expressions of church. So it is important that we start our journey of exploring how the church came into being with the story of the one to whom the founding of the church is credited: Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus and the Church

The leading question is: Was or is the church Jesus' idea? Did Jesus have in mind the birth of a community that would be identified as church? And was that "church" what would constitute the new people of God, in continuity with ancient Israel? Then come the follow-on questions: What does "church" that is true to Jesus' idea of church look like? And is the church in its diverse forms today what Jesus conceived?

There are only two passages in all the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – in which Jesus made explicit reference to the church. The first is Matthew 16:17–19.

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock *I will build my church*, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven [italics mine].

The second, also from Matthew, 18:15–20:

If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they 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 they still refuse to listen, tell it to the *church*; and if they refuse to listen even to the *church*, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them [*italics mine*].

Experts in the languages in which the Gospels were originally written tell us that it is difficult to determine exactly what words Jesus used that are translated “church” in these passages. The English word “church” is the translation of *ekklesia* in the common Greek language that was spoken in first-century Palestine; it meant a citizens’ assembly in a city to decide the matters that affected their welfare – a political gathering or simply a gathering. It was therefore also frequently used instead of the term *sunagoge* – translated “synagogue”, the local gathering of Jews for preserving and nurturing the Jewish faith during the post-exile period. The term *ekklesia*, however, does not have an inherently religious (or later on, cultic) meaning. It is uncertain whether Jesus used a Hebrew or Aramaic word that translates *ekklesia* for temple. He may have used the Hebrew words *edah* or *qaha*, or the Aramaic equivalent, *edta*, which simply means the community of Israel. Yet another possibility is the Aramaic word *kenista*, which could be used of either a local Jewish community or just the Jewish people.¹

Whichever of these words Jesus may have used, they all communicate the idea of a community identifiable by their gathering as well as by what happens when they gather, as was the case with the Israelites. In the affirmation “I will build my church”, Jesus makes clear whose initiative and responsibility it was to bring the community into being and to whom the community would belong. Like the citizens’ gathering and Israel, they would have a shared consciousness of the group’s identity. However, their identity was grounded not simply in their belonging together, but rather in the one to whom they belonged. The community was to derive its character not from its membership but from the one who called it into being. Jesus was to be the author and reason for gathering. Furthermore, he pledged to be personally present in the gathering. It was Jesus’ gathering in every sense: his people, and by extension, God’s people.

1. Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?* (London: SPCK, 1995), 37.

Unfortunately, the contemporary church scene speaks more of the presence of a denominational character than that of Jesus. I fear that in a lot of instances it is not Jesus gathering his own but rather us gathering those who are like us. Is it not true that the churches as we know them today – such as the ones described in the Introduction – are associations rather than assemblies of Jesus? Don't the rivalry, competition and conflict, and our inability to work together reflect the fact that our primary rootedness and calling as communities is in our worldly credentials – ethnic, social, regional, structural, stylistic and formal – and not in Jesus? I have been amazed when visiting congregations in my work as bishop in Kampala to find that some of them have felt more like tribal meetings because, in spite of the cosmopolitan nature of Kampala, the members of these congregations came from one ethnic or regional groups. The history of the churches in Kenya is such that particular denominations are associated with particular ethnic groups: Presbyterian for Kikuyu; Methodist for Meru; African Inland Church for Kalenjin; and so on.

It is unfortunate that the significance of Matthew 16:17–19 in defining the purpose of an authentic Jesus community has been lost in theological and ecclesiastical debates over what Jesus meant by “on this rock” and “the keys of the kingdom”. Too much energy has been devoted to determining whether Peter was that rock and who his successors are! By focussing on this we miss the major subject of Jesus' words, which concerns the nature and purpose of community. Jesus' statement “I will build my church” is a clear expression of his intention to bring into being a visible community. Church was not accidental or incidental to his mission.

But the community was not to exist for its own sake. A closer look at the life, mission, message and ministry of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels shows that it was not the community that was Jesus' preoccupation but rather the kingdom of God. It is noteworthy that while there are only two references to the church in all the Gospels, there are 76 independent sayings on the kingdom of God, or 103 if the parables are included.² It was Jesus' messiahship that would be the foundation of the kingdom; the keys to Peter symbolized the work of “unlocking” through his apostolic leadership and declaration of the finished work of Jesus as Messiah. The kingdom of God was the reason Jesus was revealed. The purpose of the community is the kingdom of God.

The church was not the good news that Jesus preached; that good news was the kingdom of God. It is the kingdom of God that defines the

2. Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?*, 27.

To the Ends of the Earth: Among the Gentiles

The “ends of the earth” meant, from the perspective of the Jewish people, the Gentile world. The story of the first proclamation among the Gentiles is also surprising. Again, because it was a major barrier for the Jewish apostles, the Holy Spirit dragged their leader, Peter, to them. We have to remember that the Jews despised the Gentiles, considering them aliens to the purposes of God, “excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world” (Eph 22:12). All familiar association with Gentiles was forbidden because they were declared unclean. They were to be treated like dogs; not pet dogs, like those I saw when I first visited Europe and North America, which eat food from the supermarket, have blankets and are members of the family! No; these were “dogs” like the African guard dogs that eat leftovers, bones and other scraps. The story of that encounter, in Acts 10:1–23, is captivating.

Luke begins this narrative in a very surprising manner: with the story of the Gentile, Cornelius, a Roman soldier with the rank of a centurion (equivalent to a captain or company commander). What is even more tantalizing is that God had been at work in the life of Cornelius. His and his family’s devotion to God was not a secret, reflected in the way he gave to the poor and kept the public prayer calendar. Cornelius was possibly associated with the local synagogue and was respected by the Jewish community. But his was not devotion for show; he desired God and was seeking him, to know him and his glory. One afternoon at three o’clock, he took a break from his work and retreated to his prayer chamber, as was his custom. Jesus had told his disciples that “everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened” (Matt 7:8), and that is what happened. Luke tells us that Cornelius “distinctly saw an angel of God” who told him that God had taken notice of his devotion and desire for him. The angel then told Cornelius about Peter – with amazing detail concerning the name and address where he was staying – and said that Peter was God’s messenger for him.

Consider how incredible this story is. Cornelius was not a proselyte, but just a God-fearing Gentile. That there were God-fearing Gentiles could be understood by a Jew, but that God should listen to them and answer their prayers was unheard of. How can it be, then, that we read that Cornelius’ prayers reached God and that God was answering his prayers? That is the

point: there is no one and no place beyond God's reach. He is the sovereign God who rewards all who seek him diligently.

As I reflect on this truth I think of the many people whom our traditions and theologies have disqualified as beyond God's reach. The Jewish perspectives on Gentiles as outsiders could be compared to some evangelical Christian perspectives on people of other faiths (Islam, Hinduism, etc.). Is it possible that God may be working in them, even though we consider them outsiders? No one is beyond the reach of the sovereign God! God may be at work in them in ways we are not able to see because we have excluded them in our minds. What is also amazing is that when God spoke through the angel, Cornelius recognized this as coming from God and obeyed immediately. He sent for Peter.

As all this was happening, unknown to Peter, he was getting on with the work of visiting the saints in Jerusalem and Judea. At the time, he was in Joppa at the home of Simon, a businessman dealing in hides and skins. Peter, like all the Jewish disciples of Jesus, kept the prayer hours. So at the noon hour of prayer Peter went up on the roof to pray. Meanwhile, lunch was being prepared. He was feeling hungry and dozed off for a time. Then he had a dream – or should we call it a nightmare? A sheet containing all kinds of creatures that the law of Moses declared unclean – four-footed animals, reptiles of all kinds and birds – came down. And to his shock and disbelief, a voice instructed him to “Get up ... Kill and eat”. What was even more unbelievable for Peter was that this was the voice of the Lord. In his dream he protested vehemently. He could not and would not eat these creatures that were prohibited, for they were unclean. I wonder whether at this point Peter reminded himself and God of all those animals and creatures prohibited in Leviticus 11: “some that only chew the cud or only have a divided hoof ... The camel ... The hyrax ... The rabbit ... the pig ... the animals that move about the ground ...: the rat, any kind of great lizard, the gecko, the monitor lizard, the wall lizard, the skink and the chameleon” (11:4–7, 29–30). They were the very ones on the sheet. How on earth could Peter, a Jew, eat pork? Then the voice came two more times, telling Peter not to “call anything impure that God has made clean” (10:15). The command was irresistible because he recognized that this was not just a dream: God was speaking to him. It was a vision from God.

As Peter was making sense of this vision, perplexed and bewildered as to what God was saying to him, the men from Cornelius came to the door asking for him. Even before the message got to Peter, who was still puzzled,

the Holy Spirit told him about them and instructed him: "Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them" (10:20). Having descended from the roof and seeing the men he announced himself as the one, Peter, whom they were looking for. He learnt that they were Gentiles sent by another Gentile – a God-fearing man, Cornelius. Then it all became frighteningly clear. He had to let them in, for he was not to call anything unclean that God had made clean. God had shown him in no uncertain terms that he who gave the regulations in Leviticus now declared clean that which then had been declared unclean. For the first time in Peter's life he had to welcome Gentiles and sit with them in a home. They even stayed there overnight. We are not told what Simon the tanner had to say about all this. The apostle must have explained that God had broken the rules.

Compare and contrast the two visions of the two men. Of the two of them, who needed more persuading and converting to the purposes of God for the Gentiles? For Cornelius, all happened when he was wide awake, while Peter was in a half-asleep, half-awake state (in a trance) when he saw the vision. The angel spoke just once to Cornelius and he obeyed, while for Peter the Lord spoke three times, and even after that Peter was still wondering (Luke makes reference to his "wondering" (10:17) and "thinking" (10:19)).

All of us are like Peter in one way or another. We have long-held views and traditions, theological or otherwise, that hinder us from engaging with God in unfamiliar places. We must open ourselves up to God's mission. What was common to both Peter and Cornelius was their willingness to hear God. God prepared both for the encounter; the Holy Spirit was at work in Cornelius just as he was in Peter. It was significant that Peter went to Cornelius' house on invitation by Cornelius, in obedience to God's revelation through the angel. Peter also went with the men from Cornelius' house in obedience to the Holy Spirit. It was God at work, God's mission.

Peter travelled with some other believers from Joppa to Cornelius' home, which was a day's journey (10:23–24). When they arrived they found a large gathering of Cornelius' relatives and close friends. Peter did the unthinkable for a Jew: he entered Cornelius' house, the house of a Gentile. Cornelius had never experienced this before in his life. The Jews he had associated with thus far had treated him as an outcast. He had come to believe that as a non-Jew he was inferior to them. Now a Jew, a man of God, had entered his house. He fell down at Peter's feet as though in worship (10:25). The barrier and prejudice was not just on Peter's side; Cornelius had it too, albeit from the opposite angle. He too was captive to a history and tradition that created

a dividing wall of hostility. The tragedy with barriers built between races, cultures, nations and ethnic groups is such that narratives of superiority and inferiority are told for so long that they become not merely traditions but the truth people live by. I was amazed in 1983, when I visited racially segregated South Africa, to find that it was not just that the white community believed they were superior to the blacks, but also that the blacks believed they were inferior. Both Peter and Cornelius needed to be freed from their prejudices and the captivity of their history and traditions by the gospel. Peter discovered this on entering Cornelius' house.

Peter's response was also amazing. He "made him get up. 'Stand up,' he said, 'I am only a man myself'" (10:26). Peter no longer defined his identity in Jewish versus Gentile terms. In Christ these identities were no longer significant. He was just a human being like Cornelius. What a transformation! What a conversion in Peter towards God's purposes and indeed his kingdom, a realization that there was no intrinsic distinction between Jew and Gentile! Peter gave up believing and acting out of the narrative of superiority. He then addressed the gathering, explaining how God had brought him there and testifying to the change that God had brought about on the journey to Cornelius' house. He began explaining that he should not really be there: "You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile. But God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean" (10:28). He wanted them to know that it was God who had brought him there. He then asked why they had invited him to come. He did not want to presume upon them. Cornelius then narrated the story of how God had told him to invite him, and explained that they were all eager to hear the message from God.

It was clear to Peter that the same message was to be proclaimed among the Gentiles as among the Jews, for "God does not show favouritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (10:34-35). He then declared to them the story of God's revelation and mission in Jesus Christ, the Lord of all, the one appointed judge of the living and the dead, and how that message was entrusted to his disciples, and he concluded with the offer of forgiveness for all who turned to him (10:36-43). Cornelius needed someone to explain to him who it was that was calling him! "While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message" (10:44) and they spoke in tongues, praising God. God did among the Gentile believers what he had done on the day of Pentecost with the Jewish believers. It was understandable that the Jewish disciples who

had come with Peter were astonished. It was only fitting that these Gentile believers should be baptized, just like those who were baptized at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came upon them, sealing their membership of the kingdom.

A Missional Community: Keeping in Step with the Holy Spirit

It was the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that propelled the disciples into mission: God's mission and theirs. It was (and remains) God's mission first and foremost. It was the Holy Spirit who gave Peter the clarity and boldness to proclaim the gospel to the thousands gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost; it was the Holy Spirit who formed the disciples into a *koinonia* of witness; it was the Holy Spirit who gave the apostles the power to perform signs and wonders and face opposition and persecution boldly and joyfully, because they had been "counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name" (5:41). It was the providence of God that used the persecution that broke out in Jerusalem to thrust the disciples out into all Judea. Mortimer Arias writes, "The experience of the Holy Spirit brings the touch of God's presence, the power of God's healing, the liberating experience of forgiveness, the reality of fraternal community, the joy of celebration, the boldness in witness, the blossoming of hope, and the fruitfulness in mission."⁵

Thus the initiative to break through the first cross-cultural boundary, that between Jews and Samaritans, was taken by God. It was the death of Stephen and the hostile-violent Saul that forced the Jewish believers to proclaim the gospel beyond Jerusalem, even among the Samaritans. Although Jesus had clearly instructed his apostles that they were to be his witnesses beyond Jerusalem, "in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), it was only persecution that brought them there. The Holy Spirit used persecution as the agency of spreading the good news of the presence of God's reign in Christ in Judea and Samaria. The Jewish-Samaritan barrier was not a barrier to the gospel; the barrier was cultural, in the minds of the Jewish disciples. It was their prejudice against the Samaritans that God had to deal with. The cultural barriers and prejudices with which the disciples accepted the gospel were broken down by the persecution and scattering and seeing God at work among the Samaritans just as he had been among the Jews. Once scattered, instead of being preoccupied with self-pity, mourning and

5. Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), p. 100.