

Paul

"I heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'

"Who are you, Lord? I asked.

"I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting", he replied.

"My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me."

Acts 22: 6-9

The final command of Jesus to his disciples, before his ascension to heaven, included the challenging divine commission with momentous earthly consequences: ". . . *you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*" This was because their message—"my witnesses" (to who he was as Messiah, and what his incarnation represented)—was a concept totally at variance from the Judaism of Jewry at that time, and totally foreign to all contemporary religions in the world with its promise of a personal relationship with God.

Further, the apostles were mostly uneducated artisans from rural Galilee, in a minor Roman province, who had never travelled

beyond Judea and Samaria; also, their leader, who had taught them their revolutionary message, had been condemned by official Jewish leaders and crucified as a criminal by Roman officials and they could be suspected and persecuted for the deliberately falsified report that the disciples had stolen the body from its tomb. Finally, as a questionable new sect, they were classified under Roman law as *religio illicita*—an “*illicit religion*”—and therefore, forbidden to proselytize for converts.

But one encouraging sign of the baptism of the Spirit had been the capability to speak “*in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.*” In a further confirmation of the fulfilment of ancient prophecies, the fifty-day religious festival period of *Passover* to *Pentecost* had brought millions of Dispersed Jews from all over the world to Jerusalem in a pilgrimage to celebrate the major Feasts. Therefore, in addition to being witnesses to the events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, many of them were also in the Temple when Peter and the other apostles were suddenly filled with the visible and audible signs of the Spirit-baptism foretold by Jesus. This divine Pentecostal afflatus energized the Apostles, and Peter, in his first public sermon, convinced three thousand people to believe in Jesus as the Messiah (“*God has made **this same Jesus**, whom you crucified, both **Lord** and the **Messiah**”), and so used the keys of the kingdom to open the door of the invisible Church and its first visible presence in Jerusalem to his fellow Jews.*

This first “church gathering” was a community of believers adhering to the “*apostles’ teaching*” they had received from Jesus during their three years together, fellowshiping, breaking bread and praying together, gathering daily in various homes for private worship and in the Temple precincts for public witness. The original Twelve Apostles quickly became 120 followers, constituting the first church; a spiritual entity within the physical environs of the synagogue; then 3000, and increasing daily, probably from among those who had responded earlier to Jesus’ pre-crucifixion preaching regarding the kingdom of God.

With the accompanying “*likeness*” of tongues of fire, and the “*likeness*” of a violent wind, these Spirit-bestowed phenomena were

the real languages spoken by the Dispersed Jews from other nations, from Rome in the west to Asia in the east; and when they saw and heard this phenomenon, they were utterly amazed at the ability of uncultured Galileans “*declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues*”. They did not know it but they were being presented with “*the sign of the Messiah*” the sceptical Pharisees had sought unsuccessfully from Jesus in the past. It was from among these pilgrim visitors to Jerusalem that the first three thousand converts came, and were baptized, before returning to their native lands in the Diaspora. So the first “*Christians*” (or, to be more Scripturally exact, “*Messiahists*”, believers in Jesus as the Messiah of God, and not just followers of a new form of belief in a Supreme Being) in Jerusalem knew that the commission of Jesus to carry the gospel beyond Judea and Samaria was not only possible but already under way.

But neither the apostles, nor the first converts, saw any need to initiate a new movement, or organize a new sect, outside Jewry. For over three years, first John the Baptist, then Jesus, had openly identified themselves with God’s commands and promises to Israel as contained in the Scriptures of that time. Both John and Jesus had been put to death because they insisted on unquestioned obedience to all existing Scriptures in the *Laws of Moses, Psalms* and *Prophets*, and opposed all rabbinical additions and traditions. They had been put to death because they offended the hypocritical professional religionists of a God-excluding Judaism. But their right to preach or prophesy inside the synagogues, or the Temple precincts, had never been questioned—only Jesus’ claims to be the Messiah, and his healings on the Sabbath, both of which he had personally validated in public debate.

So, although the initial reaction of Jesus’ followers after his crucifixion was fear, once this had been dispelled by the baptism of the Spirit they continued to attend and participate in the activities of the synagogue and Temple like every other Jew—except for one very significant departure from normal practice:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled

*with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”*¹⁵⁰

There was a four-fold significant difference in the small Jerusalem community of Messiah-believers from their Judaistic unbelievers: (i) they *devoted* themselves to *the apostles’ teaching*; (ii) they *devoted* themselves to *the fellowship*; (iii) they *devoted* themselves to *the breaking of bread*; and, iv) they *devoted* themselves to *prayer*. *This was the divinely ordained Church of the Messiah order of meeting.*

What was primarily conspicuous about the new Church of the Messiah community within the Jewish Judaisers was their “*devotion*”. They “*devoted themselves*” to four distinctive practices that were significantly different from those who ritually attended the customary Temple and synagogue services. The Greek word used for “*devotion*” implied a departure from normal activity. It meant “*to be constantly diligent (to a place)*”, “*to adhere closely (to a person)*”, “*to be earnest (in a thing)*”, “*to persevere (in an activity)*”, “*to give oneself continually (to a cause)*”, to “*continue steadfastly (on a course)*”

The first believers did not become part of the Church of the Messiah community because of the benefits it provided, or the status it bestowed, or the merit it acquired, or the contacts it multiplied like the adherents of Judaism. The association with the new Church involved commitment and sacrifice, a new attitude of living—with passion and power, participation and performance. Religion was not left to rabbis, nor spirituality to scribes, nor absolution to priests. Individual responsibility to the Triune God was the pre-eminent element: empowerment by God; guidance by the Spirit; teaching by the Lord through his personally ordained spokesmen.

The first object of devotion in this new *Church of the Messiah* was

¹⁵⁰Acts 2:42-47: 4:32-37

“the apostles’ teaching”. This was what they had learned in their three years’ association with Jesus, but especially the revelations of the final few months from the Mount of Transfiguration to the Mount of Olivet ascension. During that period they had been introduced to the mystery of Jesus’ relationship with God, of Jesus’ revelations of the kingdom of God, of Jesus’ representation as Redeemer-Messiah, and of Jesus’ return as Ruler-Messiah.

All of these aspects Peter now incorporated in his first message after Pentecost—crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, exaltation. In the next 30 years the apostles would write 21 Letters expounding and elucidating these fundamental truths into a comprehensive doctrine, but on that post-Pentecost occasion Peter and the apostles indoctrinated the first believers comprising the new Church with the words of Jesus regarding God and his cosmic purposes. The literal crux of the *“apostles’ teaching”* was summarized in Peter’s statement: *“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this **Jesus**, whom you crucified, both **Lord** and **Messiah**.”*¹⁵¹

It is important to note that it was the unquestionably Jewish Peter, standing beside his ten equally Jewish colleagues, addressing Jews, —*“all Israel”*—who placed the guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus on Jews. It was not, as later Jews allege, anti-Semitic Gentiles.

There was a sense in which Jesus had always been *“Lord”*, cosmically speaking; and had always been *“Christ”* or *Messiah*, prophetically speaking. He had accepted both titles during his public ministry in Judea. But it was in his incarnation and crucifixion, his resurrection and ascension, that he validated on earth what had always been recognized in heaven. As *“Lord”* he was one with his Father in eternity, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Communicator of the unfolding mysteries of God, the Custodian of the kingdom of God and the Church. As *“Christ”*, the *Messiah*, he was the Promised Seed of Eve, the Promised Redeemer of Moses, the Promised Ruler of David, the Promised Deliverer of the Prophets, the Promised Son of God of Peter’s Caesarean declaration. All of this in its manifold presentations was *“the apostles’ teaching”* to the new Church of the Messiah, to which they devoted themselves assiduously every day, in contra-distinction to the sterile 613

¹⁵¹ Acts 2:36

ritualistic *Traditions* of rabbinical Judaism of the professional religionists in the Temple and synagogues.

The synagogues, as has been noted earlier, were the centre of Jewish life. They were intended to cultivate and stimulate devotion, discipline and learning in the Jewish communities. They were the place where the *Torah*, or *Law of Moses*, was read and its teachings inculcated. The services consisted of the *schema*, prayer, the reading of the *Law* and the *Prophets*, usually followed by an exposition, and concluding with a Blessing. Any member of the congregation might be called on to read the Scriptures; anyone might be asked to give an exposition of them. So, what was different about the new community of the *Church of the Messiah*, in addition to the particular emphases of the “*apostles’ teaching*” outlined above?

They were “*devoted to the fellowship*”, is the answer. The word fellowship, *koinonia*, was used in various ways at that time. Plato had used it in connection with men and women in education, and the relationship between pleasure and pain. In common usage it meant three things: (i) a business partnership; (ii) marriage; and (iii) relationship with God. In other words, it was a close and intimate bond between people with mutual interests, and between them and God to a greater degree.

The fellowship of the new *Church of the Messiah* carried the concept further, to a “*fellowship with the Father, and his son, Jesus the Messiah*”; which resulted in a more intimate association with the lives, possessions and activities of the other members of the Church—a “*fellowship in the Spirit*”:

*“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone who had need”*¹⁵²

For those who practiced the principles of the kingdom of God there already existed a standard of fellowship. One was outlined by Moses when he said:

“When you have finished setting aside a tenth of all your produce in the third year, the year of the tithe, you shall give it to the Levite, the alien, the fatherless and the widow”.¹⁵³

¹⁵² Acts 2: 44-45

¹⁵³ Deuteronomy 26:12

It was not just a racial, tribal, or even family, responsibility for caring, but a person-to-person care for each other, and a person-to-God recognition of His love. In the new Church of the Messiah there was an even greater unity in all that they did, and they joyously gave all that they had, and not just a tenth, or tithe, required under the *Law*.

The new *Church of the Messiah* community continued to meet in the Temple (“*at the time of prayer*”¹⁵⁴) for witness, but not for worship. They had learned from Jesus that the time for animal sacrifice in a building was past, and that, as “*Lamb of God*”, he was the divinely acceptable sacrifice for sin for all and for ever. He, the Messiah, had become the *Passover*, and the bread and wine of the Last Supper remembrance feast were the symbols of his body broken and blood shed in the communion of the Church. This communion service of the first church in Jerusalem was commemorated as a participatory act of worship. It was the supreme act of the New Church, the act in which Jesus as Messiah and Lord was remembered in his life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension in a varied Spirit-guided, spontaneously-expressed representation act of worship.

The symbolic “*breaking-of-bread*”, or communion, of the Lord’s Supper at first was part of the customary daily meal colloquially known as “*breaking bread*”. Unlike the Passover Feast, which was a once-a-year celebration, the “*communion service*” was a once-a-week; or, at times, even a once-a-day act of worship. The communion service was distinctively different from the other communal activity, “*prayer*”, because it was wholly for worship of, praise to, and adoration for God. It was not a time for confessing of sins, or seeking help for personal needs.

These were kept for the time set apart for “*prayers*”, which were of various types: namely, *supplication*, the prayer with empty hands seeking help; the *demand* of the seeker who has fulfilled certain conditions of “*ask . . . seek . . . knock*”; the *waiting* before God with patience and persistence until noticed and blessed; the plea for just response. What was particularly distinctive in the *Church of the Messiah* was that the members “*devoted themselves to prayer*” as a spiritual communication with a personally known God rather than

¹⁵⁴Acts 3:1

simply as a sacred performance of traditional ritual or verbal self-promotion. It required a distinctive commitment to first “*seeking the will of the Father*” with regard to the requests being made, that they were the revealed purpose of God and were not just self-generated personal desires, or self-centred presentations of pious attitudes like the Pharisees.

While these spiritual practices devoted to seeing “*the fair beauty of the Lord*” were unique characteristics within contemporary Judaism’s synagogues, they might have flourished for a time and then died had it not been for the vision and commitment of a remarkable Jew, the Rabbi Saul of Tarsus. He was born into a Dispersed wealthy Jewish family who had been granted the coveted Roman citizenship in the Cilician city of Tarsus. Like all Jewish boys, he had begun his formal education in the Scriptures at five years of age, but with a knowledge of much of the *Pentateuch* and many of the *Psalms* and *Prophets* before then; at thirteen he had studied the Scriptures with leading rabbis and scholars; and at eighteen he had been admitted to the exclusive Rabbinic academy in Jerusalem favoured by the revered Rabbi Gamaliel. There he had performed with such distinction that he had been promoted as a possible member of the *Sanhedrin*.

In the city of Tarsus that was said at the time to be the cultural equal of Athens, Paul, at thirty years of age, was considered a young man with a great future. There were those who spoke of him in the same context as Canaanites, the tutor of Julius Caesar; or his fellow-Stoic, Athenadorus, the Tarsus University philosopher who had gone to Rome as tutor to the Emperor Augustus; and the academician Nestor, tutor of the young Marcellus and Caesar Tiberius. Caesar Augustine had died, and the wretched Tiberius had succeeded him, but the reputation of these Tarsians would have given their promising fellow-student from Tarsus University an entrance to the highest circles in Rome had he wanted. But Paul had no desire to continue his studies in Rome at this time, whatever the future might hold. He was equally fluent in the written and spoken languages of Roman, Greek and Hebrew, including Aramaic. He was as at ease conversing with the resident or visiting intellectuals

passing through Tarsus, as he was debating the fine points of Judaism with his rabbi colleagues in the Temple at Jerusalem.

But all around the Mediterranean Sea the four great empires which had dominated the history of the world for the previous four centuries—Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman—were collapsing with increasing rapidity, despite the external magnificence on view, because of the weakness inherent in the individuals who tried to maintain them. One of the last great acts of the Tarsian scholar, Athenadorus, after he returned to Tarsus from Rome and found the city in the hands of corrupt officials, was to turn them out of office and send them into exile. A nation or world empire, he affirmed, like a city council was only as good as its people's laws and spiritual values.

To his strict Pharisee family Paul was known as Saul, the name taken from Israel's first king, who was also from Paul's same tribe of Benjamin. But the deeply Jewish family were also members of the elite body of Tarsians who had been made "*citizens of Rome*" for distinguished service, and so outside the family he was known by his registered Roman name of *Paulus*, or Paul.

Paul had felt a surge of excitement when he had heard the news of the emergence of the two Jewish prophets in Jerusalem, John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus especially was a fellow-rabbi who was obviously tired of multiplying words about holiness and righteousness and felt that some action had to be taken—like Paul himself felt. Where the Nazarene prophet was impressive was in his knowledge of the Scriptures, and his unique expositions of them; but his constant emphasis on a spiritual kingdom of God, in which all would participate who believed in him as God's Messiah sent to die for the sins of the world, was just nonsense. He had not been unduly surprised to hear of Jesus' death, and he was sceptical of the reports of miracles of healings of all kinds, of remarkable exorcisms of demons, and of resurrections from the dead—including Jesus' own. There was sure to be explanations for all of these.

But the sudden disappearance of two such dynamic religious personalities by beheading and crucifixion respectively was certain to produce unanticipated repercussions. That was how legends were

born. The gap they left behind also gave rise to vague regrets and hopes of what-might-have-been if only their message or actions had been different; and it was this that troubled Paul now. What was it in their message that had so moved the nation in such a short period of three years? And what was it that might be learned to make it the kind of revolutionary religious movement he so desired?

He had no difficulty understanding, or even agreeing with John the Baptist and the need for national repentance before the appearance of the historically prophesied Messiah. Nor had he any quarrel with the emphasis by Jesus on the need for observance of spiritual principles and precepts of the *Law* above the ritualistic ceremonies and sacrifices in Talmudic Judaism. He, too, had a passionate desire to establish a purified Judaism to its rightful primary place in the life of the Jewish nation. He had devoted the most of his youthful life to pursuing that frustratingly elusive goal, and was already weary with the endless emasculating obfuscations of the various schools of rabbis pursuing their own personal visions.

There were major divisions between Hellenists and Judaists, and between the doctrinal *Hagadists* and the legalist *Halachists*, each despising the others. The seven rules of Hillel became the thirteen rules of Ishmael, and the thirty-three of Akibha, and then by combinations and permutations of these and self-serving additions almost anything could be added or subtracted from Moses' *Law*. Meanwhile, others were deducing from the selective utterances of the *Prophets* a spirit which almost evoked contempt for the Mosaic principles, permitting free rein to anything. There had to be a change—of heart, of mind, of emphasis—if what remained of Israel was not to disappear altogether in total catastrophic judgement by an outraged God. Somewhere in all that confusion there must be a clear message from God such as had been articulated by the former prophets of Israel—and had been tantalizingly close in what John and Jesus had preached.

In search of his own youthful vision, and to accomplish his own personal goal, he had committed himself fanatically to the observance of every item of the written and oral *Law*. If it could be done, he could do it. If God had declared that the human creature

could be holy as He was holy, as He had said to Moses and others, then it must be possible to attain it. If God had declared that it was the destiny of Israel, on the basis of that vision, to be “*a light to enlighten the nations of the world*”, then it must be an attainable goal. He, Paul of Tarsus, had done all that was humanly possible, according to the strict code of the Pharisees which accounted him of blameless life, yet he was conscious that he was lacking some essential element. What had John and Jesus found that made them so confident—and so different?

Now that he had reached the mandatory thirty years of age necessary for appointment to the *Sanhedrin* he must decide whether he was going to pursue a course that would carry him to the position of respected Rabbi like Gamaliel, or a skilled administrator like Nicodemus. There was no other leading position in Jewry for one like himself. Yet he knew already, from observation and experience, that to go down that road meant diminishing of vision and increasing casuistry. Had it not been a rabbi like himself who said: “*No one is appointed a member of the Sanhedrin who does not possess sufficient ingenuity to prove from the written Law that a creeping thing is ceremonially clean.*” And there was no more definite law than that asserting the uncleanness of creeping things. Sophistry, your name is Judaism, thought Paul—or, at least, Rabbinism.

Paul entered the pages of Biblical history as an implacable persecutor of the new *Church of the Messiah*, primarily because they taught the “heresy” that a man crucified on a tree could ever be a Messianic king of the Jews. Two events changed Saul of Tarsus’s life for ever: he was an observer of the death of the martyred Hellenist Jew, Stephen, a member of the *Church of the Messiah*, as he prayed for his killers; and he had a vision of a living Jesus while on his way to Damascus to persecute and imprison more of Jesus’ followers there. That encounter with the risen and glorified Jesus, and the divine commissioning by him, transformed Saul into Paul, the “*Twelfth Apostle*”, the Jesus-approved office vacated by the death of the traitor Judas. His close friend and constant companion, Luke, described the event in his *Acts of the Apostles*:

“*As he (Paul) neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from*

heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'

"Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do . . .'

"The Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! **This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name**.'

"Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord—Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here—has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength."¹⁵⁵ (my emphasis)

Paul spent the next few years in the Judean desert, and then emerged to communicate with Peter and the other apostles in Jerusalem his vision from God regarding the form of the *Church of the Messiah* beyond the frontiers of Judea and Judaism. It would not be a religion like Judaism, it would not be a sect like the Essenes, it would not be an organization like the Pharisees. It would be an organism—an entity, connecting independent parts with a common element (like Jesus' description of "*building*" a church); a whole, with connecting parts compared to a living being (like the human "*body*"); a union, the sum of which is greater than its parts (like the "*bride*" in marriage).

Paul expanded Jesus' analogy of the Church as a building, and likened it to a "*temple*" as foretold by Jesus when he said, "*Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up . . .*"¹⁵⁶. The individual's body was a spiritual temple, indwelt by the Holy Spirit; the local community of believers was a spiritual temple, indwelt by the Holy Spirit; the whole universal *Church of the Messiah* was a spiritual temple, indwelt by the Holy Spirit.¹⁵⁷

In the *New Church-Temple Building* organism Jesus was the corner-stone, and the apostles were the foundation. But, Paul added,

¹⁵⁵ Acts 9: 3-6

¹⁵⁶ John 2:19

¹⁵⁷ I Corinthians 3:16; 6:19; Ephesians 2:20

the *Church of the Messiah* was also like the human *Temple-Body*, in which there were a variety of members with differing functions but all contributing to the basic unity and well-being of the whole.¹⁵⁸ In this Body Jesus was the Head, and the life and activities of the members were dependent wholly on him.¹⁵⁹ Paul's third analogy was to present the Church of the Messiah as a *Temple-Bride*, in which the mystery of the human union with the divine could be comprehended in the life of the individual experience,¹⁶⁰ the life of the local church community,¹⁶¹ and the life of the universal *Church of the Messiah*.

The emergence of Paul with this unique vision of the *Church of the Messiah* coincided with the unique experience of Peter at a critical point in the expansion of the local church in and from Jerusalem. Paul's conversion had happened while he was on the way to Damascus in Syria to imprison the Messiah believers there; an indication that the *New Church* was already spreading outside Judea to a worrying extent for the Judaistic leaders in Jerusalem. It was at this critical point that there was a remarkable conjunction of divine and angelic powers to demolish and abolish the barriers of Old Israel and the Babylon Judaism of the rabbis, and for Peter, and Paul, to use the "keys of the kingdom" for entrance to the Gentile nations of the world. The Scriptures record what happened:

"At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, 'Cornelius!'

"Cornelius stared at him in fear, 'What is it, Lord?' he asked.

"The angel answered, 'Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a remembrance before God. Now send to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea . . .'"¹⁶² (my emphasis)

The Scriptural account then switches to Peter in Joppa, who was also having a supernatural revelation:

". . . About noon the following day as they were approaching the city,

¹⁵⁸ I Corinthians 12:14f

¹⁵⁹ Colossians 1:18, 24; 2:19

¹⁶⁰ I Corinthians 6:15f

¹⁶¹ I Corinthians 11:3

¹⁶² Acts 10:1of

Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw the heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. 'I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.'

"The voice spoke to him a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.'

"This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

"While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there . . .'¹⁶³ (my emphasis)

Cornelius was what was known in Judaism as a "God-fearer". There were two types of proselytes in Judaism, the full proselytes who were circumcised and who practiced all rites and ordinances; and part-proselytes, or "proselytes of the gate", who professed sympathy with monotheistic Judaism, but who only selectively practiced the ceremonies. Cornelius was the latter; and, as such, he was a citizen of the kingdom of God—a "devout God-fearer"—but not a member of the Church of the Messiah.

To fully understand the distinction, and its importance, God revealed the mystery to both Cornelius the Gentile, and to Peter the Jew. He did this by utilizing all the heavenly agencies of witness and communication. In the respective revelations it is recorded above that each "had a vision"; Cornelius in prayer saw "an angel of God", who gave him instructions, whom Cornelius addressed as "Lord", and who replied that Cornelius' prayers had "come up before God". Meanwhile, Peter, as noted above, while in "a trance", or state of ecstasy, also had "a vision", in which "a voice" spoke to him, whom Peter identified as "Lord", and "the Spirit" told Peter to go with Cornelius' servants. There was a unanimity of heavenly beings to

¹⁶³ Acts 10: 1-17

bring together Jew and Gentile in the Church of the Messiah.

At the meeting of the two men, and gathered "large crowd", and while Peter was preaching, "the Holy Spirit came on all who believed"; and, like the experience of the Jews at Pentecost in Jerusalem, the Gentiles in Caesarea "spoke in tongues, praising God". Peter identified the similarity, and agreed that the whole company should be "baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah". In Jerusalem, it had been Jews who were already baptized with water who had been baptized by the Spirit; in Caesarea, it was Gentiles who were baptized by the Spirit and subsequently baptized by water. But it was the baptism of both water and Spirit that gave both the unique entrance from the kingdom of God into the Church of the Messiah.

The visionary experiences of Paul and Peter, and the important conclusions they had drawn from them, created a crisis in the first and predominantly Jewish *Church of the Messiah* in Jerusalem, where James, the step-brother of Jesus, was a respected leading figure in Talmudic Judaism. James did not approve of the conclusion reached and preached by Peter and Paul, and being widely disseminated in the growing number of churches of the Dispersion, and a council of the Jewish *Church of the Messiah* elders was held in Jerusalem to discuss the matter. After Paul and Peter had described their personal experiences, James and the other elders accepted that "God had showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself".¹⁶⁴ The Church of the Messiah was for both Jews and Gentiles, as God had foretold through his prophets.

While Peter continued to preach to Jews in synagogue congregations throughout Asia, it was Paul who gave form and substance from his own extensive and detailed knowledge of the *Pentateuch, Psalms and Prophetic Scriptures* to the new and rapidly expanding *Church of the Messiah*—in synagogues, when the Jewish congregations permitted him; and, when he was refused by fanatical rabbis, outside of them in house-holds, public places and lecture-rooms.

Paul never ceased to be a passionate Jew, even although he held the coveted citizenship of Rome. He was, he said, "of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, in regard to the

¹⁶⁴ Acts 15: 14

Law a Pharisee, circumcised on the eighth day, faultless in legalistic righteousness."¹⁶⁵ But these, he maintained, were principles of the kingdom of God, and of little or no significance in the Church of Jesus the Messiah. For that Church there was a whole new set of revelations, but which would only be understood in the light of the former prophetic revelations regarding the kingdom of God. There were many unique features about Paul of Tarsus, as a person and as an apostle, but the greatest was that he was an instrument chosen of God to reveal the culminating significance of the divine mysteries revealed by God since the beginning of Creation.

The word "*mystery*" is mentioned 22 times in the *New Testament* Scriptures, and 17 of the usages are by Paul; one is by Jesus to his disciples regarding the kingdom of God, and four are by the Apostle John in his *Revelation*. The seventeen mentions of divine mysteries by Paul encompass various aspects of divine communication. 15 of them are addressed to five churches—Rome, Corinth, Ephesus, Colossae and Thessalonika—and two to an individual, Timothy. Addressing them in the order in which they appear in the Scriptures, two of them occur in Paul's *Letter to the Romans*:

(i) the mystery of the *grafting of the Church of the Messiah on to Israel as the New Israel*: 11:11f.

(ii) the mystery "*hidden for long ages past*", but "*now revealed*" in the prophetic writings: 16:25.

In the other *Letters* to the four churches mentioned above they are:

(iii) the mystery of God's wisdom "*before time began*" but now *destined for revelation*: I Corinthians 2:7.

(iv) the mystery of the Church's "*transformation (to heaven) at the last trumpet*": I Corinthians 15:51.

(v) the mystery of *the Messiah's revelation "in the fullness of time"*: Ephesians 1:9.

(vi) the mystery of "*the administration of God's grace*" to Paul ("*to me*"): Ephesians 3:2, 3.

(vii) the mystery of *the Messiah as preached by Paul*: Ephesians 3:4.

¹⁶⁵ Philippians 3:5-6

(viii) the mystery of *the Gentile inheritance with Israel in the Church*: Ephesians 3:6.

(ix) the mystery of *marital union as an analogy of the Church and the Messiah*: Ephesians 5: 31, 32.

(x) the mystery of *“the gospel” of the kingdom and Church*: Ephesians 6: 19.

(xi) the mystery of *“the word of God in its fullness”*: I Corinthians 1:25.

(xii) the mystery of *the indwelling Messiah in Gentile believers (“Christ in you”)*: Colossians 1:26-27.

(xiii) the mystery of *revealing God in the Messiah as the totality of “all understanding, wisdom and knowledge”*: Colossians 2: 2-3.

(xiv) the mystery of *God’s participation in the Messiah-message (“God may open a door . . . that we may proclaim . . . the Messiah”)*: Colossians 4: 3-4.

(xv) the *“mystery of iniquity” revelation*: II Thessalonians 2:3-12.

A summary of these “mysteries” revealed to and through Paul might be: the mystery of God’s eternal wisdom; the mystery of God’s will; the mystery of God’s kingdom; the mystery of God’s Messiah; the mystery of God’s Church; the mystery of God’s Gospel; the mystery of Satanic lawlessness; the mystery of the Church’s rapture to heaven. All of these Paul taught and wrote as he travelled in three missionary journeys throughout the various countries of the Mediterranean and western regions. The fruit of his labours was a proliferation of local churches in synagogues, households, schools, a variety of places and circumstances, but all having the same fundamental character: God’s word was the final arbiter in all things; Jesus the Messiah was Lord, in every sense of that term; and the Holy Spirit was the determining and guiding influence at all times. As Paul wrote to the church in Corinth:

“Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant. You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to dumb idols. Therefore, I tell you that no-one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus is cursed’, and no-one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’, except by the Holy Spirit.

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are

*different kinds of service, but the **same Lord**. There are different kinds of working, but the **same God** works all of them in all men.*"¹⁶⁶

Having established the foundation principles of meeting together as a *Church of the Messiah* community of believers, Paul went on to assert that the witness to the Messiah as a church required no other extraneous matter. This was obvious from his emphatic statement:

*"You have been enriched **in every way**...because our testimony about the Messiah was confirmed in you. **Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift . . .**"*¹⁶⁷

These spiritual gifts were not only qualities, but people. In describing the Church as a "**Body**", Paul declared:

*"Now **you** are the body of Christ, and **each one of you is part of it**. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those speaking with different kinds of tongues . . ."*¹⁶⁸

To the Ephesian church he added:

"It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers. To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ

*"Then we will be no longer infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every word of teaching and by the craftiness and cunning of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, 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".*¹⁶⁹

The *apostles* were those who were sent by the Spirit of God *to establish local churches*; the *evangelists* were those who *preached the gospel of salvation* to make believers into members of the Church and local churches; the *teachers* were those who *expounded*

¹⁶⁶ I Corinthians 12: 1-6

¹⁶⁷ I Corinthians 1: 5-7

¹⁶⁸ I Corinthians 12: 27f

¹⁶⁹ Ephesian 4: 11-16

the Scriptures so that the believers' faith was strengthened and they grew maturely into the likeness of the Messiah; the *prophets* were those who *received particular messages from God* relating to conditions in the local churches in the present, and eschatologically in the future. Any church format which excluded these functions locally or universally was not divinely authorized or approved.

The format for the local church meeting together was outlined by Paul with a minimum of structure and regulation. The spiritual leaders in the Church should be recognized and obeyed because of their spiritual qualifications, and not because of their age, seniority or social status. He wrote to his young associate regarding this:

"If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task. Now the overseer must be above reproach, the husband of but one wife, temperate, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not given to much wine, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil. He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap".¹⁷⁰

These spiritual overseers, or "*bishops*", were also known as "*elders*"; the former indicating function or responsibility, and the latter wisdom and experience. Each local church had several bishops, and never one only over several churches with over-riding authority. This centralizing authoritarianism was a later, and completely unScriptural, imposition, which resulted, in addition to a performance-oriented institutional ecclesiology, an emphasis on seniority and longevity in a proliferation of all denominations and sects rather than the Biblically-ordained spiritual quality of life.

In the 25 years between the initiating of the first local Church of the Messiah in Jerusalem, and Paul's *First Letter to the Corinthians*, the purpose of the communion service, had become distorted in the customary breaking-of-bread format. The practice of having the communion service following the daily meal had deteriorated into

¹⁷⁰ I Timothy 3: 1-7

a social occasion in which the richest would indulge eating and drinking to excess. In rebuking the church in Corinth, Paul reminded them what the divine purpose was:

“For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

“Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself . . .”¹⁷¹ ”

The focus of worship, Paul continued, was the collective contemplation of God in which each individual Spirit-filled believer stimulated others to higher and greater thoughts of God in adoration from personal experience:

“When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret. If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and God.

Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said. And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop. For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged. The spirits of the prophets are subject to the control of prophets. For God is not a God of disorder but of peace.”¹⁷²

It is apparent from what Paul said and taught that the function, format and focus of the local Church of the Messiah emphasized participation on the part of everyone led by the Spirit of God, and

¹⁷¹ I Corinthians 11: 23f

¹⁷² I Corinthians 14 : 33f

not performance on the part of one member because of social status, seniority, or academic accreditation. Even the prophet with a message had to give way to another with a more immediate important contribution under the stimulus of the Spirit of God. The concept of a pastor or priest addressing a non-participating congregation—weekly, monthly, yearly, *ad infinitum*, and often *ad nauseum*—was and is totally foreign to Paul’s revelation from God.

The final contribution in Paul’s revealing the mysteries of the Church was in its future removal to heaven, or what was to become known as its “rapture”. The word “rapture” does not appear in the Scriptures. It is not even derived from the Greek language, but from a Latin word meaning “to catch up, to snatch away”. It also enshrines the idea of delight, or joy. However, it is implied in the words used to describe Jesus’ ascension—“received up into heaven”;¹⁷³ and “carried up into heaven”.¹⁷⁴ Paul was given the specific revelation that what would happen in these “last days” of the world would be ushered in “by the sounding of a trumpet” and the subsequent rapture to heaven of the Church of the Messiah in the words:

*“Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. **We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.** According to the Lord’s own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. **For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever**”.*¹⁷⁵ (my emphasis)

The Apostle Paul had given an abbreviated version of what was going to happen in his two statements regarding the twin mysteries of godliness and iniquity portrayed in the persons of Jesus and Satan:

(i) *“Beyond all question, **the mystery of godliness is great: He (Jesus) appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached***

¹⁷³ Mark 16: 19

¹⁷⁴ Luke 24: 51

¹⁷⁵ I Thessalonians 4: 13-17

among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory . . .”

(ii) “Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, **for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.** He opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshipped, and even sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God . . .”¹⁷⁶ (my emphasis)

Writing to the church at Thessalonika Paul informed them that:

“The **mystery of iniquity** (or “secret power of lawlessness”) is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth and destroy by the splendour of his coming. The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all we condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness.”¹⁷⁷

The event which would trigger these final events would be the rapture of the Church of the Messiah to heaven. The record of both **Old** and **New Covenants** is a history of the unfolding purposes of God, and the implacable hostility of Satan in individuals and nations, moving towards a great temporal and divine crisis of confrontation between the Messiah and the Anti-Messiah Adversary in the “last days” of the world when “the mystery of God is finished”,¹⁷⁸ just as he announced to his servants the prophets.

God’s awesome apostolic authority to Paul was not just to create perfect churches across the world, but also to mould perfect people. He said to the **Corinthians**: “. . . Since we have these promises . . . let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God . . .”: to the **Ephesians**: “. . . Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless..”; to the **Philippians** “. . . do everything without

¹⁷⁶ I Timothy 3:16

¹⁷⁷ II Thessalonians 2: 3

¹⁷⁸ Revelation 10: 7

complaining or arguing so that you may become blameless and pure . . . "; to the **Colossians**: " . . . we proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ . . . "; and to the **Thessalonians**: " . . . May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be holy and blameless in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones . . . ". **God's intention, and Paul's goal, was perfect people in perfect churches everywhere.**

This purging, or perfecting, must take place before the individual can enter the presence of a Holy God, for "*without holiness no man can see God*". If the purging, or perfecting, has not taken place in the life of the willing individual on earth it will take place at the time of judgment immediately following death:

Writing to the Romans, Paul declared:

"We will all stand before God's judgment seat . . . each of us will give an account of himself to God"¹⁷⁹

And, writing to the Corinthians, he said:

"We must all appear before the judgment seat of the Messiah, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad".¹⁸⁰

The word Paul used for "*judgment seat*" here is the Greek word *bema*, which was widely used, among other applications, to denote the place where the judge of athletic events awarded prizes to the competing athletes. It was not a judicial bench from which to assess whether some action was "good or bad" in moral terms; *but whether it was valuable or worthless, in terms of aspiration or accomplishment*—hence the differing values, "*gold, silver, costly stones, (like the "gold, silver and bronze" medals of the Olympics)*". The losing competitors in the same race receive only relatively worthless "*wood, hay or straw*" mentions as participants in the same race. It is at the future heavenly *justicium domesticum*, or "*family tribunal*" of judgement, that all believers will be called to account for words spoken and actions performed while on earth to establish their fitness as the "*inheritors of rule*" in heaven from those who "*had their rewards*" on earth, the

¹⁷⁹ Romans 14: 10, 12

¹⁸⁰ II Corinthians 5: 10

millennial ruling overcomers of the Church of the Messiah from the serving citizens of the kingdom of God.

After three missionary journeys over a period of some thirty years of almost constant travel, Paul was reaching the end of his active life. In his travels he had been subject to all sorts of difficulties:

“ . . . imprisoned, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times have I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own fellow-countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false brothers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressures of my concern for all the churches . . . ”

Then Paul turned once more to face Rome. His vision for the *Church of the Messiah* was drawing to a close. In Rome, that great enemy of Christ and the Church, Nero, was defying God in every blasphemous way conceivable; and so it was fitting that he, Paul, servant of the living God, should go there in defiance of the previous imperial order of exclusion following his first visit, to preach Christ once more in the city that to him was the seat of Satan.

Paul arrived in Rome for his second visit in the late summer of A.D.67. The news of Paul's arrival in Rome was communicated to the authorities by some of his rabbinical Jewish enemies as soon as he began preaching boldly in the synagogues, and wherever the Christians were gathered in their secret meeting-places. Paul was immediately arrested, and this time he was thrown into prison for violation of the previously imposed imperial order. Unlike that occasion he had no favoured treatment, or powerful friends in high places. Any who attempted to visit him were suspect, and subject to immediate arrest, imprisonment and gruesome death, so he was kept isolated and alone except for a single visitor to bring him his daily food.

He wrote a *Second Letter to Timothy*, which he thought was likely to be his last. Timothy had been the close companion of many travels, the inheritor of his vision. Now, bereft of all his friends, and facing certain death, his last thoughts were with the young man who had been like a son to him. He was aware that although death was near, it could be delayed some time, so he sent for Timothy to come and join him if at all possible. He wrote:

“Do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of His own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day. What you have heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us . . .”

Paul was kept waiting for the Emperor Nero’s decision. The confrontation never took place as Nero left it to a panel of jurors and their cursory decision was death by beheading. Paul was content. He recalled his words to the believers in Philippi as he sought to encourage them when he was forced to leave them: *“I hope . . . I will have sufficient courage so that now as always the Messiah will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is the Messiah and to die is gain.”*

As he walked the three miles to the burial ground he recalled his first arrival and the joyful welcome from the hundreds of fellow believers and his sense of fulfilment at reaching the goal of all his endeavours at last. It had not been the end of his journey then, and it was not the end of his journey now. He recalled his final words to Timothy:

“As for me, the hour has come for me to be sacrificed; the time has come for me to leave this life. I have done my best in the race, I have run the full distance, and I have kept the faith. And now there is waiting for me the crown of victory awarded for a righteous life, the prize which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that Day—and not only to me but to all those who wait eagerly for him to appear.”

He nodded to the soldiers that he was ready, kneeled down at their direction, bowed his head and closed his eyes in prayer. God’s plan of salvation for the world was completed.

EPILOGUE

*“Wait! Church of God! in quiet contemplation
Before His throne, where grace and truth hold sway.
Lift up your hearts in holy adoration,
As now to Him with heart and mind we pray.
Wait! Church of God! It is thy preparation
On earth to strive in faith to speed His day.*

*Speak! Church of God! His Gospel clear proclaiming
To hearts in grief and broken by the wrong.
Hold high His Cross, God’s grace fore’er retaining,
God’s answer true, to each and to the throng.
Speak! Church of God! nor cease thy witness, claiming
Each soul for Christ, till all to God belong.*

*Go! Church of God! thy Charter of Salvation
Take to all nations torn by war and hate.
Thy mission high is to all God’s creation
Until God’s peace shall rule each land and state.
Go! Church of God! and by thy consecration
God’s blessing bring, and world-wide love create.”*

George Arthur Clarke

The first chapter of George’s book

God’s Secret Truth

will be available on this site on the 1st October 2011