The Concept of the Church in Christianity

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Abstract: Generally the word church means the community which who believe Jesus Christ as their personal savior and Lord and coming together a place for worship and listen word of God. Thus the group of people or community called as a Church or body of Christ because the church is belongs to God. The purpose is to explain about the meaning and definition of the term ‘church’ and how to formation of early Christian community or primitive community. Also it gives the characteristics and functions of the Christian Church. Moreover this paper explains the concept of the church in synaptic gospels, Acts of the Apostles, epistle of Paul and the epistles of John. In addition it gives the significance of the Christian Church.

1. Introduction

This paper deals with “the concept of the church in Christianity.” I discussed the root meaning of the word the church and the formation of the church in times of Jesus and in the early community period. Also I discussed the divisions, the major church groups or traditions. Indeed I explained the factions of the Christian church as well as its role in the present society.

2. Meaning and definition of the term ‘Church’

The root word of ‘church’ in Greek language is according to Macregor Geddes says, “The Greek word ekklesia (Latin ecclesia) was used in ordinary secular discourse of any assembly, chiefly of an assembly of self-governing citizens. It is used in the Septuagint of the assembly of Israel, i.e., the people of the covenant contradistinguished from foreigners. It is first used in a Christian sense in Acts 5.11.

The term seems plainly to have been used at a very early date by Greek-speaking Christians. What the early Christians thought was the nature of the Church is less certain, but there is no doubt that the concept of a carefully organized and structured institution was developed soon and that the unity of the Church was accounted important. The Church moreover, was soon seen to embrace both the faithful on earth and those who had gone beyond the veil of death and were conjoined in Christ with the visible Church.”

“Originally the term ekklesia was a Political one, denoting an assembly of, free people who are qualified to vote (Acts19:39) or, more generally, a public assembly (vv. 32,41). The specifically Christian use, however, is not fully in line with this meaning. The attempt to explain the word etymologically from the part ek (out from) as indicating the adhering of those who are called out (from the world) would also be misleading. Rather, its background can be found in the OT and apocalyptic Judaism.

When the private Christian community in Jerusalem called itself the ekklesia tou theou (church of God; cf. Gal. 1:13), it was probably translating the Aramic gehal el (1QM 4:10; IQSa 1:25). If so, it reflects the community’s awareness of being the company of those called as the center and core of the end-time people of God. The simple ekklesia is always implicitly defined by the genitive phrase “of God” (e.g., see I Cor. 14:4; Phil. 3:6) and can be taken as a shortened form of the full ekklesia tou theou.”

In generally the church means an assembly of people, congregation or any group of people gather together to worship God. The Encyclopedia Britannica says “The Christian view of the church was influenced by the Old Testament concept of the tahal which means the elected people of God of the end time, and by the expectation of the coming of Messiah in Judaism. The Greek secular word ekklesia, the term used for the church, means an assembly of people coming together for a meeting.”

According to Bhagat Singh Hira, “The word ‘church’ is etymologically derived from the Greek word “kyriankon” which means the Lord’s house.”

According to Geoggery Parrinder “the English word comes from the Greet Kuriakon, belonging to the Lord”, strictly, the church is a place for the worship of Christ as Lord”

3. Jesus and the Early Church or Primitive Community

We discuss about the concept of the church in the Primitive community or Early Church. (Acts 2:44-47) “These verses describe the Christian community in the days after the Pentecost speech. The believers displayed a generous attitude toward possessions. But there was no blind rush to rid ‘themselves of all their possessions’, as if personal property was in itself evil, instead they give as there was the need. The believers’ financial problems were not automatically and miraculously
solved by virtue of becoming Christians. Even in this ‘golden age’ of the church, there were needy people (although because of the sharing they didn’t generally remain needy; 4:34, 6:1).”

“The first Christians were the disciple of Christ, the simple fishermen that he wanted to make “fishers of men”. Their first “catch” according to the Acts of the Apostle, was the Jewish community that had heard him preach, had seen the wonders he performed, and saw in him a great prophet and then more than a prophet. The early origins of the Christian Church are hardly distinguishable from a special Jewish community. Many Jews saw Christ as a special rabbi, a special teacher. Only gradually did they come to believe that Christ was more than just a teacher and that he had a larger mission.

At first, they continued to perform all the Jewish rituals on the Sabbath. Little by little they reenacted the Passover meal with it new meaning, realizing that Christ had, by his death and resurrection, given it a new reality. After the fuller meaning of Christ life and teaching dawned on them historians tells us, they gradually began to separate from the temple and synagogue. It is the beginning stage of this development that chronicled in the Gospel of Matthew, the actual separation took longer and varied different communities as Jewish communities, and Christian communities with Jewish background, left Palestine and moved into the Greek world.”

“A decisive factor in the self awareness of the Jerusalem community was the conviction that God had introduced the end time with resurrection of Jesus from the dead and that the time had thus come to complete the gathering of Israel, which had begun. The leading disciples, especially Peter with Twelve, settled in Jerusalem shortly after the last appearance in Galilee and there began public witness (see the story of Pentecost in Acts 1-2). This involved an ecclesiological program. Jerusalem was the center of Israel, the place of salvation. It was there that the assembling of God’s people was too expected. This city was the goal of the end-time pilgrimage of the nations. After Easter there doubtless were groups of disciples in Galilee, but the true rise of the church was in Jerusalem.”

“Most important were the experiences of the working of the Spirit in the church (Holy Spirit), which were viewed as the fulfillment of OT promises for the time of salvation (Acts 2:16-21; Gal. 3:25; 4:6-7 promise and fulfillment) and as a manifestation of the lordship of the exalted Christ. Incorporation into Christ’s sphere of lordship and subjection to the power of the Spirit were by baptism into the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38). The Spirit-effected eschatological holiness and purity of the church found visible expression in its rigorist ethos. Disciplinary measures were seen as acts in which the Holy Spirit himself defended his lordship against those who transgressed the norms (Acts5:1-11; 1Cor.5:1-5) Church Discipline.”

4. Characteristics of the Christian Church

In orthodox ecclesiology, in accordance with a concept that is basic to the biblical and patristic tradition, the church is defined by nature and essence as the body of Christ in history that takes shape in time and space and is the basis of the kingdom of God. All the other descriptions that appear in Holy Scripture and the patristic tradition are to be understood only in relation to the ecclesiology of the body of Christ as an authentic description of the Church. From this angle the Orthodox Church underscores the perichoresis (i.e. interconnectedness) of the mystery of Christ and the mystery of the church.

“The Christian view of the church was influenced by the Old Testament concept of the qahal, the elected people of God of the end time, and by the expectation of the coming Messiah in Judaism. The Greek secular word ekkesia, the term used for the church, means an assembly of people coming together for a meeting.”

In Christianity the concept received a new meaning through it relationship to the person of Jesus Christ as the messianic inaugurator of the Kingdom of God: (1) with Christ the elected community of the end time has appeared; (2) the church is the eschatological gift of the Holy Spirit, which already flows through the life of the church (Acts2:33;( 3) the community of the end time consists of those who believe in Jesus Christ—both Jews and pagans; the idea of the elected covenant people (i.e., the Jews) is transferred to the “new Israel” (4) the church forms the body of its Lord; and (5) the church consists of “living stones,” from which its house is “built” (1 Peter 2:5).

Jesus himself created no firm organization for his community; the expectation of the immediate imminence of the Kingdom of God provided no occasion for this. Nevertheless, the selection of Apostles within this circle pointed to the beginnings of a structure of his community. After the community was constituted anew because of the impressions made by the appearances of the Resurrected One, the succession of his appearance apparently effected a certain gradation within the community.

The constitution of the body of Christ finds fulfillment in the history of salvation in the unity of believers in the body of the church. By this unity they are fellow members (symphoi) of the body of Christ. They are those who gave grown up together with Christ (symplekti). By divine grace, they thus participate in the life of Christ.

This incorporation takes place through the work of the Holy Spirit in baptism, anointing, the Holy-
Eucharist, and the other sacraments (mysteries). On the other hand, the church is signified in the sacraments; on the other hand, the sacraments of the church dispense divine grace to believers. Thus the church is “the fullness of him who fills all in all.” (Eph 1:25).

The Christ centric ontology of the church is the characteristic feature of Orthodox ecclesiology. On the basis of this criterion orthodox theology evaluates even the qualities specified in the Niceno Constantinopolitan Creed, which speaks of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

The church of Christ is one, for the body that the Logos took in the incarnation is one, and so is the Head of this body, Jesus Christ (Eph 4:4-7). The source of this unity of the church is the unity of the Holy Trinity in the whole mystery of the incarnation, by which the unity of the one body of Christ is achieved. This view rules out the rise of the popularity of ecclesial bodies. In this spirit the Holy Eucharist is celebrated in the Orthodox Church as a realization and revelation of this unity of the life of the church.

The church defines its relation to church communions outside, itself as one of either communion (koinonia) or necommunio (akoinonia).

This Christ centric unity of the body of the church, by which believers are related in the Holy Spirit to one another and to their divine Head, also defines the holiness of the church, for the incarnate divine Son and Logos “loved the church and gave himself up for hr, in order t make her holy,” so that the church might be “holy and without blemish” (Eph 5:21–27). By nature, the church is thus holy in Christ, for it represents the perfect and absolute holiness of the Holy Trinity. The presence of sinful members (-Sin) within the church does not affect its natural holiness, for the task of the church is the equipping of the saints. The “holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14) is the work of the Holy Spirit, who knits the body together, quickens it, and gives divine grace to believers in order to up build them in the church as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9).

The unity and holiness of the church also define its catholicity (Catholic, Catholicity), which may be seen wherever there is an authentic realization of the one body of Christ—that is, wherever the one, constant Eucharist is celebrated. This localization of catholicity does not rule out the catholicity of God’s worldwide church; rather, it confirms it by the criterion of the—identity of the experience that is lived out in Christ. The universality of the church is a dynamic component of its catholicity, but it is not the decisive factor, for the catholicity of the local church is fully experienced in its ongoing Eucharist. As the whole Christ is offered at every alter table at a Eucharistic assembly and is likewise offered the worldwide church, so the catholicity of the local church is manifested in the worldwide church, and vice versa. Hence the relation between catholicity and universality is question of the identity of all and not a cumulative relation of parts to the whole, for the whole is Christ.

The unity, holiness, and catholicity of the church are confirmed by the criterion apostolate, that is, by the continuous and authentic life and experience of the apostolic—tradition, according to the epigrammatic formulation of Vincent of Lerins (d. before 450): “that which has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” In the Orthodox tradition the mind of the church is expressed and confirmed through its—self-understanding in local or ecumenical—councils.

5. Great Schism

There was Great Schism “Hence the gravity with which the great schism between East and West in 1054 was regarded, with each side claim in to be the Church and holding the other to be in schism.” It also called East-west schism and that event that participated the final separation between Eastern and Western churches.

6. The Major Church groups (Traditions)

There are major Church traditions or groups in Christianity. They are: Roman Catholic, Protestants and the Orthodox Church. Moreover they are several demotions existed within the Protestants church tradition.

7. Functions of the Church

This paper had brief note of the functions. “The term church multidimensional it embraces different element, the relations between them, and variation based on time and place. An increase in these elements and their variety, relations, and changes cannot be ruled out. Hence a connectional definition must always be dependent on the social reality. It is possible only within the theory of the church that focuses on the church’s present form or on a descriptive listing of specific features (regional spread, form of organization, etc.)

The structural wealth of the church, which indicates its status in the relation between God and humankind, is the contest of the saving message of Jesus and is that to which the church owes its distinctiveness and ongoing existence. It reflects the complexity of our human world. But this advantage is subject to a certain restriction. Whereas God is ultimately beyond our human perfection (the term “God” being definable only in the reflection of believers), the church is open to observation as the social locus and agent of the
message of salvation. Because it is so manifold, however, the structural wealth of the church, like the complexity of our unavoidable fact means that ecclesiology, which for maculates the church’s self-understanding, can draw on only a partial view of the church. No single church, then, on the basis of its orthodoxy, can lay claim to church the ancient axiom of Cyprian that outside the church there is no salvation. It must always acknowledge that other ways of salvation are possible

The concrete form of the church, including its piety, worship, spiritual communication, organizational structure, and collective functions, will not continue unchanged. This contingency is not due merely to the contextual conditions in which individual churches developed. It is unavoidable also for fundamental theological reasons. The complexity of persons and relations (God as Father and Creator, Son of God and Son of Man, Holy Spirit; Trinity), which is viewed as the divine economy in the three article of the creeds, and which is attested as the reality of faith, is as such inaccessible to us. Hence manifesting in the practice of faith call for reductions that makes it selectively accessible. This takes place in images, fantasies, symbols, stories, myths, interpretive models, doxologies, practices, and instructions against the background of secular experience, as we see clearly enough in the history of the church and its dogmas or doctrinal statements.

CONCLUSION

I would give some opinion or concluding words on the concept of the Church in Christianity. Generally the term ‘church’ derived from Greek word which means assembly or group of people. In Christianity the word ‘church’ means that are believe in Jesus Christ as their savior and Lord come together as a assembly or community or a group to worship. Moreover they (believers) get to together not only spiritual matters also social work in order to help the needy. The Christian church has a very important role in the society like helping the poor in education and providing good health through medicine. Moreover the Christian church is preaching and teaching of life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

References


[9] Ibid. 482
[9] Ibid. p. 121.