"THE CHURCH" IN HISTORY

H. GORDON VAN SICKLE

A basic problem in dealing with the subject of this paper is the very word "Church" itself. The modern use of the term carries with it two thousand years of connotations both conceptual and institutional. No amount of analysis or reduction to its components can properly or adequately account for the meaning its has accumulated, in terms either of its original etymology, or its application to a set of ideas and concommitant institutional embodiments at any given moment or era in its history.

The word "Church" is an Anglo-Saxon derivative from the Greek *kuriakon* meaning "That which belongs to the Lord." The very ambiguity of this expression itself may account for its usage: it is a description rather than a definition. The Greek original was not used in the New Testament – where we use "church" the New Testament used "ecclesia" – a much more limited word whose inadequacy forced the writers to the use of more than a hundred cognate expressions in order to indicate what was implied by *"ecclesia,"* but could not be conveyed by it. It was not *"ecclesia"* which gave meaning to these expressions, but rather the reverse – "ecclesia" came to mean all that these expressions meant to convey – but it cannot be held that "ecclesia" either defined or organized the ideas conveyed in the expressions. Thus the new fad in theological circles to return to the word *"ecclesia"* when speaking of the church is a poor move in the wrong direction.

Paul Minear in the article on "The Idea of the Church," in the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible,* attempts to subsume these many cognate expressions under ten headings but admits that "No list can exhaust the vivid imaginative powers of the New Testament writers or do justice to the fluidity, vitality, and subtlety of their conceptions." Further, the idea of the church is nowhere exhausted or summed up, either in the New Testament images, forms, activities, or vocabulary, or in the creeds, liturgies, usages, or institutional forms which later developed, in succeeding ages. Thus, in our usage of the term today we are but reflecting the fluidity inherent in the term. Minear summarizes the "New Testament Idea of the Church" as "not so much a technical doctrine as a gallery of pictures. In this shifting panorama

EDITOR'S NOTE: Among the papers of the late PROFESSOR H. GORDON VAN SICKLE was this. written in 1965. The subtitle he gave it was: "An Historical Description of the Evolutions of the Ideas and Forms to which the Term 'Church' Has Been Applied." He read the paper at a Faculty Colloquium in May, 1965.

of thought we can detect recurrent themes which exhibit their vitality in the variety and flexibility with which they are voiced," and one might add "institutionalized"!

It might not be inappropriate at this juncture to point out that the adjective "Christian" when applied to church is not really a descriptive term when used by Christians, but rather, is a noun serving as a definition of the term Church, for here is made explicit that "That which belongs to the Lord" belongs to Christ. We make this consciously or unconsciously explicit by our usuage of the word church; especially is this noticeable when speaking of the systems of ideas and institutions relating to other religions – for we scarcely ever refer to them as "churches" – we speak of Judaism – seldom, if ever do we speak of the "Jewish Church," etc. By so doing we not only express the idea that the church is Christ's, but that Christ is the exclusive property of the "the Church" – thus religions without Christ cannot have a "Church." The germ of exclusiveness is inherent in this expression and the concept church evolves into "The Church," and is further narrowed to mean the "True Church," which by interpretation means that no other system of ideas or institutions than our own is "a" church. It is noticeable that the New Testament usages of the "religious associations" that give meaning to the word *ecclesia* are never applied to non-Christian entities; nor is it ever necessary to distinguish between "The Church" and the "True Church," since they are one in the minds of the writers.

Only in post-New Testament times did rival systems of thought and organization within Christianity make it necessary to speak of the "True" Church, and this not in recognition that other churches might exist, but rather to deny them the right to call themselves a church at all! Christ is not only "not divided," it is also implied that no body or group may share in Him except they be in His Church. Thus the wondrous, if tortuous labors of the New Testament exegetes to prove to the Jews by the Old Testament, that the Jews were included in the new covenant, as seen in Paul's writing and especially in the psuedo-Pauline Hebrews, during New Testament times is abandoned and rejected by the time of Nicea – where Jews are expressly anathamatized and are denied having any share in Him or his Church. By the time of Theodosius, Jews are put under the imperial ban (a rival church), not as heretics, but as a form of paganism. They knew Him not – and His Church knew them not.

We spoke above of the wondrous concatenation of ideas, images, association, and "pictures" which attempt to express, but cannot define the meanings of the word church. These expressions run the gamut from "the New Israel," "the new covvenant," "the elect," "the slaves or

Servants of Christ," "The Sons of God," "the sanctified," "the justified," "the righteous," "the brethern," "the community of saints," through such diverse analogies as the "household of God," the "sheep and flock" of God, "the vineyard," to such esoteric images as "The Body of Christ" and "The Bride of Christ!" Neither any one of them nor all of them together, can be said ever to have expressed the "fullness" of the concept "church." The church as the "Body of Christ" is a favorite expression of our time and though it may have much to recommend it as an acceptable analogy, it is too much to say that a breakdown of the analogy into its separate components would "sum up" if not define all that has been imputed to that word.

Thus the meaning of the word church in an historical survey must be related to those expressions or associations having demonstrable dynamic impact on human society within a frame of space-time dimensions. Thus Church may be made far more concrete as referring to certain concepts, acts, usages, and institutions, say in the era of Constantine or Henry VIII, than it is in Acts, precisely because concepts take specific creedal forms, acts follow from concrete requirements laid upon the members of the Church, usages have been crystallized by canon, custom, and tradition, and institutions have evolved as physical agents in implementing and embodying in material forms the dynamics inherent in the "ideas" of the church. It is plain that there has been a selective process taking place, and choices having been made among the diverse elements entering it the concept "church," the current institutional forms were derived from the dynamics of these chosen ideas.

It might also be said that the institution itself then becomes the major factor in determining what ideas of the church were to be promulgated, fostered and maintained, and what were to be allowed to vegetate, atrophy, or to be out-right rejected.

It is a commonplace to recall that the Roman church had never denied "justification by faith," it had merely let this doctrine vegetate while emphasizing a correlary doctrine of "works," and a whole interrelated structure of beliefs, acts, polity, usages, and physical plants had emerged to make concrete the dynamics of this emphasis – and it was to preserve that structure, more than to either deny "justification" or dogmatize "works," that the Late Renaissance Church bent its efforts to silence Luther. Luther in turn was forced to find out, step by step, that he had to overthrow the structure in order to realize the dynamics inherent in the doctrine of "justification." And, just as surely, he had to erect a new structure on the ruins of the old and he "cannibalized" the old structure whenever he thought he saw a likely looking piece of material! Just as non-Lutherans are fond of pointing out

just how far short Luther was in creating a wholly new or different Church than that which he destroyed, so his critics have hastened to select their own ideas of the Church ranging all the way from personalizing "justification" through pietism, to such radical re-interpretations of the priest-hood of believers as is found in Jehovah's Witnesses.

Similarly the idea of "election" is clear cut in Augustine, Luther, and Calvin – but its potentialities were only stated, not emphasized or employed by the first two, whereas Calvin made it central to his concept of the church, and built a dynamic institution on that foundation. Thus in many ages the stone rejected (through neglect) by the builders becomes a cornerstone of the edifice known as the Church in a specific space-time framework.

The analogy of the stone may be used to extend what was said above about Luther's shattering of the Roman institution of the church. It may become stone thrown against the feet of clay of the 'false' church to bring that structure down, thus there is judgment as well as salvation in the stone. This thought is implicit in the later view of the Christians toward not only the Jews but also the "false" institutions of the gnostics and heretics.

The historic evolution of the church points to at least two characteristics which need to be mentioned here. First the church always has, in every epoch, been in interaction between faith and act, creed and deed, belief and institution, and never has it been possible to separate the two into primary and secondary aspects, in a meaningful way. Neither Platonic or Scholastic distinctions between idea and form, spirit and matter, creed and deed, etc. can separate these components to give us either a view of the Church as a "spiritual," i.e. non-objective entity (un-historical, non-historical, or a "beyond history" church and "invisible" church or "triumphant" eternal "idea" in the mind of God), or to reduce it to the sum of its material "physical" manifestations, of buildings, dogmas, rituals, clergy, members, and ceaseless, if not always relevant, activities.

The continual "renewal" or "reform" of the church, which has been sporadically a feature of her history from the beginning, and which was by no means confined to the so-called "Reformation period," is proof enough that the material structure of the church is never the "efficient" or "final" "cause" of the nature of the church. However much it may build Babylonian walls around itself, history may describe the nature of the church in a given era, but cannot attribute to the objective character of the institution the total nature of the institution, since it is not now what it once was, nor was it then what it had been or would be. "Something there is" which refuses to be bound by the existing institutional arrangements and which periodically alters or

shatters the institution and gives it a new form or direction, or both. This "something," in the history of the Church, has usually been called The Holy Spirit. Its actions may be historically discerned if not defined.

Secondly, it has been characteristic that the evolution of the church as idea and institution has not been either a linear development, where one step led to another, nor has it been a clear cut example of the "idea of progress" in action. The church of the "good news" of the third decade in Jerusalem is hardly the same church as the Robber Council of Ephesus reveals, and one shares with Harnack the nostalgia for a church built upon a proclamation of "good news," rather than upon a set of creeds hammered out in the fires of controversy and uncharitable anathemas. Still, with Harnack, one also concedes that creed making was a necessary concommitant of the increasing intellectualism of the church, and hence even Ephesus meant progress in the explication of ideas. Tenth Century Christendom in Europe is a traversty of the idea of either linear succession or progress. Peter, Paul, Eusebius, Augustine, and even Gregory the Great would have been hard-put to identify what they would have seen there as the Church as they had known it. The only "progress" visible would have been in the extension of the institution to new peoples and new areas, as a partial offset to the decline of the institution in all of its visible forms, including the losses suffered to the rise of Islam.

Another way of putting this thought is to indicate, as an example, the non-linear development of the withholding of the cup from the laity, or the inclusion of temporal rulers into the category of saint — once reserved for those who by the manner of their lives and death demonstrated the quality of their commitment to Christ, now conferred on kings who embraced, or merely protected the Church, such as Constantine or St. Olaff, and who in their conduct as men and kings demonstrated a total non-commitment to saintly conduct! Eventually sainthood was conferred on national heroes for non-Church centered activities, such as Joan of Arc or on national myths such as St. George!

An historian would readily concede that the expressions and images used in the New Testament to give meanings and dimensions to the Christian usuage of the word *ecclesia* grew out of their own passionate attachment to this community, and their attempts at self-analysis of the nature of that community. It is the task of the theologian to attempt to construct a coherent theological basis for that community; the historian's task is to attempt to delineate the growth and development of the 'visible' framework of the community and to note the theological developments only as they are made concrete within that framework, through creeds, doctrines, policy, etc. An examination

of the developing community in post-New Testament times reveals changing theological emphases that accompany changes in the institution of the church – but it is a moot question as to whether the institutional changes, in many instances, are 'cause' or 'effect' where developments in theology are concerned. To cite an example of this we need only point to the sudden emergence of the bishop as the 'without which not' of the early second century Church, as Ignatius flatly insists, but we have no concomitant companion theological explanation on which Ignatius bases his view of the role and function of the bishop. As Lietzmann points out "In Ignatius, we find the completed monarchical episcopate – Ignatius built up no theory in regard to this institution, or its accordance with scripture; rather he starts from it, and was simply concerned with continually pressing home the out and out divine authority of the bishop as the spiritual monarch of the individual church. – In so doing he became the classical authority for the Roman Catholic doctrine of bishops."

Several things in the history of the church are brought to our attention here. First, it is plain that in just a few years after the New Testament age the nebulous figure of the New Testament "bishop" has emerged as a concrete locus of authority in the local church and is declared by Bishop Ignatius to be a divine institution "the bishop must be looked up to as the Lord Himself!" He incorporates within himself both the unity of the church and the source of authoritative doctrine. "Nothing can take place without Him," asserts Ignatius. We cannot trace this development – by Ignatius' time it is simply there! We can say that this is no longer the New Testament church. Only specious reasoning can assert (where it cannot prove!), that the emergence of such bishops is a logical extension of New Testament theology relating to the succession of Christ's powers and authority passing down through the leadership of the church to the bishops (who were already present in name while Apostles were still present in the church). Neither can we infer that the New Testament accounts of the offices and officers in the church already point to the bishop as the emerging apex of a developing hierarchy. What can be seen in Ignatian and post-Ignatian times are the forces which make the Ignatian "idea" of the bishops an institutional reality. "Creed-making," already present in Ignatius times (Lietzmann), is meaningless if there are not "authorities" to enforce observance and acceptance of the creeds (and as yet neither Popes nor councils nor Christian kings had emerged as authorities or enforcers); internal schism and heresies were already present in Ignatius' times and he had a clearcut view of the unity of the church as a necessary embodiment of the unity of the "Redeemed in Christ" (the Church) and hence was driven to exercise

his office of bishop in defending the unity of the church against some ill-identified groups whom he accused of "false opinions" (ognostics?). Again, external pressures were present in his time (he died a martyr), and a strong head of the local congregation was a necessity to preserve its very existence as a visible community.

Perhaps another point needs to be made: the very nature of social institutions in the form of communities calls for leadership and authority. Such leaders were bound to be forced to the apex of the structure. Perhaps it is just an accident that "bishop" emerged as the title. There were still "apostles" in the church - though not of the original eyewitness NT type - why not this title - though the functions would still be those observable in Ignatius' bishops. We cannot prove that these things account for the rise of bishops like Ignatius; we can demonstrate the utility of the office in meeting the needs of the church, and that these same forces continued to make necessary the exercise of it for another two centuries. It is plain that a necessity had become a tradition by Constantine's time, even if the theological foundations, in our own time, are still not quite "jelled" into a closed dogmatic structure as the recent sessions of Vatican II reveal.

It is interesting to recall that Luther let the title "bishop" lapse in his arrangement of the church in Saxony, but not the functions. In practice he absorbed some of them into himself (he became the theological authority), while the prince was specifically called upon by Luther to exercise the role of bishop in matters of polity and in maintaining the "unity" of the church within his realm! Even so, he does not seem to have quarreled with the Scandinavian decision to adopt his theology while maintaining the Roman polity (without a Pope, to be sure). This is a very curious example of perhaps the non-relevance of theology to the office. Tradition, utility, or perhaps sheer indifferenc and lethargy — certainly not "Lutheranism" — decided the issue there.

Another aspect of the historical evolution of the church in post-New Testament times is evident in the Ignatian period. Whatever part the theological "images" drawn from the Old Testament, or the then current norms of Judaism, played, in developing the concepts and polity of the church in the New Testament era, these certainly played lesser roles, or were subject to alteration and "re-interpretations" in the second and succeeding centuries by virtue of the fact that the church was now largely expagan Gentile and not ex-Jewish, or, ex-"God-fearers" in membership. The symbols and ideas of Old Testament origin, as well as usuages, polity, etc., of first century Judaism were declining elements in determining the shape and direction of the church, if for no other reason than that the second century member-

ship no longer drew on a common Jewish shared experience. Increasingly hostile relations between Jews and Christians help to explain the rise of Marcionism with its rejection of the Old Testament and its Jewish God. And though the church beat Marcionism back and stoutly defended the Old Testament as Christian scripture, it was plain that Marcion represented the new element whose view of the church was not rooted in Judaism. It is equally plain that even the orthodox church was less rooted in it than it thought itself to be. In passing into the Gentile world it had increasingly been re-interpreting itself in Gentile forms of thought and adopting non-Jewish forms of polity. Tradition and practice were moving farther apart. The ease with which the whole church moved from a despised and ill-understood and almost subterranean community as it was in the year 300, to a pillar of Roman society in Constantine's time, to "the" pillar of society in Theodosian times (395), is far more attributable to its thorough Hellenization in theology, usages, and forms than it is to a sudden over-powering release of the Holy Spirit on the Roman empire after the pattern of Pentecost. It was less foreign (Jewish) to a world which had suddenly freed it from bondage only to embrace it as a norm in religion, than was Paul's theology and polity in the synagogues of his own time. An Aramaic speaking, Jewish oriented, localized community, had – in less than three-hundred years – become a Greek speaking, Hellenistically integrated, ecumenical community – and no one seemed too surprised!

Within another hundred years the church would be penetrating a new kind of pagan world as the one Roman institution which the pagans found acceptable and worthy of preservation. It ought to be noted here that it penetrated only so far in the north and west as those areas where Celts and Teutons had been partially Romanized before they became Christianized. Perhaps it is not to much to say that the Church here was a function of Roman civilization. The other side of the coin is revealed in the subsequent Romanization of the pagans through the medium of the church. It might also be pointed out that the high level of theology as developed in the declining days of Rome cannot explain the success of the church in the pagan North-West. It can be explained in terms of the organization of the institution. When one reads Gregory of Tours, he is astounded both by the poverty of learning in general and theology in particular – and the relatively high quality of the institutional efficiency of the Church.

Another Ignatian element may be examined to illustrate what continually happened in the development of the Church. Ignatius had insisted that the Eucharist could not be administered without the bishop. Does this mean that the efficacy of the sacrament is derived

not from tradition or even because it is, or represents, the physical embodiment of Christ in His Church, but is derived from the Bishop himself? Ignatius does not say. In either case how then shall we account for the fact that both before and after his time presbyters did administer the sacrament in the absence of a bishop? Did the later practice recall that once presbyters and bishops had been the same in functions and powers in the early church? Or did the ordination of presbyters by bishops convey this power in a later time; or did necessity dictate that this function of the bishop be surrendered to the presbyters because it would have been a physical impossibility for the bishop to be present in every church in his diocese? The doctrine on sacrament of orders does not attempt to explain this: it merely starts from the presbyter who does offer the Eurcharist and proceeds to interpret the act and fact as a divinely ordained and empowered "quality" belonging to the office of presbyter, a "quality" or power, as later developed in the theology of Orders, to explain how it was that a presbyter had powers that even angels did not enjoy. Historians have been baffled to account for the rise of the diaconate as a stepping-stone to the presbyteriate. The church was baffled also since on one occasion a synod in North Africa declared against the practice of elevating deacons directly to the office of bishop.

Perhaps here we get a clue to the functional relationships between the two that cannot be explained theologically. It is known that in organizing the diocese deacons were important cogs in the institutional machinery. There is evidence that their fiscal duties were so important that they – rather than presbyters – seemed to make up some bishop's "cabinets," and a financial genius would certainly prove to be an asset in the bishop's chair! The case of Ambrose raises even more interesting problems. He, by popular demand, was chosen bishop in Milan while only a catechist! True, he was hurried through the office of presbyter in a scandalously short time before being allowed to act as bishop – thus the Church's growing sense of a theology of Orders was preserved intact – even though it is obvious that the people of Milan saw in him a man who was already endowed with the qualities of a bishop, qualities not derived from ordination!

Working backward from the present to the past, we see an even more baffling example of the meaning and efficacy of the sacraments as related to any theory of Orders. The most extreme example is that of baptism. It was practiced in the early church – by whom we do not know (as an exclusive function). By Peter Lombard's time the sacrament had been made the only way whereby infants could be assured of a place in heaven and it was a necessary step for all Christians; all of the rest of the sacraments could not make up for the absence of this

one. But whence was its efficacy derived – since any layman could completely administer this sacrament by the use of water and pronouncement of the Triune formula? No theory of orders, apostolic succession etc. can account for this – it is *ex opere operato.* It efficacy is not derived from the one who administers it. Thus this essential sacrament is not properly a function of the priestly office at all! Yet a human being without it is neither a member of the church visible nor invisible. This reduces the Ignatian and post-Ignatian structure of the priesthood to a house built upon sand. In all ages the church was considered the sole ark of and membership in it, conferred by baptism, even the baptism of the martyr in his own blood, was the *sine qua non* of salvation. Was the act of conferring it left to all members in it as a kind of acknowledgement that "war is too important to be left to the generals" sort of thing?

To turn to another facet of our story of the relation of the "images" to the institutional arrangements of an understanding of what the church was in a given era, we might turn to Montanism and Donatism. Montanus was aware that the image of the church as the community of the "elect" or the "righteous" was no longer true in his time. He tried to recall the institution to such norms and was declared a heretic for his pains. The orthodox church was now willing to admit that it harbored both "wheat and tares." (Some modern catholic spokesmen rather boastfully call their church "the church of great sinners" perhaps as much to point out her saving powers as to admit that it is not a community of the righteous.) Monasticism arose partly out of an aversion to such a motley membership and to preserve, in their own community, a relationship between "righteousness" and the community of the saved. Donatism, facing the problem of the "lapsed" insisted on a community of clergy and members free from this taint– only to find themselves classed as schismatic and eventually as heretical. The "saving" function of the orthodox church was now stressed, not the "community of saints." We might note at this point that Cyprian in the Novation quarrel was extremely harsh on the "lapsed," denying the validity of their own baptism and of the baptisms administered by them, thus placing them clearly outside the Church. But within three-quarters of a century, the Church had reversed his decisions and declared the indelible nature of baptism and strictly forbade "re-baptism" – thus in effect making by ex-post-facto doctrines a heretic out of Cyprian, whose careful and insistent elaboration of the twin theses that "there is no salvation outside the church" on the one hand, and his insistence that the "unity" of the church was centered in the Bishop through apostolic succession and that "separation from the bishop was separation from the church" on

the other, became one of the cornerstones of the Roman Catholic view of the nature of the church and the role of the bishop. Plainly the saving grace and the essential unity of the church was here held to be mediated through the bishop – in this sense the Bishop was the church.

The papacy as an institutional and theological development, derived more from its setting than from an institutioal application of a concept of the church, will now be dealt with briefly. It is a commonplace to recall that Rome made the papacy. Ireneaus pointed to the church at Rome as the nearest seat, from his residence at Lyons, of a church with apostolic connections. Neither he, nor Cyprian earlier, nor the ecumenical councils later, ever accorded the Bishop of Rome the primacy of the visible church. The power vacuum in the West after the capitol was moved to Constantinople, the Arian Vandal and Arian Visigothic invasions of the Fifth century left Spain and North Africa "vacant" so to speak in any defense of their bishop's claim to be peers of Rome, claims which in the third century they had made in both word and deed. The development of the Petrine theory of primacy was not so much the progression of an idea or claim as it was a justification for a condition after 330 A.D. and especially after 410. They were prototypes of the medieval papcy even when they were the sole sources and supporters of such a tradition. They were popes in deed, of necessity. No such vacuum developed in the East for a thousand years after Leo I. Nevertheless they had their own version of a papacy and exercised it, even against the papacy of the West. Constantine made himself Caesaropope over the whole empire – but did not exercise all the potentialities of that role as Justinian did. He waged spiritual as well as political warfare against all elements which would rend or divide the "body of Christ" – namely the Roman Empire, and invaded Italy as much as Pope as Emperor. He kept the Roman Pope as his prisoner and extorted acquiesence from him for "Justinian Bulls"; he excommunicated from the church long-dead saints and heroes, such as Origen, and deprived them of their saint-hood. And made it stick! and he was an unordained layman! It was a function he was exercising rather than a theory that he was implementing in action. Leo the Isaurian followed much this same pattern. Papacy is as papacy does – even though in the East a theoretical dual-monarchy of Emperor and Patriarch exercised the office. The power center of the dual-monarchy shifted back and forth in the rhythm of strong emperors and weak patriarchs and vice-versa.

It is interesting to note that when Constantinople fell, the mantle of Caesaro-Papism passed to (or rather was siezed by) the Russian church and Emperior. "Holy Russia" was now the Body of Christ.

Stalin and Khrushchev stood on solid traditional ground when they exercised their Papal functions over the Church in Russia. It was not necessary that they "believe" in that church. When the medieval Conciliarists attempted to develop a theological base on which to stand, to do what had to be done (end the papal schism and restore a semblance of institutional unity to the Roman church), they transferred the Petrine theory to the bishops collectively, so that they could maintain that the church is the bishops in council, not a bishop, except in so far as a single bishop ought to exercise the office as the representative of all the bishops. The body of bishops was the continuing locus of the role of the vicar of Christ, else, was Christ lost to the church during the intervals between the death of a Pope and the enthronement of his successor? But the strong popes at the end of the conciliar period put an end to that theory. Thus, in the Pre-Reformation Roman Church, the Pope was the church.

It must be remembered that the synods and councils of the church actually began as an instrument to hammer out disputes, deal with problems, and draw up creeds and canons before any clear-cut conception or exercise of the Western papal office is discernable. Neither were these first synods and councils called in response to any previously conceived theological determination of the role, function, or authority of a council. Conciliar theories came after the events which initiated them. These two institutions, often times antithetical, were in operation, before anyone discovered potential conflicts between them, either as to place in the church or in their powers to determine the nature of the church. It is perhaps ironic that the great schismatic and heretical communities which eventually surrounded the territorial periphery of the Catholic church, were more nearly brought to a focus, and hardened into the mold of rivals of the Catholic Church, by synodical and conciliar activities, than they were brought about through arbitrary action on the part of popes. Whether the Holy Spirit operates to better advantage in a collective and representative body of the church than through a system of monarchical fiat can hardly be demonstrated in the past experiences of the Church, East or West, Roman Catholic or Protestant. Certainly Nicea, IV Lateran, Constance, and Trent, to name only a few, do not demonstrate the power of the Holy Spirit in council as a healing or unifying force! The persistence of peripheral institutional rivals can be accounted for almost solely on the grounds that the Catholic Church could not get within physical range to compel them to submit to its standards of the "true" and hence "only" Church. Perhaps the Protestant ecumenical assemblies (they are not councils) may eventually demonstrate that what the councils of the past tore assunder assemblies of the present may

re-unite. But I am not sure that this is being implemented by either a unified theory of the nature of the church or of the function and powers of the Holy Spirit. Here again I think that the contingencies of the era more nearly explain the phenomena than does any dynamic "idea" of the nature of the church which points to the ecumenical movement as the logical instrument for the recovery (?) of the unity of the Christian communities.

The rise of the importance and character of the sacramental system was a factor determining the nature of the Church. As Rainey saw it:

> With the flood of new proselytes the Church acquired a constitutency which could only be dealt with on legal principles, and such principles could be applied only in the way of enjoying certain observances. That alone could be practically intelligible to the mass. The assumption follows, that when these observances were passively accepted, at least without disbelief or contradiction, they would do their work, would confer and accomplish the Christian salvation. Thus the theory became "Christ has furnished us with a system of Church Ordinances which, reverently complied with, do mysteriously effect salvation."

The sacramental system of the Church as it was found at the end of the middle-ages is a strange and wonderful development. There are so many elements in it and so many stages in its development that we can do no more than touch upon some of the steps involved and its implications for the nature of the church. The sacrament of baptism is touched on elsewhere and was early recognized as of such importance that it is inferentially touched on in the Second Century creeds in the references to the forgiveness of sins. It was made plain by the time of Hermas that it had applied to original sin and members were not to sin any more. Hermas pleaded for one more forgiveness, since men did sin after baptism. Though certain aberrant sects had weekly baptismal services, the one baptism became a norm and was made the norm after the Donatist controversy. But sin continued. How to deal with it? The key lay in concepts of the nature and function of the church. Hermas had depicted the church as an old woman who symbolized the Holy Spirit. The Second Century Creeds spoke of the "Holy Church" and the "forgiveness of sins." Earlier, Clement had spoken of the Church as a body which formed a "unity with Christ as spirit." The Church Order of Hippolytus spoke of the Eucharist as uniting the participants "with the body of Christ" (but it is not clear whether he thought of the elements as being the body of Christ whereby the recipient was united with Christ, or whether

the act of communion was instrumental in assuring the participant's unity with the Church as the Body of Christ).

The haziness of the meaning of the sacrament in the Second Century was characteristic of the whole sacramental system – since men were still debating the nature and function of the sacraments and even the sources of their powers, to the eve of the Reformation and then the debate re-opened in the new churches – freed from Roman Catholic dogmatic controls, but neither free from past concepts and usages nor from the difficulties inherent in the sacramental system. It is interesting to note that the early creeds did not attempt to incorporate so much as a mention of the Eucharist much less an interpretation of it; and Transubstantiation was not made dogma until 1215. But the Eucharist had nothing to do with forgiveness of sins directly; it was rather "the medicine of immortality," but Irenaeus' views of its function in creating "New Adams" 'whereby a "community of saints," as the Church was constituted, had in it the germs of a system for dealing with the problem of sin. The ultimate outcome was a double solution: first the Eucharist evolved as a "sacrifice" along Old Testament lines, such sacrifices satisfying the legal "payment" for sins, on the one hand, and the sacrament of Penance on the other. The latter sacrament became so important that the Eucharist became something of a culminating rite, attached to it, whereby all the grace inhering in Penance was brought to a focus. The latter middle-ages emphasized the primacy of Penance to such an extent that by Luther's time nearly all the machinery of the church – from dogma to the doctrine of orders, the Papacy, etc., was subservient to it and dependent on it. The "medicine of immortality" and union with the God-head, were of less importance than salvation from the consequences of unforgiven sin-eternal damnation. Grace as freely given love, was transformed by the sacramental system into a legalistic and absolutely efficient technique for escaping from the pains of hell!

The church had been transformed into an agency, within which the sacramental system operated, and which, in turn, gave meaning to the church. The germs of this way of looking at the meaning of the church are to be seen in Irenaeus who saw the divine plan of salvation mediated in the Church to the individual by the operation of the Holy Spirit through the sacraments. His emphasis was that only in the Apostolic Catholic Church were these sacraments truly available. Thus in his time it was the true church that gave the sacraments their validity, and in effect the Holy Spirit was given a channel through which to work his wonders in the sacraments, by the Church. The work of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments was to bring about the union of the individual with the God-head, not to work out a means of escaping

from the consequences of sin. But Ireneaus had provided a way of looking at the church, which by extension, not to say distortion or inversion, paved the way for The Babylonian Captivity of the Church: For Luther was right in seeing that the sacramental system had captured the church, rather than the other way 'round as envisioned by Ireneaus. Ireneaus had invoked the concept of mediation.

As the sacraments multiplied in number, and as salvation from sin became more important than being united with the God-Head, the sacraments as channels of grace for forgiveness of sin became the mediating agencies and in the end the Church obtained its validity and utility only because of the powers and functions of the sacraments operating in the Church. In the same way the offices from priest to pope derived their powers not so much from aposolic succession, etc., as from the fact that the sacraments themselves were so powerful and essential that those who administered them were really empowered by the sacraments, rather than that they were giving to the sacraments their powers, as mediators. Thus a priest had power through being the recipient of the powers bestowed upon him in the sacrament of Orders. This power was *ex opere operato;* it was as indelible as baptism, and wholly independent of his qualities as a Christian. Neither his belief nor unbelief, his sins or virtues could add or subtract an iota from his power and function as a priest whose principal task was to administer the sacraments. By extension this applied to the Church also. The sacraments endowed her with their powers and functions, however low She might sink into iniquity or unbelief. Even the papacy as the apex of the sacramental system, rather than as Vicar of Christ and successor to Peter, drew upon this concept of the Church. Luther could not, as he found out, attack indulgences without threatening the position of the Papacy, since it was by then thoroughly bound up in the sacrament of Penance. The hierarchy, and the people, the whole visible church, were in subjection to the sacramental system. Even Christ was in its possession in the Eucharist, he was both "compelled" to be present in body and in spirit, and was daily "sacrificed," and as it were was forced to make His daily contributions to the "treasury of merit." In Penance He was forced to grant absolution. When the priest and the confessed sinner had performed the acts outlined in the sacramental system, in ABCD order, Christ's absolving power was automatically operative. It was as though, in the late medieval period, that the Church and Christ were only relevant as they functioned "within" the sacramental system. This amounted to an almost total inversion of the view of the Church held for hundreds of years after Pentecost. No wonder Wyclif, Hus, Luther, et al. sought to reverse the order and revise this view of the church, which included

putting Christ at the head, directly in charge of His own Body. Only then could the sacraments be made subject to the church and her Head.

Another point might be made here. The strong nostalgia for a return to the "ideal" church of New Testament days or the pre-Constantinian days that has, to a greater or lesser degree, furnished an element of dynamism in nearly all churches at one time or another, is really only made possible by the fact that the church, as the custodian "of the things of God," has often literally been a custodian. By this I mean that it has served as a virtual warehouse where past theologies, usages, forms, etc. have been stored and preserved, and from which they may be removed and restored to use and prominence when occasion demands it. "Restorationism" may not only be a response to a felt need, it is made really possible by the fact that the Church seldom discards, once and for all, anything it held dear in the past. Though the "images" of the past may not ever have been "ideal," and hence literal "Restorationism" may be a fantasy, in fact they may be recovered from the warehouse and put to use, if not "restored to use." Hence the church is ever old and ever new, and I doubt not, as Pastor Robinson said to the little flock of Pilgrims as they set sail for America, but that "the Lord hath more truth and light yet to breake forth out of his holy Word." Every view of the church must be, in the nature of things, "a process" where in the very act of implementing the images by means of the institutions, we create new images and institutions. The church is not what it once was, or what it will be, but I will grant that it is in part what we make of it, and what we make of it will help determine what it can be!