

The Nebulous Church

The largest, most long-lived social experiment of all time has so far been inconclusive, but I don't want to give up on it. Despite disappointing results to date, millions of people around the world still want to carry on with this experiment. It is called the Church, and was expected to unite people of different backgrounds, different races and different positions in life.

I belonged to the institutional church for more than 20 years, from conversion to excommunication and, when I first wrote these words, I had been out of it for a further 20 years. The people who rejected me had been misled by dangerous teachings about 'discipleship', which they have since abandoned. Some of those people are now my close friends, but I have no inclination to rejoin their group or any other institutional church. That experience of rejection did not make me bitter because previous trials had prepared me for it¹ and I believed that God was leading me on into new ways. The experiences of the past few years have helped shape my understanding about those 'new ways'. I have not stopped believing in the idea of the Church, but I have sought to redefine my thinking about it.

The Church was a totally original idea introduced to the world by the apostle Paul². There was no equivalent in Judaism, in Roman paganism, or in Greek philosophy. Previous expressions of religion had some element of exclusivity about them; they were for single tribes or nations; they were for single social classes; they were for warlike hunters or for peaceful farmers³. None of them matched the Pauline concept of a fellowship of universal love, or his remarkable vision of people working together as if they were one body made up of many interdependent members.

Many people who shared my experience of excommunication from sects of the Charismatic movement previously believed that the movement was leading them towards the ultimate unity of the Church. They expected the Holy Spirit to draw people together by the power and example of 'the gifts' and the authority of anointed leaders. Unfortunately, the abuse of leadership power led to widespread disillusion. Many who felt let down by that move turned back to traditional denominations, carrying with them a frustrated feeling that their dreams may have been too idealistic.

¹ Long before that final experience of being asked to leave fellowship I had been through situations which prepared me for it, starting with heavy 'exit counselling' to leave Pentecostalism while I was still a teenager. That early experience taught me to be cynical about leaders who direct and command vulnerable people in order to support their own prejudices. Each later experience hurt less, until I was able to face with relative ease the final blow of being forced out of the church, which many other people found utterly shattering.

² Matthew's gospel records two occasions when Jesus mentions the church, though neither of them explains this novel expression. Matthew 16:18 includes the famous "on this rock" statement, which has been so frequently argued about between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Matthew 18:17 advises on the fair application of discipline within the church. No other gospel uses the word 'church' (ἐκκλησία).

³ Though some historians now believe that farmers, with their new claim on land ownership, were more warlike than the ancient hunter-gatherers.

They decided that second best must be better than having no church at all. Some other people remained outside the churches and concluded that Paul's ideal must have been a mistake. In the 1970's a friend of mine wrote a popular article called "The Concept of One Church - Is it an Impossible Dream?"⁴. I have stayed outside of the traditional church environment, but have answered "No" to the question posed in that title. I don't think unity is impossible. I have held onto the dream, and want to continue with the experiment.

Many people through the ages have become disillusioned with the institutional church. Some, like Luther and Calvin, tried to reform it, and ended up controlling new institutions of their own. Some, like St Anthony or like Simon Stylites, abandoned human fellowship and went away to live a hermit's life, seeking God on their own. Some of the Mediaeval mystics showed striking independence from official church thinking, as we can see from their writings and teachings⁵; but they chose to influence the church from within, like yeast influences dough.

It may seem inappropriate for a person who stopped going to church almost 20 years ago to be speaking of influencing the church from within. However, I have never considered myself to be outside the Church. Before I was 'put out of fellowship' I already held the view that the Church was one body and that all divisions were man-made, temporary and irrelevant. Once I became separated from the institution I began to act as if my vision were fact, and now the reality is beginning to appear out of the mist.

In the 1960's I first gained a vision of the potential for one church based on love. In the 1970's I joined with thousands of others in the attempt to bring the 'one church' vision into reality - especially following the inspiring call to faith given by a Christian musical of the time, called "Come Together"⁶. Our mistake was that we tried to create unity by imposing a design, and 'life's not like that'. Since leaving the formally organised church I have held onto the vision, and sought to create it, simply by living as if it already existed. I should explain....

When my wife and I found ourselves apparently alone, and people in our town were avoiding our company, we resolved to remain in the area and not to run away from the circumstances. We decided that our earlier commitment to the people who had since let us down had been a sincere commitment and that we could not abandon them. We continued to treat them as friends, even if they were cautious with us. When they, and others in the town who knew us less well, invited us to events that they thought would 'do us good' we often accepted the invitation for their sake, even if our real interest in the event was limited. However, we avoided joining ourselves to any particular group

⁴ The brief article I am referring to was written by George Tarleton, a prominent figure in the charismatic/house church movement during the 1970's. Despite expressions that now seem dated, it seemed so significant that I have often referred back to it.

⁵ Some of the mystics, now revered, were rejected during their own time, at least for a while. The convent of Hildegard of Bingen, for instance, was for several years treated as a kind of outcast within the church. In Spain, John-of-the-Cross was kidnapped by rival clerics and imprisoned for a while.

⁶ "Come Together", written by Jimmy and Carol Owens, was a musical that toured several Western countries, initially with Pat Boone (Hollywood actor and pop singer) as the main presenter. In Britain it was picked up by a number of different choirs who presented it at venues all over the country during the early 1970's. The underlying message of the presentation was a call for Christians to 'come together' in spiritual unity. Little unity resulted from it at the time, but the liveliness and enthusiasm of the various presenters succeeded in spreading the charismatic movement to most denominations.

or committing ourselves to regular meetings on a long-term basis. We deliberately cultivated friendships with people from a wide range of denominations ... when we met them at the shops we would stop and chat, just as friends. We had at one time been banned from some meetings, but nobody could ban us from shopping!

Our policy has been to be ourselves and not to attempt to prove our spirituality or justify our position. If people wanted to judge us for 'not going to church' that was their problem. If they viewed us as 'backsliders' they were entitled to their opinion. However, they learned gradually that we remained open to them as friends or even as counsellors. Some began to discuss spiritual matters with us, and sometimes to ask for our advice. On our part, we were not shy to ask for their help when we faced problems that we couldn't manage on our own. They remained 'the Church' in our thinking and our acceptance of them led to their acceptance of us.

I regard the Church as an elusive, but nevertheless real force that transcends all meetings and ignores all institutions and organisations. Maurice Smith coined the term "the Nebulous Church", and I like it. 'Nebulous' means 'like a cloud' and the Church is as vaguely defined and continuously changeable as any mountaintop mist. If you were to try and pin down a cloud it would vanish. If you tried to describe its shape it would change; but you know the cloud is real and that its waters can bring life.

The essence of church-ness is love, but I think that today the word 'friendship' conveys the meaning more clearly. Doctrine divides, structures provoke power-struggles, order stifles creativity. By contrast Friendship overcomes dissension - we can agree to differ when we see our relationship as more important than our politics. Friendship is anarchistic⁷ - my friends don't rule me nor do I rule them. Friendship encourages creativity - if I believe in you, then you will be more confident to express yourself.

Many people will be dissatisfied with a church concept that cannot be clearly defined and written down. They want to be sure who is in and who is out and, perhaps, to make that decision on God's behalf. I am content to accept anyone who clearly wants God, however they express their beliefs, and I seek to make friends of them. By behaving as if the nebulous church is a reality, by treating as friends all those who put God before personal ambition, by accepting responsibility for my own spiritual health, I am seeking to create the vision by demonstrating how it can work. From where I am looking, the nebulous Church is already here.

© Derrick Phillips
March 1995

⁷ The word 'anarchy' has acquired negative connotations due to the violent actions of political extremists of the past. I use the word in its literal sense, based on the Greek *an archos* (*αν αρχος*) meaning no ruler. Our purest actions arise from internal drivers, not external compulsion.