

Summary : The NT Community of Believers Acts 2:42-7, Acts 2:32-37, Acts 6:2



The Jerusalem Community

- Was one of the most radical groups of the “Jesus Movement”
- Begun and led by well known personalities (Peter & James, blood-relation of Jesus (not apostle))
- Founded at Pentecost: the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit gave them courage to live as Christians, and proclaim Christ’s message
- In an atmosphere of persecution: Jewish authorities wanted to stamp out the Jesus movement – Saul who later became St.Paul, one of main persecutors
- Radical lifestyle: expected the imminent return of Jesus (the Second Coming).
- Still very Jewish: kept Jewish dietary customs, would go up to the Temple 3x a day to pray, would perform Jewish vows of dedication to God.

Summary of the Jerusalem Community lifestyle

- Devoted to Apostle’s teaching
- Worshipped together – temple 3x a day, private houses
- Breaking of bread, (simple Eucharist, more like a meal), also shared food
- Shared possessions – people decided if they wanted to sell / give , no compulsion, not a commune
- Gave to the needy – had to allocate job to specific Christians, so Apostles could focus on preaching.

Modern Christian communities similar, but some significant differences:

- Apostle’s Creed said in most Churches...but doctrinal fragmentation since Reformation
- Mass, other devotions eg Adoration, rosary, Divine Office (psalms)
- Eucharist...different interpretations, inter-communion a problem. Meals??
- Possessions – monks and nuns?
- Charity – Lent, other collections

The early communities were not ideal...

- The Jerusalem c’ty was not a standard model for other Churches so can’t use it as a basis for comparison. Paul’s letters make it clear that members should not give up daily jobs or houses, but should work for their living.
- Problems with false behaviour from new converts, even in Jerusalem c’ty eg Ananias and Sapphira’s deception.
- Uncertainties, even among lead apostles, about how Jewish new converts should be: Paul had to remonstrate with them, and later with Peter, that once it was clear that Jesus’ salvation is also for the Gentiles, they cannot run a two-tier Church, with Gentile a or Jewish behaviour
- St Paul in his Churches has problems with abuses of the Eucharistic meal (people stuffing themselves with food, ignoring those who had none), false “teachers” who taught false doctrines, serious immorality among new converts (sleeping with father’s wife), Jewish legalism (thinking you could be saved by following Jewish law, rather than faith in Christ)

Permanent Characteristics of the Church

In the last few decades, reflection on the nature of the Church in Vatican documents and among theologians, has identified aspects of the Church which could be said to be true of the Church as it exists in any time or any place¹. Below are five such “permanent characteristics”.

1. Institutional Organisation



As an institution, the Church could be defined as “a specific type of human community, brought together by professing the same faith, in communion with each other through participating in the Sacraments, dispensed and governed by legitimate pastors” (Bellarmino, C17th). On this definition, one can be a member of the Church, without actually having any real faith.

The Church, like other human organisations in society, requires organization and structure. It needs to **safeguard the truth** of the Christian message, and its faithful interpretation. It needs to provide means to make accessible to all “*the unfathomable riches of Christ*” (Eph.3:8): the divine wisdom seen in Christ’s own teaching and manner of life. It must make available the grace that Christ won in restoring us to God. Through him, we become new beneficiaries of God’s goodness, otherwise prevented by sin. The Church mediates to us these blessings, stored up for us in Christ. In the Protestant Churches, Christians are aware of receiving them through their life of faith in Christ. In the Catholic Church, these blessings are also mediated in a particular way through material creation (the Sacraments), since God first chose to mediate His grace through physical presence of Christ, incarnate, who himself used material objects to communicate his salvation (bread, wine, water). The deacons, priests, bishops and other ministers **dispense “the riches of Christ” in the Sacraments and in the communication of the Word.**

The Church can, at times, seem to be primarily concerned with its own **authority as a legislating** institution. Indeed believers may feel this institutional aspect keenly, when the Church expresses itself *ex cathedra* in apparently dictatorial, interfering, and restrictive pronouncements about people’s personal lives. The Church’s institutional authority may be particularly resented in the sphere of sexual ethics, where teachings over artificial contraception (*Humanae Vitae*), conjugal and pre-marital sex (JPII *Theology of the Body*), homosexuality, divorce (*Amoris Laetitia*) etc may lead a Christian to adopt an unhealthy focus on sexuality as the battleground of faith, rather than to the proper focus of living a just and outward-looking life, lived in the company of Christ.

¹ Dulles, A. “Models of the Church” p.196 Random House, 2002

As an institutional organization, the Church is its buildings, its ordained clergy, and its authority and power in making canonical and dogmatic pronouncements. It is concerned with teaching, discipline and the proper dispensation of the Sacraments.

2. A Sacrament – Communion of Grace

A Sacrament is “**a visible sign of invisible grace**”. Just as Jesus Christ is the visible sign of God’s grace for humanity, so the Church is the visible sign of Christ among us, continuing his work of redemption and healing. As the sign of Christ, the Church is the visible sign of the union between humanity and God. This union is expressed through the life and activity of the Church, just a person’s spirit is expressed through a person’s body. The divine is expressed in a human way. The image of the Church as **vine**, or **Bride of Christ**, or **Body of Christ**, conveys this sense of being united to Christ, and of being the active expression of his presence.



When we participate in the Church as its members, we are not there as spectators, on the outside. We are part of this union, and like branches to the vine, or parts of a body, we receive his life. But we do not only receive – being part of it, we also express in ourselves this life: the life of Christ flows to us, through us, and from us. Therefore as members of “the Church”, Christians **are** the Church, and they mediate grace to each other, and into the outside world. “*Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?*” (St. Paul in 1 Cor 3:16), and “*the Church is made up of living stones*” (1 Pet 2:5).

Without this kind of participation, which is nourished in us by listening to the Word, receiving the Eucharist, and confessing our sins (Sac. Reconciliation), Christians are as good as “dead branches” in the image of the vine. Unless we have Christ’s life flowing through us, we cannot understand his purpose for us, nor “bear fruit” in good works, nor be examples that would attract others to Christ.

The Church as Sacrament also reminds us that we are not isolated individuals who come to pray at Church for our own spiritual benefits, in a vertical relationship with God. The reality is that we are mutually interconnected at a deep level, and we can only find ourselves, and Christ, from and through others, in a place where others are, that is his “body”. Nobody ever baptizes, absolves, or anoints himself.

The Church as a Sacrament is far more than a teaching institution: it is a spiritual communion of persons sharing in the very life of Christ, in a way that brings this life to others. It guarantees that our good works will build up the Kingdom of God, because they are done with the grace of God, rather than being our own prideful efforts of aiming at some abstract notion of human progress.

3. A Liturgical Church – offering Praise and Worship

The Liturgy, as the activity of offering praise and worship to God, is *“the summit towards which the whole activity of the Church is directed, the goal of all its apostolic works”*. All the activities of daily life are for this: to glorify God, as that Being of supreme and ultimate importance, whom it is a privilege to serve.



The Mass is the most perfect expression of the Church’s worship, in that it is the re-presentation of Christ’s perfect self-offering to the Father, in whom the Church also offers itself, in all its individuals, since Jesus commanded his disciples to “do this” at the Last Supper. The liturgy gathers us all up together, and returns us, in Christ, back to the Father.

In the liturgy of the Word, the Church gathers “at the feet of the Master”. Jesus speaks to the community through the scriptures, through the preaching, through the signs and actions of the Mass. This activity deepens the union between the Lord and his members, and moulds them in the attitude of being more Christ-like, as they make the expressions of their faith their own. So at the visible level, the liturgy has a “teaching” role, but more importantly perhaps, is the meaning it expresses: what we are all here for.

4. A Missionary Church – sharing the Good News

“Go out to the whole world and preach the gospel to the whole of creation” (Mk 16:15). These were Jesus’ final instructions to his disciples, after he resurrected, and before he ascended into heaven. Subsequently, with the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the first Christians found the courage and understanding, to carry out these instructions, often at the cost of their own lives.



In continuity with the Apostles, the Church cannot ignore this command. It sees its task illustrated in the gospel in the Parable of the mustard seed: to grow from small beginnings and become an enormous place of shelter and welcome for all creatures. It knows that not all its members will be faithful and true (Parable of the wheat and the tares) but it must cast the Word of God far and wide, often failing to bring in those it has reached out to (Parable of the sower).

The Church’s missionary outreach at the most obvious level, involves telling people – teaching them - about Jesus, who he was, what he did, what he taught. Evangelicals have a reputation for directness: “Is Jesus your personal Saviour?”, or “Are you saved?”. It is a message of hope, in the midst of sin, and of God’s love, freely offered.

At another level, to preach the gospel is more than teaching – it is to express actively Christ’s message of a saving, hope-filling love: as St Francis said “*Preach the gospel: use words only if you have to*”. Christians are missionary when they show acceptance of, and serve, those in need. By restoring to others their human dignity, whether in places of poverty, conflict, slavery to addiction or sin, they share the gospel as good news for the poor. By being Christ to others, Christians share what Christ was for – and so become a Sacrament of Christ to them. This can happen when Christians have been formed and nourished by the life of faith through sacraments and liturgy - not simply by being taught and believing certain doctrines and truths of faith. Being “Christ” to others is much more than just being a member of the Church at the institutional level.

5. A Healing and Restoring Church – for the good of all humanity

As a community of disciples, the Church must continue Jesus’ work of healing and exorcising demons. The Church must fight poverty, oppression, injustice, show compassion for the sick, sinners, the dying, and help those in need. It must be “the Good Samaritan” to others, of every race and creed.

Our secular age often sees the Church as one organization among many, doing valuable charitable works. Caritas, the official aid agency of the Catholic Church (of which CAFOD is a part) is one of the world’s largest aid-giving organisations. However, nowhere does the NT suggest that those experiencing the Kingdom of God, as salvation, joy, health and wholeness are not also those invited to be part of this Kingdom:

the Church is committed not just to improving the conditions of life on earth, but to gathering all mankind to Christ in the final sense, of their resurrection into life after death. Its activity must therefore be shaped not only by material human need, but it must be a struggle against sin, and seek to permeate the secular world with the Spirit of Christ. To show agape love, to forgive, to be peacemakers, to accept others as they are, to pray for them and to befriend them in their suffering, is as much a work of mercy, as feeding the hungry and clothing the poor. It is such activity that distinguishes the Church from merely being an aid organization.

The Church’s teaching reminds Christians of this, so that they do not fall into the error of assuming that the conditions of this present life, are all that determine human happiness or spiritual fulfillment. But unless the Church does put its own teaching about love of others into practice, and works for the real, physical liberation of all mankind in all aspects, its teaching remains empty, and hypocritical.

