

# The Church: God's Agent in Transforming Society

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A part of the brief given to me for this opening session is a definition of the Church. The need for this is something of a puzzle, because we are all in a church (The Peoples' Cathedral), all or most of us are members of, or associated somehow with a denomination called, The New Testament Church of God, the Anglican Church, the Baptist Church or the like, and some of us claim to be members of *the* Church. And yet that is the problem, the fluidity attached to the English word 'church'.

The situation is no easier if we go behind the English word 'church' to probe the 'meaning-in-usage' of the central Greek word *ekklēsia* that has given rise to the English word 'church'.<sup>1</sup> This is so for two reasons.

Firstly, *ekklēsia* itself has fluidity in meaning in the New Testament documents, so *ekklēsia* describes, in Acts 19.32, 39 and 41, a gathering of tradesmen<sup>2</sup>, in Rom. 16.4 and 5, a local group or groups of Christians, in 1 Cor. 10. 32, all Christians on earth and in Eph. 2.6 and 3.10, possibly a trans-earthly or cosmic body of Christians. The central prevailing idea in the 114 references to *ekklēsia* is that of *people constituting a kind of community*.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, the New Testament documents use a multiplicity of terms to describe the same entity called 'church', terms such as 'those who believe'<sup>4</sup>, 'the brethren'<sup>5</sup>, 'body'<sup>6</sup>, 'family'<sup>7</sup>, 'temple'<sup>8</sup>, 'flock'<sup>9</sup>, etc. Even that popular expression on the lips of our Lord, 'kingdom of God/heaven' is suggestive of a term for the entity called church as Kevin Giles argues. He says,

It has been pointed out that the term, the Kingdom of God, primarily speaks of the dynamic rule of God, but as the thought of God ruling implies a people he rules over, the expression also can involve, in a secondary sense, the idea of 'realm'. Thus Jesus not only proclaims the Kingdom of God – that is, God's dynamic reign – but also invites people to 'enter' the Kingdom of God (Matt. 18.3; Mark 9.47; Luke 16.16, etc.), which must mean deciding to recognize God's rule over one's life. Those who do this constitute a new community where the rule of God is of utmost importance, and life transforming. Yet the reign of God is not limited to this sphere.<sup>10</sup>

It may be instructive too that in one of the only two places where Jesus uses the term *ekklēsia*, Matt. 16.18-19<sup>11</sup>, it may, arguably, be used as a synonym for 'kingdom of heaven' which is also used in the text.

Nonetheless, one has to agree that "...all the early Christian writers use *ekklēsia* only for those fellowships which came into being after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Ekklēsia* appears 114 times in the New Testament;

<sup>2</sup> This reflects the traditional usage of the term, in Greek cultures, for a group gathered for a purpose, in which case the term *ekklēsia*, had reference to the gathering, not the people themselves. When dispersed the *ekklēsia* ceases to exist. See T.D. Alexander, et al (eds.), *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, IVP, 2000, 408; Walter Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Baker, 1996, 95; Lawrence O. Richards, *New International Encyclopaedia of Bible Words*, Zondervan, 1991, 164-167.

<sup>3</sup> Using the King James Version at 1 Corinthians 11.18, 14.19, 28, 34,35, one may be tempted to think, incorrectly, that the idea of 'church' as a structure is evident in the expression 'in church'. This really means 'in assembly' and it must be remembered that the 1<sup>st</sup> century Christians met in homes until they were able to acquire property for worship structures in later centuries. For an insightful and readable summary of the use of *ekklēsia* in the Old Testament and the Intertestamental literature plus the challenge of translating *ekklēsia* see Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?* IVP, 1995, 230-243.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 2.44, 4.32.

<sup>5</sup> Acts 15.1,32.

<sup>6</sup> Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ephesians 3.14, 17-18; 1 John 3.11-15, 4.7-21; 1 Peter 1.22; 1 Thessalonians 4.9.

<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 2.21-22, 1 Peter 2.5.

<sup>9</sup> John 10.1-18.

<sup>10</sup> *What on Earth Is the Church?* 30-31.

<sup>11</sup> The other is Matthew 18. 17 (twice).

<sup>12</sup> L. Coenen in Colin Brown (ed.), *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol.1, 1975, 298.

May I suggest then that for purposes of this presentation we regard the Church, minimally, as *a plurality of persons, forming a community, who express faith in and allegiance to Jesus Christ*.<sup>13</sup>

It is to such a community that the multifaceted mission of Jesus Christ is committed.<sup>14</sup> If we seek justification for seeing such a community as God's means of transforming society then such emerges from several passages.

I wish now to explore these in brief compass then spend the rest of the time on selected aspects of the legacy of societal transformation and challenge toward transformation left by the church over the past 2000 years.

Perhaps the fundamental text in this regard would be Matt. 28.16-20 especially the central command to 'make disciples of all nations' (v. 19). The suggestions are quite strong concerning societal transformation in both the central command 'make disciples' and its stated extent 'of all nations'.<sup>15</sup>

A disciple is one who mirrors in her life and ideas the life and ideas of her master. Put differently the disciple mirrors in his *character, concepts and conduct* whose he is. The ministry of *genuine* discipling is then transformational of the individual in terms of mind and life and when a nation can be said to be discipled, meaning the majority of people have experienced this transformation, such a nation can hardly escape being transformed or at least being challenged toward transformation.

The revolutionary metaphors 'salt of the earth' and 'light of the world' used by Jesus of his disciples (Mt. 5.13-16), are definitely transformational in societal terms.

There are also hints of the transformational presence of God's community in parables such as the Sower (Mk. 4.1-20), the Mustard Seed (Mk. 4.30-32), the Seed growing secretly (Mk. 4.26-29).

#### *A Legacy of Societal Transformation & Challenge Toward Transformation*

Christians in the period from Pentecost to the fall of Rome challenged and at times progressively transformed the societal mores of the Roman Empire with reference to the value of human life and the virtue of sexual purity.

#### *Value on Human Life*

That Roman culture placed very little value on human life is well known. Romans were not only accustomed to emperors (like Nero,<sup>16</sup> Domitian,<sup>17</sup> Decius,<sup>18</sup> and Diocletian,<sup>19</sup>) and other societal leaders who were murderous of rivals, Christians and even of family members<sup>20</sup> but the horrible gladiatorial games were as popular then as football is in many nations today.

Each contest required men to fight men, commonly with the aim of killing the opponents with a sword (*gladius*). It was the crowd that largely decided the fate of a weakened, gasping gladiator. A turned-thumb signal, usually given by women spectators, instructed the victor to go for the final blow. Often it was the women who praised gladiators...The barbaric cruelty, the agonizing screams of the

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<sup>13</sup> I have reworked ideas from Lawrence O. Richards, *New International Encyclopaedia of Bible Words*, Zondervan, 1991, 164-167 and Walter Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, Baker, 1996, 95.

<sup>14</sup> We would include para-church agencies as part of the Church insofar as their staffs express faith in and allegiance to Jesus Christ and their mission is some aspect of the Church's mission. See a discussion of para-Church agencies in Bruce J. Nicholls (ed.), *The Church: God's Agent of Change*, The Paternoster Press, 1986, 199-229.

<sup>15</sup> This is so whether we take *ta ethnē* as bespeaking Gentiles (non-Jews) or what we call today nations or countries.

<sup>16</sup> Ruled AD 54-68.

<sup>17</sup> Ruled AD 81-96.

<sup>18</sup> Ruled AD 249-251.

<sup>19</sup> Ruled AD 284-305.

<sup>20</sup> Nero killed two wives, one of whom he kicked to death while she was pregnant. Domitian, who insisted upon being called 'lord and god' ruled like a despot and lived with a fear of being assassinated. See William Klingaman, *The First Century: Emperors, Gods and Everyman*, Guild Publishing, 1990, 360-362. and Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, Zondervan, 2001, 22-32.

victims, and the flow of human blood stirred no conscience in the crowds of the gladiatorial events...To see a gladiator stab and slice his opponent to death was top-ranked amusement.<sup>21</sup>

Christians boycotted and denounced the games and attracted criticism. One critic of the Christians said, "You do not go to our shows; you take no part in our processions...you shrink in horror from our sacred [gladiatorial] games."<sup>22</sup> Peter's call to live uprightly amidst slander and to suffer with pride for doing good and *for being a Christian* (1 Pet. 2.12, 3.9-17 and 4.12-19) may reflect the emerging trend of verbal attacks on Christians for being counter-cultural in lifestyle.

The gladiatorial games were eventually banned owing to the influence of the Church. As W.E.H. Lecky concludes, "There is scarcely any single reform so important in the moral history of mankind as the suppression of the gladiatorial shows, a feat that must be almost exclusively ascribed to the Christian church."<sup>23</sup>

Roman culture too (like several others in the ancient world) was completely at ease with infanticide and child abandonment, which the Church opposed on biblical principles.

Plutarch (ca. AD 46-120) says of the Carthaginians that they "offered up their own children, and those who had no children would buy little ones from poor people and cut their throats as if they were so many lambs or young birds; meanwhile the mother stood by without a tear or moan."<sup>24</sup>

Even the philosopher Seneca (ca. 4 BC – AD 65), chief advisor to Nero, said, "We drown children who at birth are weakly and abnormal."<sup>25</sup>

Christians did not only denounce the entrenched Greek and Roman cultural practice of child abandonment but they also provided refuge for abandoned children.<sup>26</sup>

Infanticide and child abandonment were made capital offences in 374 under the Christian emperor Valentinian who was influenced by Bishop Basil of Caesarea.<sup>27</sup> Though infanticide was not completely wiped out—recurring in later centuries—the consistent opposition of the Church is what has influenced anti-infanticide laws up to the present.

Crucifixion<sup>28</sup> in the hands of the Romans approximated an art form, albeit a despicable one<sup>29</sup> and was outlawed by Constantine owing to his high regard for the Christian cross.<sup>30</sup>

### *Sexual Morality*

Christianity's elevation of sexual morality based on the Bible<sup>31</sup> has exerted a tremendous transforming influence on societies ancient and modern. Whereas the Christian sexual ethic outlawed all sex acts except heterosexual monogamous acts the conventions of the Roman Empire (and not a few modern societies) countenanced a 'no holds barred' approach as people, in general, did sexually, whatever, however, wherever

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<sup>21</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence:How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 62.

<sup>22</sup> Cited in *ibid*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Cited in *ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> *Moralia* 2.171D, cited in Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence:How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 49. See also William Barclay, *Educational Ideals in the Ancient World*, Baker Book House, 1959, 263-266.

<sup>25</sup> *De Ira* 1.15, cited in Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence:How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, Oxford University Press, 1957, 300; Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence:How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 51.

<sup>28</sup> "...the *crux* [cross] is put at the head of the three *summa supplicia*. It is followed, in descending order, by *crematio* (burning) and *decolatio* (decapitation)...Of course because of its harshness, crucifixion was almost always inflicted only on the lower class..." Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, Fortress Press, 1977, 33, 34.

<sup>29</sup> Seneca, "I see crosses there, not just of one kind but made in many different ways: some have their victims with the head down to the ground; some impale their private parts; others stretch out their arms on the gibbet," cited in Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence:How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 65.

<sup>31</sup> Romans 1.24-27; 1 Corinthians 6.18-20, etc.

with whomever or whatever. Not only is the evidence in literature but also archaeology has turned up sexual graphics covering a wide spectrum of sexual acts on household items in the Roman Empire.<sup>32</sup>

### *Charity & Compassion*

From the 1<sup>st</sup> century of this era to the present the impact of the Church's commitment to voluntary charity and compassion has been transforming in many societies. The rise of orphanages, homes for the aged, the Salvation Army, the various Catholic groups like Sisters of Mercy and Brothers of the Poor, United Way, YMCA, YWCA, Teen Challenge, hospitals, mental institutions, the Red Cross/Crescent and, numerous other agencies for the care of needy human beings can be traced back to the Church of Jesus Christ.<sup>33</sup>

"The whole approach to [governmental] social welfare that has developed in the West, and more recently in the East as well, is debtor to the Christian contribution and has been profoundly influenced by it."<sup>34</sup>

### *Education*

Living in post-slavery societies in the Caribbean we all know of the Church's novel contribution of education for the slaves<sup>35</sup> matching an earlier novel Christian practice of education for both sexes.<sup>36</sup> The idea of tax-supported public schools and compulsory education seem to go back to Martin Luther (1483-1546) while graded education owes a debt to the Lutheran layman Johann Sturm (1507-1589).<sup>37</sup>

Education for the deaf began in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century with three French Christians and education for the blind got its most significant forward fillip, though not its origin, from another French Christian Louis Braille in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The origin of the university is debatable<sup>38</sup> but it is beyond controversy that the oldest and most prestigious universities, recognized as such, had Christian roots; the University of Bologna (1158, regarded by some as the first), the University of Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Heidelberg and Columbia, etc.<sup>39</sup>

### *Modern Science*

Despite misconceptions that plague the public in general as well as some in the scientific community, modern science not only had its experimental tap roots in the Judaeo-Christian worldview of a purposive, orderly, created world<sup>40</sup> but "...virtually all scientists from the Middle Ages to the mid-eighteenth century—many of whom were seminal thinkers—not only were sincere Christians but were often inspired by biblical postulates and premises in their theories that sought to explain and predict natural phenomena."<sup>41</sup>

The names include Leonardo da Vinci (human physiology), Gregor Mendel (genetics), Nicolaus Copernicus, Johannes Kepler and Galileo Galilei (astronomy), in physics, Isaac Newton, Gottfried Leibniz, Blaise Pascal, Georg Simon Ohm, André Ampere and Michael Faraday, in chemistry, Robert Boyle, Antoine Lavoisier, George Washington Carver, in medicine, Louis Pasteur and Joseph Lister.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See, John Clarke, *Looking at Lovemaking: The Constructions of Sexuality in Roman Art, 100 BC – AD 250*, University of California Press, 1998; Juvenal, *Satire 6* and Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* [The Art of Lovemaking].

<sup>33</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 125-169.

<sup>34</sup> Cited in *ibid*, 144.

<sup>35</sup> Shirley Gordon, *A Century of West Indian Education*, Longman Group Ltd., 1963.

<sup>36</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 172.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 177-180.

<sup>38</sup> See Charles Habib Malik, *A Christian Critique of the University*, IVP, 1982, 15-16, for a Greek origin; George G.M. James, *Stolen Legacy: Greek Philosophy is Stolen Egyptian Philosophy*, Africa World Press, 1954, 49, for an Egyptian origin; Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 186-187, for monasteries as embryonic universities.

<sup>39</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 186-193 and Charles Habib Malik, *A Christian Critique of the University*, 30.

<sup>40</sup> Nancy R. Pearcey and Charles B. Thaxton, *The Soul of Science: Christian Faith and Natural Philosophy*, 21-26.

<sup>41</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 244.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 218-247.

## Law

In the realm of law it is hardly known that “[i]ndividual freedom and rights are most prevalent where Christianity has had the greatest impact”,<sup>43</sup> nor are human rights advocates often aware of the philosophical dilemma of defining and justifying *inalienable* human rights minus a transcendent and reliable/credible revelational source such as the Bible with its foundational doctrine of human beings *uniquely* created by and in the image of God.<sup>44</sup>

On what other basis, but the concept of creation by and in the image of God could we, non-arbitrarily, elevate the interests of humans over the interests of other animals or plants or even inanimate objects?<sup>45</sup>

If one operates with an evolutionary philosophical and scientific framework it will be difficult to assign essential or superior dignity to the evolutionary accident called ‘human being’—the result of chance, natural selection, mutations and time—and it would be impossible to escape the racism inherent in and argued from the evolutionary view that the earlier species of ‘humans’ were inferior to later species. Note carefully that the full title of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* is *On the Origin of Species by Means of natural Selection, or The Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.

Elaine Pagels summarizes the issues.

Where, then, do we get the idea on which contemporary human rights theory rests: that ultimate value resides in the individual, independent from and even prior to participation in any social or political collective? The earliest suggestion of this idea occurs in the Hebrew account which describes Adam, whose name means “humanity,” as being created in the “image of God.”...This account implies the essential equality of all human beings, and supports the idea of rights that all enjoy by virtue of their common humanity.<sup>46</sup>

The legally entrenched idea that no one is above the law had its genesis in an encounter between an emperor and a bishop in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and got two other shots in the arm by the British Magna Carta in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and a bombshell of a book written by a clergyman in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

In A.D. 390 some people in Thessalonica rioted, arousing the anger of the Christian emperor, Theodosius the Great. He overreacted, slaughtering some seven thousand people, most of whom were innocent. Bishop Ambrose, who was located in Milan—which was also where the emperor lived—did not turn a blind eye to the emperor’s vindictive and unjust behavior. He asked him to repent of his massacre. When the emperor refused, the bishop excommunicated him. After a month of stubborn hesitation, Theodosius prostrated himself and repented in Ambrose’s cathedral, bringing tears of joy to fellow believers.<sup>47</sup>

The emperor too was under the law and Ambrose would not allow the emperor or others to forget that.

Nor can we forget the significant influence of the Church, through the Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton and his Christian colleagues, on the British Magna Carta (the Large Charter) of 1215 which gave new rights to barons and the people in general and which also challenged the notion of the king being above the law.

The Rev’d Samuel Rutherford, a Presbyterian, wrote his *Lex, Rex: Or the Law and the Prince* in 1644. The main thesis, as implied in the title, is that the law is King, and so the king is *under* the law and not above it, a notion that was regarded as treasonously contrary to the tradition of the ‘divine right of kings’.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 259.

<sup>44</sup> See the arguments for this view by John Warwick Montgomery, *Human Rights & Human Dignity*, Zondervan, 1986. 105-188.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 208.

<sup>46</sup> Cited in *ibid*, 206.

<sup>47</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *Under The Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization*, 250 and Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, Atheneum, 1980, 105.

<sup>48</sup> See Francis Schaeffer’s comments in his *A Christian Manifesto*, in *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, Volume 5, Crossway Books, 1982, 473-476.

## *The Arts*

Another area of the Church's transforming influence on societies is in the realm of the Arts, especially with reference to music and art. Though a somewhat subjective issue, if the average knowledgeable person is quizzed about 'the international greats' in music and art, in all likelihood the names of Christians would emerge: such as da Vinci, Michelangelo and Rembrandt in art and Bach, Handel, Schubert and Mozart in music.<sup>49</sup>

There are other areas of societal life that have been transformed or challenged by the Church. In some of the areas we have explored, the Church now stands guilty of deliberate abandonment and must now reclaim or reengage turf while in others she needs to redouble her efforts against a growing tide of secularism.

The Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need vision—the ability to detect and discern *what is beneath what appears*—as it intentionally engages modern societies in order to effect transformation within them.

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<sup>49</sup> See Leland Ryken, 'Literature in Christian Perspective' and Edmund P. Clowney, 'Living Art: Christian Experience and the Arts', in D.A. Carson et al (eds.), *God and Culture*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993, 215-253; Gene Edward Veith, Jr., *State of the Arts: From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe*, Crossway Books, 1991; William D. Spencer et al (eds.), *God Through the Looking Glass: Glimpses From the Arts*, Baker Books, 1998; H. R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture*, InterVarsity Press, 1973.