

THE ALEPH COURSE.

6 : THE CHURCH.

WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCH ?

We've already mentioned it as a source; now I want to talk about it as an institution.

Or, a least, I think I ought to talk about it as an institution. I'm not at all sure that I want to do so, because in some ways it isn't a very edifying topic.

THEORY :

The church is the Christians' "official" organisation in the world.
It is the "body of Christ", carrying on the work of Jesus throughout the ages.
It is the channel of God's love to the world.

PRACTICE :

The church is divided into very many fragments, some of which regard the others as agents of the devil. (Others are less dogmatic.)
The church is by no means always as pure and honourable as one might expect from the body of Christ.

THE CHURCH IS -

"One, holy, catholic, and apostolic church" - or, at least, that's what it's supposed to be.

<p>NOTE : Approximately, "catholic" means "universal"; "apostolic" means "missionary".</p>
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I think most of the "mainstream" western churches, directly or indirectly sprung from the Roman Catholic church, use the Nicene creed in their set services, and therefore profess to believe in "One, holy, catholic, and apostolic church".

ONE ?

In fact, they are clearly, in secular terms, several different competing organisations - all too visibly so, as they conspicuously waste their resources by all attempting to maintain their own buildings, staff, and services.

HOLY ?

How do you measure holiness ?

Fairly certainly not by capacity for internal fights, and even schism into rival bodies.
Fairly certainly not by partiality to rich people, or white people.
Fairly certainly not by following society's manners and excesses rather than leading society.
And fairly certainly not by judging people by standards they would probably not recognise (which goes for judging themselves in earlier times).

CATHOLIC ?

Most (?) denominations claim to be catholic. Some avoid the awkward question of other denominations by claiming that their members are the only true Christians. It's logically consistent.

Do Christians really love one another ? Northern Ireland ?

APOSTOLIC ?

The relationship between the church and society has often been touchy, and probably should be so. In proclaiming the principles of Christianity it is likely that there will be frequent conflicts with the prevailing customs and standards.

The history of established churches, linked to secular authorities, is not particularly encouraging. Compromise is one danger; complacency is another. There really was an attitude that to be British was to be Christian - so (for the people) why would you need to go to church ? - and (for the church) why would you need any local evangelistic effort ?

Overseas missions were more energetically pursued. It's easy to be rude about them in hindsight, but certainly unjust in (perhaps) most cases.

STILL HERE.

It is tempting to regard this as among the more astonishing miracles.

Despite the frequent and sometimes extreme departures of the church from its own principles, and many attacks from other sorts of organisation, it has survived.

One might suppose that the reason was connected with the church's threats of hell-fire and damnation. That isn't convincing; much of historical part of the Old Testament of the Bible is concerned with broadly similar threats to the Jews, and it didn't stop them deserting en masse.

I would prefer to believe that there has always been enough of the Christian ideal preserved in the church to bring comfort and light to those in need. It is certainly possible to argue today that there is a lot more disagreement and doctrinal strife in the "higher" levels of the church than among the "lower" people, who don't know the doctrines but do know some of the Bible stories. I can't prove it, and in any case those statements are oversimplified, but I think there's some basis for it.

WHICH IS TO SAY -

- that the church is HUMAN, INCONSISTENT, FRAGMENTED, COMPROMISED, STUPID.

All of that. And that's when it isn't being POWERFUL, DICTATORIAL, OPPRESSIVE, EXPLOITATIVE.

But from time to time the church, or part of it, or one Christian is LOVING, SELF-SACRIFICING, GLORIOUS, RIGHT. And that might make up for the rest.

Always, the church is a very human organisation, very easily exploited by people with barrows to push, snake-oil merchants, self-serving opportunists. Most of us are fairly ordinary well intentioned honest Christians, conditioned by our denominational background, but for the most part much readier to accept and believe other people in the church than to distrust, until we have a great deal of distressing experience.

So the barrow-pushers, etc., can comparatively easily get to positions of some authority, from which they can say and do things that don't reflect the positions of most Christians.

And anyway THE FRAGMENTED CHURCH IS WHAT WE'VE GOT.

If we want Christian companionship (and we do), that's where we have to find it.

If you find the party lines uncomfortable (I do) go for one of the "mainstream" churches. Personal experience suggest that Anglicans and Methodists are so tolerant they'll accept anyone who professes to be a Christian.

If you have really bizarre views, it's kind not to shout about them. Why hurt the other people ? They don't want to hurt you.

It is perhaps fair to ask WHY DOESN'T GOD SORT THEM OUT ? Surely He can't be enthusiastic about the fragmentation and confusion.

Alternatively, one can argue that, as God doesn't sort them out, perhaps He's not nearly as fussed about it as we are. Perhaps there's a lesson in that.