

Introduction

If 'Church Life' sounds unfamiliar, think of the phrase 'family life'. We are all individuals, with our own feelings and abilities; we have our own personal lives. The great majority of us, however, have also experienced family life. We grew up in the shared life of the family, and later most people also enter into a new family relationship. Similarly, the Christian life is lived by individuals, but it is also intended to be a shared life. It is a life lived together with our brothers and sisters in Christ; it is church life.

In the book of Acts we find that, on the day of Pentecost, those who came to believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour formed the church in Jerusalem. As the gospel spread, wherever groups of people believed they formed the church in the place where they lived. Nearly all the letters in the New Testament were written to churches in different cities. Even those that were written to individuals were still concerned with churches. The last book in the Bible, Revelation, was written to the seven churches of Asia. A large part of the New Testament is really about church life, which is the subject of this book.

In those early days there was only one church in each town to which the gospel had been brought. Each church was a local church; that is, it was the church of Jesus Christ in that

place, that locality. There was no other church, nor could there be. This, of course is not the case in these days. There are all sorts of different churches; in many countries towns have numbers of churches in them.

These churches generally have differences of beliefs and practices. Such differences are very important when they concern the inspiration of the Bible and the gospel message itself. This book is based on a belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible and its authority for every aspect of Christian doctrine and practice. Quite often, however, there is general agreement about the heart of the gospel message; differences are more about matters like church government or styles of worship. This book does not attempt to say anything about how these lesser differences may be dealt with; that is not its purpose. However, it does have in mind churches of a certain type and so this must be acknowledged here in the Introduction.

The churches in view are, firstly, independent churches. This does not mean that they have nothing to do with any other churches. Rather, each church recognises that it is governed by, and answerable to, Jesus Christ himself. The Bible is the Word of God and the church looks to it for the mind of Christ, and to the Holy Spirit for insight into Christ's will and grace to do what he says. The pattern for this is seen clearly in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. Of course, a church can learn from other churches and from individual Christians, but only to learn the will of Jesus Christ as it is seen in his Word. Each church is accountable directly to him as its head and Lord.

Secondly, the book is also written with the understanding that baptism is for believers and not infants, whether or not these are the children of Christian parents. All the first male believers in Jesus who were baptised had already been

circumcised as infants, receiving the sign of God's covenant with Israel. However, on believing in Jesus every one of them was commanded to be baptised in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38) and this command continues for those born in the future and all who are afar off (Acts 2:39).

Thirdly, spiritual leadership in the church belongs to those who are described as elders, pastors or overseers. There are also others who serve in more practical ways and these are called deacons. A church should have some who serve by spiritual oversight and others who do so in more practical service.

These three aspects of church life are taken as basic, though more will be said about them later on. It is in churches of this sort that the book seeks to explain the nature, privileges, demands and blessings of church life. Most of what is said here will actually be useful for all churches that take seriously what the Bible says, even though they might not agree with every detail of interpretation.

Do not think that this book has been written so that every church may alter the way it does things simply to follow what is said here. Rather it is written to explore and set out principles from the Bible which may need to be applied in different ways in different circumstances. If change needs to take place this should be done sensitively, often little by little as the whole church comes to agree. Wise pastoral care is always needed in all the different stages and developments in church life.

No one book, apart from the Bible itself, can be simply applied all over the world. Churches which develop and grow in very different cultures may well apply principles from the Bible in different ways. It is important to follow what the Bible says, but when the gospel first comes to an area it may not be possible for groups of Christians to function exactly as they would like or as they will in time. It is also becoming

more and more important for churches to be able to bring in fully people from different cultures and backgrounds. The aim is for every believer to feel at home in the church.