From the \textit{Jüngergemeinde} of Jesus to the early Christian church* \\

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ABSTRACT \\
In order for the church to return to Jesus, it does not suffice to refer to Mt 16:18. On the contrary, one should differentiate between the \textit{‘Jüngergemeinde’} (community of the disciples) called together by Jesus, and the \textit{‘church’}, which evolved out of the \textit{‘Jüngergemeinde’} after the death and resurrection of Christ, and which took on its form with the help and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Based on the words of Jesus, this growing church is dependent upon his inspiration and instruction. This is verified in the New Testament by the close relationship between the church and Jesus, from whom it has to learn anew in every situation, by the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which preserves the church in the succession of Jesus and the apostles, regardless of all change due to development.

1 HOW DID IT BEGIN? \\
Today the question surrounding the origins of the church is often posed in a critical sense. It is said that the church should be reminded of what it originally was and still should be, and rightly so. If we want a renewed church, then this renewal cannot simply consist of a superficial accommodation of the new standards of current times. What is necessary is a renewal on the basis of the church’s \textit{origins} as testified in the New Testament. However, we must admit that the church of our day, if it is to be a church suited for the transition from the second to the third millennium, cannot simply be a copy of the early Christian church or of that which we imagine it to have been. Judging by the testimonies about the early church, we should not reflect on an established institutional structure but rather on the message of Jesus and the original mission of the church.

What is the \textit{purpose} of the church if not to fulfill what Jesus really intended. Can Jesus’ real intention be fulfilled merely through the existence \\

* This article is dedicated to Professor J H Roberts, whose hospitality I enjoyed when I was guest lecturer of UNISA. It was during this visit that I discovered his particular interest in the subject of ‘ekklesia’ in the New Testament and today. My article is based on a lecture on the same subject held in my native country and retains much of the lecture style.
of the church alone? What is the real work of Jesus if it is not identical with
the present church or the early church as testified in the New Testament?

Contemplation of Jesus’ given mission is an essential part of church
renewal. What is the purpose of the church? When we take a look at current
expectations and opinions the church has no problems with its charitable
organisations. In fact, they are currently very much in demand: social work,
kindergartens, schools, hospitals, homes for senior citizens, assistance for
under developed countries and, as always, such services as ministerial work,
counselling (for example, regarding unwanted pregnancies) and telephone
counselling, among other things.

But is this the real purpose of the church? How is the actual mission of
the church expressed in all these things, if the actual mission is preaching the
gospel, instruction, administering the sacraments, celebrating mass, learning
to live according to Christian principles and developing a Christian con­
science? Considering that from the beginnings of early Christianity preach­
ing the gospel to all people (cf Mt 28:19) has played an important role in
determining what the church understands itself to be, how is the subject of
missionary work seen today? Today we speak of evangelisation or neo­
evangelisation, which for us, being part of the predominantly Christian
Western hemisphere, has long since become a duty for us.

I have the impression that today all of us need to be constantly reminded
of the beginnings of the church, especially as far as its essentials are con­
cerned.

2 PRE-EASTER AND POST-EASTER BEGINNINGS

2.1 Where does the church begin?

The New Testament offers us this information: the church begins with Jesus.
This is mentioned in the well-known pronouncement of Jesus in Matthew
16:18–19: ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the
gates of hell will not prevail against it.’ This is one of the few passages in this
Gospel in which the church (Greek: ekklesia) is named per se.¹ This is Jesus’
promise and intention for the founding of the church. However, it is a highly
controversial statement among theologians. In what sense could Jesus have
spoken about the ‘church’, if he did so at all? Did his message not actually
refer to the kingdom of God? But the kingdom of God is not identical to the
church. As Alfred Loisy (1857–1940) put it, ‘Jesus annonciat le royaume, et

¹ The other passage is Mt 18:15–17, in which, however, ‘ekklesia’ is meant more in
the sense of ‘community’.
c'est l'église qui est venu." However, Loisy's words were meant much more positively than church critics later wished to admit. Loisy considered a certain implicit consistency between the proclamation of the kingdom of God by Jesus and the development of the church in its post-Easter structure. Indeed, there is quite a relevant relationship between the prophecy and work of Jesus and the formation of the post-Easter church. I will try to make this clear by citing words spoken by Jesus at the Last Supper. In spite of all the setbacks He endured, Jesus always adhered to the prophecy of the coming kingdom of God during his entire life on earth, and even confirmed this prophecy in the face of death at the Last Supper, when he said to his disciples; 'Amen, amen I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God' (Mk 14:25 par Lk 16:18). These words, taken directly from the story of Christ's passion, awake in us expectations of the future coming of God's kingdom realised in the form of the eschatological feast. At the same time, the disciples are told: 'Do this (break bread and drink wine) in memory of me.' That means, there is a time of remembrance of Jesus after his death which is connected with the repetition of the Last Supper. The disciples are told by Jesus himself of 'the time of the church' after his death (and resurrection). This is a time of remembrance of Jesus and the awaiting of the last coming of Christ and the kingdom of God. During this time Christ's message of his coming kingdom does not simply remain dormant, as if postponed. On the contrary, the new church, which evolved from the post-Easter reorganisation of the 'Jungergemeinde', is called to proclaim anew the gospel of Christ and, in so doing, to confirm the people's hopes of the fulfillment of the prophecy which no one on earth, not even the church can attain on its own as it comes to us as a concession of God. That is why we pray: 'Thy kingdom come...'
(Lk 11:2 par Mt 6:10.) Thus, it is clear, judging by Jesus' work and his will, what the church should be after his death and resurrection: a community of faith and hope. The third part of this well-known theological triplet then appears as if by itself: love. At any rate, it fits in clearly with the concept that the early church had of itself as conceived in fulfillment of the testament of the Lord (see Jn 13:34; 15:12).

It may now become clear again what Jesus' words about the founding of the church (Mt 16:18-19) mean, and what they do not mean. Jesus did not think of the founding of a church in the sense of a new institution. The

3 How little self-evident Jesus' words regarding the foundation of the church are, including those in the Gospel of Matthew, is indicated by the fact that, according to Mt 15:24, Jesus was sent 'only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. His words to the apostles about missioning in 10:5 can be understood in the same sense: 'Go
meaning of the passage cited can be found in Jesus’ earthly life and work, especially in his message about the kingdom of God. If taken in its entirety, the word about the founding of the church forms, as it were, a key-sentence with reference to which the evangelist based the manifestation of the post-easter church in the life and work of Jesus on earth. Nowhere in the Bible, in any of the other gospels, is it expressed so clearly as here. In them, however, the reality of the church is implicitly founded on the life and work of Jesus. A particular question arises in this context regarding the relation to Israel, designated from the beginning as the chosen people; a question concerning Jesus as well as the early Christian church. This is an important question within the present-day Jewish-Christian dialogue, but it would have to be treated separately.

2.2 The main impulse provided by meeting Christ after the resurrection

Now, if everything concerning the future church is already based on the work of Jesus until his death what meaning does the resurrection of Christ from the dead have for the church? Are Jesus’ proclamation that God’s reign is near and the calling of the disciples the most important things, or is it not the resurrection of Christ and the regathering of the disciples inspired by the resurrection? Which of the two should the church emphasize more in order to gain and preserve its identity: Jesus’ work on earth or his resurrection? After all, the mission of the disciples is derived from the resurrection of the Lord in Matthew 28:16-20 (as well as Lk 24:46-49; Acts 1:7-8 and Jn 20, 21-23). Moreover, according to Luke, the power from on high, namely the Holy Spirit, is promised to them.

Therefore, the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is of particular importance for the founding of the church. We have to combine both arguments: the laying of the church’s foundation in the work of Jesus on earth and nowhere among the gentiles, rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'. However, the way to the gentiles is opened by Jesus’ death and resurrection. This is the universal mission command to the disciples (in 28:19-20: ‘Go and make disciples of all nations...’), which corresponds to the concept of the Church as extending beyond the borders of Israel and consisting of Jews and gentiles.

The question as to the authenticity of Christ’s church-founding words in Mt 16:18 cannot be answered by just determining whether Christ spoke literally of ‘my church’. It is the correspondence of the circumstances described with the main purpose of the mission Jesus took upon himself and fulfilled. It cannot be decided only on the basis of an ‘ipsissimum verbum’ of Jesus, but rather on the basis of his ‘ipsissima intentio’ (W. Thüring). For more information about this question see also: A. Vögtle, 'Das Problem der Herkunft von Mt 16, 17-19', in: Offenbarungsgeschehen und Wirkungsgeschichte. Freiburg 1985. 109-104.
the crucial impetus of the Easter-Pentecostal events. Without the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit, without the appearance of Christ after the resurrection, the initial work of Christ on earth would have come to nothing. Through the Easter-Pentecostal events, the pre-Easter beginnings gain their powerful force. Therefore, we cannot underestimate the discussion about the resurrection of Christ or make it too easy for ourselves (for example, with Gerd Lüdemann’s thesis) and certainly we cannot ignore the resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles, especially when we consider Jesus’ life on earth, his prophetic-messianic sermon, his personal behaviour and his help and work for mankind. Both have their merits. The modern Christian, however, must be told in no uncertain terms that unless one believes in the resurrection of the Lord and the continuation of his work through the power of the Holy Spirit, the church will lose its supporting foundation. The church derives its form from the Easter-Pentecostal foundation.

2.3 The formation of the church according to the Acts of the Apostles

In Acts 2, Peter delivers the first of his sermons inspired by the Holy Spirit after the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles (2:14-36). It begins with a lengthy exegesis on the subject of the descent of the Holy Spirit according to Joel 3:1-5 (Acts 2:16-21). It continues with the testimony about Christ and the role of God in Christ’s life; about his rejection by the Israelites and his resurrection from the dead and his ascension to the right hand of God.


6 This approach is employed with outstanding exegetic competence and personal interest in the well-known book by Gerhard Lohfink: Wie hat Jesus Gemeinde gewollt? Freiburg 1982. With the model of the church as an alternative society, Lohfink is inspired by the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ with its high ideals of the renunciation of violence and force. The socio-ethical imperatives of Jesus’ message indeed become binding through Jesus’ messianic-prophetic, forceful charisma, which, as such, can only be recognised in light of the death and the resurrection of Christ, and which can only be perceived by the church which evolved from this fundamental event. The ‘Jüngergemeinde’, which, according to the testimony of the gospel, was called by Jesus to follow him is ‘only’ the pre-conception of the post-Easter church. See K. Kertelge, ‘Jesus und die Gemeinde’, in: K. Müller (ed), Die Aktion Jesu und die Re-aktion der Kirche. Würzburg 1972, 101-117. See, however, the new publication by G. Lohfink, Braucht Gott die Kirche? Zur Theologie des Volkes Gottes, Freiburg 1998, in which Lohfink differentiates more strongly between the disciples and the post-easterly church (see p. 206 and footnote 295).
Regarding the ascension there is again a lengthy exegesis (Ps 16: 8-11 [G] and other Psalms). It ends with an appeal to the entire house of Israel (v 36) and a call upon the Israelites present to convert and be baptised. Thus, it concludes with the words: ‘On this day some 3000 odd people were added’ v 41). Immediately thereafter follows a testimony about the young church: ‘They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship (koinonia), to the breaking of bread and prayer’ (v 42).

In Acts 2, it becomes clear that Luke sees Pentecost as preparing the way for the growing young church. In the beginning, the disciples gather in prayer in the upper room in Jerusalem while waiting for the promise of the Holy Spirit (1:12-14); certainly a positive first picture of a community. According to 2:1-13, the Holy Spirit descends upon them, and just at that moment others join them. They are named according to their national and regional origin. The ‘Urgemeinde’ makes up the central community. Those who have joined later are addressed and asked to become members of the community through baptism and faith. The number (3000) who joined ‘on this day’ is quite considerable. However, the deliberate moulding of the report according to Luke’s concept of the church is evident here. It does not confine itself to the original pentecostal community. The Holy Spirit causes the early development of the community into a universal church. This is an idealised scene which Luke presents here. However, it does reflect the law of growth of the young church with the help of the Holy Spirit. It is in this context that the first general view is to be understood. In it, the basic elements of the church from the viewpoint of its early history are mentioned: ‘They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and the community and to the breaking of bread and prayer’ (2:42).

The teaching of the apostles: The gospel, which the apostles preached and which is to reach everyone in the world, takes on the form of apostolic teaching within the church as in catechism, baptismal creed, and symbols through which Christian identity is determined.

The community (=koinonia): It comes into being on the basis of the gospel. It consists of being a community with one common faith and the belief in one Lord. Because of this belief the church becomes communio and develops a communal structure, which most definitely contains ‘democratic’ elements, but which are not identical with the political concept of democracy. The ‘community’ is and remains the church, because of participation. That is the original meaning of koinonia; being part of the one Lord and the one Spirit (see 1 Cor 12: the ‘Body of Christ’).

The breaking of the bread: It is with these words that the ‘Urkirche’ describes the eucharistic feast. According to 1 Corinthians 10: 16-17, by taking part in
the Lord's supper, we all become part of the ecclesiastical Body of Christ, which is the one church. The eucharistic community and the church community are therefore interdependent.

The prayer: This is a comprehensive expression for religious service, which preserves something of the early Christian community's sharing of the Jewish prayer tradition (see Acts 2:46a; Mt 6:5-13), which, however, is also connected with everyday Christianity and with sharing the social-missionary initiatives of Christians in the present world. The apostle Paul saw this all-encompassing service, in Romans 12, as a reference to his message of justification (Ch 1-11) as the primary moral of his message: '...to present your bodies as a sacrifice...which is your spiritual service' (12:1).

3 CONCLUSION: THE church ACCORDING TO THE WILL OF CHRIST

The church according to the will of Jesus Christ is not simply an utopic idea which remains unattainable in some distant future. On the contrary, it is the tangible church as it evolved with the help of the Holy Spirit after the resurrection. This is the church as it came into being under certain historic circumstances in its early days: the church, which, in spite of all novelty of the early Christian spiritual experience is, nevertheless, indebted to the inheritance of the Old Testament and the Judaic faith in God. Moreover, the church could not exist without borrowing culturally from its environment, but it did so without becoming a syncretistic religious movement, because of its orientation towards Jesus and its adherence to the apostolic tradition.

This, of course, is not an obvious historical fact known to us through nearly 2000 years of church history. It is a vocation and an obligation which the church has set for itself at the turn of the third millenium. Even after 2000 years, it is a church which is still in the process of formation and development. However, with all the growth and change connected with it, it still all revolves around the identity of the church of Jesus Christ. If I am not mistaken, we are experiencing a conspicuous break with tradition in the present day changes in the church and society, which cannot simply be accepted as absolutely necessary. The church preserves its identity by reflecting on its original mission, which derives from the Kyrios. The church is church in this world, but not of this world (see Jn 18:36). Today there is much reason to remember this criterion, without overlooking the signals of the Holy Spirit in the 'signs of the times' (Lk 12:56). However, the future orientation of the church can only succeed if we do not gullibly rely upon this or that sign (and upon the prophets of those signs), but rather when we differentiate also between true and false prophets, a differentiation which Paul considered to
be an indispensable charisma of the community (1 Cor 12:10, cf Mt 7:15). Only with the assurance of its *differentia specifica* can the church remain in a position to fulfill its given mission in the world, for the good of the world. The church can be assured that the most crucial elements of its formation are contained in the work of Jesus Christ, and that it will find its way into the future by reflecting on this foundation.

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