

## Whose church is it anyway?

I once heard about a young boy with a flair for model-making. He spent many long and careful hours designing and building a sailing-boat which, with great pride, he eventually launched on the local pond. With a thrill he watched the wind catch the sails and send his creation racing free across the water.

But his joy soon turned to concern, and then anguish, as he witnessed its headlong rush towards the reed-bed in the middle of the pond. Stuck fast, out of depth and beyond reach, his boat seemed lost for ever and the little boy returned home brokenhearted.

Some days later, passing a junk shop in town, his eye was suddenly caught by the familiar lines of the boat he had made. There, displayed prominently in the shop window, was his very own creation! It bore a price tag now - one which demanded every penny he possessed. Without a moment's hesitation he ran home, snatched up all that he had and returned with joy to purchase what was already his own.

As he stood outside the shop, holding his beloved boat in his hands once more, he was heard to exclaim, 'I made you and now I've bought you. You're mine twice over!'



### **Bought at a price**

As Christians, we too are God's twice over. Can you imagine the tender love with which he created us, a people to be his very own, and the deep anguish he must have felt as we turned our backs on him and plunged headlong to our own destruction?

But his love outshone the disappointment and rejection he must have felt, and he determined to bring us back to himself: 'God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16).

It is a vast, world-embracing love, but Paul focused it, undiminished in its intensity, upon the individual when he said, 'The Son of God . . . loved *me*, and delivered himself up for *me*' (Galatians 2:20 NASB). That applies to you, too. The Son of God loves you and delivered himself up for you. He chose to redeem each one of us individually, to buy us back even though, like the little boy with the sailing-boat, it cost him everything he had.

All this has a bearing on the church-related questions we have faced in the previous chapters: Where am I? What am I doing here? What does God require of me? Am I really experiencing the power and presence of God in my church situation?

Why should we bother with such questions?

That it's for our own benefit is clear - but it goes far beyond that. God's love, which motivated our redemption, is not just emotion or easy-going affection. Its expression in redemption implies a *claim to ownership*.

In everyday terms, redemption means to recover ownership at a price, just as you recover the title deeds to a house when you have paid off a loan secured upon it. Its explanation in Scripture is similar: 'You are not your own; you were bought at a price' (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

God bought us back from the power of sin and death with nothing less than the precious blood of the Lord Jesus Christ



(1 Peter 1:18-19). We belong to him. In the light of such demonstrated love, and the righteous demand of loyalty to Jesus which naturally follows, how can we even entertain the thought of trying to live for ourselves? On the contrary, we must be willing to say, like Paul, that whether we live or die we belong to the Lord (Romans 14:7-8).

King David said, 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it' (Psalm 24:1). Everything belongs to God, but that is doubly true of the Christian, who not only belongs to God by creation but has now been bought back by redemption.

He made us and he bought us. We are his twice over.

### **A chosen people**

The Bible tells us that God is concerned with 'taking from the Gentiles a people for himself' (Acts 15:14) – 'a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God' (1 Peter 2:9).

You may have been thrilled by the love of Jesus for the world (John 3:16) and by his love for you as an individual (Galatians 2:20). But are you also thrilled, or even remotely touched, by the glorious truth that 'Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless' (Ephesians 5:25-27)?

Jesus died for the church. Not our church, but his church, a church exclusively possessed by him and one whose loyalty, like that of a wife to a husband, should be to no other.

The church cannot belong to a nation, being shackled to the state, to a practice, a doctrine or an administration. Neither can it belong to an experience or an ideal. No, it belongs to God. It is 'the church of God, which he bought with his own blood' (Acts 20:28).

Why is it, then, that while we seem ready to accept the claims



of Jesus upon our individual lives, we also seem prepared to accept the glaring discrepancies within our 'church' lives?

The truth is, if we don't allow Christ to rule 'in church' then we aren't really allowing him to rule us as individuals either. To quote a well-known saying, 'If he isn't Lord of all, then he isn't Lord at all.'

### **Built to a pattern**

Knowing that the church belongs to God, can you really believe that he who paid such a price to possess it should then abandon it to its own devices, especially as far as its structure is concerned?

That would be like a man spending a fortune on building materials and labour to build the house of his dreams only to allow the workmen to do their own thing and end up with something more like a warehouse than the luxury residence he had set his heart on.

No. Jesus said, 'I will build my church' (Matthew 16:18), and the Bible repeatedly demonstrates that he is intimately concerned with how his church should be.

The book of Exodus contains several chapters on the building of the tabernacle by the Israelites in the wilderness. After giving detailed instructions about every part of its construction and contents, God warned Moses, 'See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain' (Exodus 25:40). This command, quoted in Hebrews 8:5 and again in Acts 7:44, contains an important principle: *The place of God's presence must be built to God's plan.*

The same was true of the great temple built by Solomon. His father, King David, had intended to build the temple himself but had been instructed by God to leave it for his future son. However, the Lord gave David precise plans for its construction which he was later to pass on to Solomon. ' "All this," David said, "I have in writing from the hand of the Lord upon me, and he gave me understanding in all the details of



the plan'' (1 Chronicles 28:19).

Again, Ezekiel has four long chapters (40-43) describing his revelation 'in visions of God' of an ideal and glorious temple. God's commission to the prophet was, 'Describe the temple to the people. . . . Let them consider the plan, and . . . make known to them the design. . . . Write these down before them so that they may be faithful to its design and follow all its regulations' (Ezekiel 43:10-11).

God has already prepared a design for us to follow in the church. The question is, are we following it? Are you following it?

Remember the do-it-yourself man who failed to look at the instructions properly and ended up with distorted furniture? It wasn't that he failed to consult the instructions at all, just that he was too busy getting on with what he thought was right to take the time and trouble to obtain the full instructions and find out what he should have been doing.

Let's avoid making the same mistake; God isn't looking for a distorted church.

Remember, too, that although Christ has called us as individuals he has also called us as a body. We are a chosen people, and as a people we must build together. Not just one do-it-yourself man following a set of directions alone, but a group of people, one in heart and mind, building to one precise and complete set of instructions - the Word of God.

### **No longer living in the shadow**

The past is often a shadow of the future. The first television broadcast was just a shadow of the day when pin-sharp pictures would be transmitted live across the world by satellite. The first time an aircraft lifted off the ground under its own power hinted at a day to come when people would be able to travel from London to New York in under four hours - a distance of some three and a half thousand miles.

The previous was a glimpse of the now, and, as the writer



to the Hebrews tells us, it is no different with the things of God. Referring to the Levitical priesthood, he writes: 'There are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle, "See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain"' (Hebrews 8:4-5).

The Old Testament tabernacle and temple were merely copies and shadows of things to emerge in the future. They were built to provide hints and shadowy glimpses of better things in store.

As Christians we are now living in that future. We no longer live in the deep shadows of religious mystery but in the direct sunlight of God's purpose and love. Everything pictured and prophesied in the Old Testament becomes a reality for us, 'for everything that was written in the past was written to teach us' (Romans 15:4). The previous was a glimpse of God's 'now' plan.

We understand now that God does not live in a building (Acts 7:48) and that no bricks-and-mortar edifice can properly be called the house of God. Architectural grandeur and extravagant décor in our meeting-places is totally irrelevant as far as the presence of God is concerned. The New Testament conceives the temple of God, not as an inanimate structure made *by* people, but as a living structure made *of* people, the people of God: 'God's temple is sacred, and you are that temple' (1 Corinthians 3:17).

Peter describes it like this: 'You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house' (1 Peter 2:5). And Paul declares: 'You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the corner stone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit' (Ephesians 2:19-22 NASB).

We, the body of Christian believers – not the place where



we meet – are Christ's church. And even from the few verses just quoted something of a building plan begins to emerge for this spiritual house made with living stones.

It is 'built upon' a foundation, indicating that it is to have an unshakable stability.

It is 'built together', joined stone to stone, displaying its unbreakable community.

It is 'built . . . into', declaring that it has an ultimate destiny.

Yes, God does have a plan. And as a people belonging to Christ, individually and as a body, what will our response to it be? Will we allow God to implement it in our lives or will we stand in his way?

Do you remember Bob, the former church deacon who left his church and his emerging ministry to find a place where he could build to God's design? Before that he was already building. He was already zealous for God. But he wasn't building the house God desired.

How about you?