



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“Some of my friends have said to me that the church should be the servant of the community. I am not quite sure what they mean. Would you please comment on this and perhaps indicate what you think the church is for so that I can give an answer?”

THIS reader poses a problem. So much teaching is given concerning the church that it would be easy to travel many ways in answering and still not satisfy the questioner. However, I am asked to indicate what I think “the church is for” and I take this to mean that the questioner is asking ‘what is the function of the church’, or ‘what does the church do’.

The Popular View

The ‘in’ phrase today is ‘community care’. Sociologists have taught us about ourselves, our culture, the society in which we live and the communities of which we are members. Social services exist and give help to the sick, the lonely, the destitute, the aged. We are now conditioned to seeking these services when we have a specific need and we expect them to be available when we do seek them.

It seems to me that organised religion is being viewed as a service also, similar to the ones we have mentioned. As with the social services, people expect the church to be there when they want to make use of it. Such times would be christenings, weddings, and funerals. The church would then be expected to baptise babies for sins which didn’t exist; tie knots that the state will undertake to untie when convenient; and bury in hope when there is no hope. Small wonder that clergymen are objecting to their churches being used as clearing houses for the service of the community.

The Unpopular View

The above presupposes that organised religion, in all of its denominational aspects, constitutes 'the church'. The vast majority of people believe this to be the case and they resent being told that they may have believed something which is not quite true. I believe that before we can tell people what the church *is for* we must tell them *what it is*. We must point out to them that it is the Body of Christ and that He is its Head. We must tell them that it is a called-out community of those who have heard the gospel, believed it, repented, confessed Christ as Saviour, and have been immersed in water for the remission of sins. They must then realise that they are part of the church; that the church is not a service organisation but that they are participators with Christ IN HIS CHURCH. Then they will understand that the church's function is their function, and that their question should be, "what wilt thou have me to do?"

Paul's View

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul wrote, so he said, "That thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). A household suggests a family, and the household of God would suggest the family of God. This is precisely what the Church is, the family of God, and we are born into that family by our obedience to the gospel; this is the new birth (see John 3:3; 1 Cor. 4:15).

The church is also the pillar and ground of the truth. This is indicative of a pillar sunk deep into the ground and holding up a building; so the church, bedded deep on the firm foundation of the gospel of Christ, upholds that gospel like a beacon to the world. It is this work which is precious and important to the church. The great work of the church is not to act as a benevolent institution, nor is it to become a social community centre. Christ came primarily to save men's souls, not their bodies. Whatever else the church may do must be seconded to this great objective — the salvation of men's souls through obedience to the gospel. Now we are in a position to say what the church should do.

Maintenance

One meaning of maintenance is 'to keep something in the same condition as it was when it first started'. The church has a clear objective; it is to maintain the purity of the church as Christ gave it. Writing to Ephesus Paul said that Christ had cleansed and sanctified the church, "that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:26,27). In industry many people pay lip service to planned maintenance, that is, a systematic examination of machinery and buildings, etc., but it seldom works; too many other things get in the way. Isn't this true of our maintenance of the church also? Too many other things get in the way and we neglect that for which Christ died. But nevertheless, to maintain the church is the responsibility of the Christians who comprise it and we shall have to give an account of our stewardship to God one day.

Preservation

The act of preservation is very clearly demonstrated by God. Peter says concerning God, "And spared not the old world, but saved (preserved) Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). This preservation teaching is continued in Christ, for Jude says, "to them that are sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ" (Jude 1). The continuous preservation of the believer is indicated without any reference to time.

If, therefore, preservation is in Christ, and Christ is the Head of the church, then it follows that the church should be preserving the message of salvation for which Christ died. "This treasure" (the gospel), says Paul, "is contained in earthen vessels". He reinforces this when he writes to Timothy. "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust" (1 Tim. 6:20). Well, the gospel is still committed to the church, and it is the function of the church to preserve it.

Contention

Jude says, "it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). The word here signifies to contend about a thing as a combatant does; to see the contention as an intensive contest. It is still necessary to earnestly contend for the faith. We are in a life and death struggle with the forces of evil, against spiritual wickedness in high places. The church should not dissipate its energies on internecine struggles when the enemy is at the gates. The function of the church is to contend earnestly for the faith.

So what should the church do?

It should take the gospel of Christ and maintain, preserve, and contend for it. It should proclaim that gospel from the housetops so that none should misunderstand it. This is why it exists and this is what it should do. We should present it in such a way that people would not just want to come to it on three occasions during their lives, but would want to make the church their way of life because that life would be hid with Him who bought the church with His blood, and sanctified it for maximum use in the world.