

**EPIPHANY 2009: IN SEARCH OF THE CHURCH**  
**Introduction**

One of the great powers of Christ working in our lives is that he empowers us to imagine and live into a new and better present and future. This future is for us individually but also is for us as a community. In this study we will look at how the church can be both the body and presence of Christ, allowing us to live into this new reality.

Before we look at the aspects of the New Testament Church that are presented in scripture, we will look at some characteristics of the churches portrayed there.

- 1) **Organized in households**: this was the basic structure of Roman society. These households though went beyond the nuclear family and included more of the extended group.

There were two models for households in Roman society. The 1<sup>st</sup> was the male dominated one with a hierarchical structure. The 2<sup>nd</sup> was a voluntary group formed for trade or vocational purposes. This was more open and classless. In the New Testament, both terms are used to refer to the church and there is a certain degree of tension between the two understandings. The churches were not simply hierarchical since Jesus is the head, not the most senior male.

As Paul said in **Galatians 3:28 (NRSV)** *[t]here is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* This is a new way of living together in community and there was (is) a struggle to make it a reality. The early church sought to convert the traditional patterns of social organization to fit the new Kingdom orientation and this created tension. Yet, the goal was that this new household would provide a new community for believers to belong to and that this would become the primary community for the believer.

- 2) **Sectarian in Nature**: the early churches were not a subset of the dominant culture but existed at the edge and outside of the mainstream Roman society.

The early church pledged its allegiance to Jesus, rather than Rome and in so doing put itself at odds with the dominant culture and values. For Christians, privilege and power weren't primary. Rather, the "exiles, aliens, slaves, widows and orphans" were all invited to experience the new reality in Christ and the new community in the church.

The church and its members functioned as a sect over and against the Roman culture since its allegiance to Jesus was a choice made that put them in conflict with Rome. Love and acceptance were at the heart of the community thereby making the church a primary place of belonging in urban areas where there was a great deal of movement and dislocation.

These new communities had great diversity but, at their best, found their unity in Christ.

Though membership was *voluntary*, **commitment** was expected. By and through commitment, a new social reality was promised—a new sense of self and purpose. The marginal were accepted; the exiles and aliens had homes. All of this was experienced in and with a new social structure.

- 3) **Eschatological:** literally this means the study of the last things; for our purposes, it is a focus on “end times”. In the early church, there was an expectation that Jesus would return soon and so there was an emphasis on the end times, the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming. There was the assurance that in these end times, Christ would fully redeem this fallen creation and “set things right.” In this focus on the future, there was also a belief that the present circumstances—however good or bad they might have been—were empowered by Christ’s presence and so, hope was injected into the community.

The early church was very clear regarding who was/is in charge of history, as well as who controlled the outcome of historical events—Christ. The church, by aligning itself with Christ, as Lord, and believing him to be in charge, gained hope. By and through this focus on the future that is God’s, and God’s alone, they were able to live in and transform the present. The words of the prophet Joel quoted at Pentecost were very real to the early church--

*17 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Acts 2:17 (NRSV)*

As they lived into their faith, however, the dreams given to them by the Spirit became their present reality, rather than their future. Through envisioning beyond what might be, the communities of Christ, as well as their present circumstances, were transformed. In a very real sense, they understood that as long as we glorify the past, we can never live into a new future.

*Scripture looking towards the future*

**Luke 4:16-21 (NRSV)**

<sup>16</sup> When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read,  
<sup>17</sup> and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:  
<sup>18</sup> "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."  
<sup>20</sup> And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.  
<sup>21</sup> Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

**Revelation 21:1-6 (NRSV)**

<sup>1</sup> Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.  
<sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.  
<sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them;  
<sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."  
<sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true."  
<sup>6</sup> Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life."