

A PEOPLE TAKEN OUT TO BEAR HIS NAME.

(Acts 15:14.)

The events recorded in "The Acts of The Apostles" are not only fascinating historically, but are absolutely foundational for understanding the true nature of the Church, inaugurated on the momentous day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. Following this, one of the most decisive advances of the Church took place in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius, when God made it evident that the good news of Jesus the Christ was not to be confined to the Jewish people alone, by pouring out the Holy Spirit on Gentiles exactly as he had done on those gathered in the upper room when that promised gift was first imparted. A reluctant Peter, struggling with his inbred Judaistic exclusivism, had been the startled witness of this visitation of the Living God upon the hitherto-despised Gentiles. Was it not significant that both of these outpourings of the Spirit took place in ordinary houses and not in religious buildings?

Some time later, when some Jerusalem-based believers were striving to impose legalistic constraints on the multiracial Church in Antioch, a conference was held to thrash out the matter. At stake was the true essential nature of the Church that Jesus had promised to build. After much discussion, in which Peter's account of the happenings at Caesarea in the house of Cornelius was critical, James, the leading elder of the Jerusalem Church, spoke and uttered this pregnant sentence, ""Simeon has related **how God first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.**" (Acts 15:14) Alternative translations are these: "God took from the Gentiles a new chosen people to bear His name.", "God took notice of the Gentiles to chose from among them a people to bear His name."

When I read that passage recently the words of James began to burn in my spirit and I felt that the Lord was strongly emphasising this sentence for our day, with a particular stress on, "A people taken out for His name." That is God's idea of the Church, and that was the nature of the Church being created in those early years. Even the root meaning of the Greek word which we translate as "Church" carries just that meaning, "The called out ones ". They are called out to bear the name of the Lord and no other name than His.

Christians today bear a multitude of names. The Christian world is like the shelves of a supermarket with many brands competing for the most successful sales record. I recently saw the Church Notices in the local paper for the Northern rural town of Kaitaia. No fewer than thirteen varied names comprised the religious menu. Weep, weep for the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ!

I believe the Lord is confronting us with this foundational statement concerning His Church. As we stand in the light of this revelation of a God-initiated, God-glorifying-community, taken out to bear none but His name, how tawdry and grubby our divided denominations seem in their efforts to extend their respective domains. How we need to have engraved on our hearts this simple, yet so perfect definition of the Church, "A people to bear His name." How quick the great apostle Paul was to rebuke the Corinthian believers taking to themselves other names. "Is Christ divided?" was the agonised cry rung from his heart. (1 Corinthians 1:12-13.)

How is such a Church as James defined to be restored and brought back to the earth? His own words again hold the answer. This first called-out people for the name of the Lord resulted from a visitation of God. "**God visited the Gentiles** to take out of them a people for His name." This kind of Church cannot be built or organised by man. It is of divine creation and origin. It is not a human institution, it is an organism infused with life from God. In such a visitation, of course, God does use men, as He used Peter, but Peter was not acting on his own initiative but under the constraint of the Spirit. So, those whose hearts yearn for a Church pleasing to God will cry urgently and constantly to Him to visit by His Spirit to do that work of "taking out a people." May He take them both out of the darkness of the present evil world, and out of the separated religious camps set up by men and unite them to bear His name, joining them in a functioning Body under the headship of the Lord Jesus.

The word of the Lord inevitably brings division, and this word concerning His Church is no exception. Are we willing to be "taken out" from our named religious affiliations, or "taken out" from the world and its godless ways? Like Paul's audience in Athens, some will mock and cling to the familiar established ways. Others will say, "We will hear you again about this.", touched perhaps by the truth, but afraid of the consequences of stepping out into it in faith. Better just to talk about it and not act upon it! Yet others will gladly respond to the Spirit and will yield to be taken out, depending no longer on the sheltering walls of a structured sheep fold, but rejoicing to belong to the "one flock" with " One Shepherd."

"The Message.", that refreshing and vigorous new translation/paraphrase of the New Testament has this exciting version of Colossians 1:18 concerning Christ and His Church, "***And when it comes to the Church, He organises it and holds it together like a head does a body.***" I rejoice to belong to that Christ-organised, cohesive and unified Church. For that I will gladly be taken out , relinquishing all names other than the name of the Head, and holding fast to Him.

Lord visit us and take out a people to bear your name!

Jack Gray,
10M/66 Avonleigh Rd.,
Green Bay,
AUCKLAND 1007
New Zealand.
Tel. 649 8171831 E mail <jackgray@clear.net.nz>