

## Postscript to Studies March to December: The Apostolic Power

I have finished preparing the Ministry Studies for this year. They now form a book which is titled *The Beloved Community of God*. I have formed it into three Sections. For the first Section under the heading of 'The Community of the Word of God'—i.e. the Word of God *to, for and through* the Community, I have placed my three Studies from the Ministry School 2002. Then I have taken the monthly Ministry Studies from March to May under the title of 'The Battle of the Two Communities'—i.e. the Community of God, and the Community of Satan. Thirdly, I have taken the Studies from June to December under the title 'The Community Living in the World as a Witness as the Full Community of God'. All of this follows much of the material we studied last year, and from which I wrote *The Beautiful City of God* so that there has been quite a close survey of the church from its apostolic beginnings up to today.

Having finished all these Studies, I have had some time to consider the matter of Christ's Community as a whole, and I found myself growing strongly discontented. When I had somehow dealt with the usual disappointment with myself as a writer and presenter of these Studies, it struck me that my main discontent is with the present situation of the Church and the churches. I asked myself regarding them, 'Is this the apostolic power we are seeing?' I seek, these days, to avoid criticising the church because of its various failures and faults because I recognise it has had these almost from its inception at Pentecost. I am keenly aware that whatever such shortcomings and wrongdoings may have been over 2000 years, the church has accomplished much, so much indeed as to name it miraculous. I am aware that at this time the church is undergoing persecution and martyrdom throughout the world, and even more ruthless and cruel persecution is in sight. I know the church has always lived under grace.

In our era the Community of God is knowing the apostolic power as it knew it at Pentecost and the years following. I believe that Christ is ever walking amongst the golden candlesticks rebuking those whom he loves, judging and chastising those who need such treatment, and encouraging those who are obeying his word. I do not have an icon of ecclesial perfection, nor am I frustrated at the nature of the elements of ecclesial living which I see around us in this land and other parts of what once used to be called 'the West'.

What is in my mind, and what grieves me and many such as I am, is that in the life and action of the Church—i.e. the churches—of our land, there is the lack of genuine apostolic power. There is quite an amount of sincere endeavour, and no little planning and action in order to gain the attention of the human community. Even so, much of it seems to lack the power the apostles knew. Where do we see the power of the word of God, the power of the gospel—the word of the Cross, the power of his resurrection, the power of the Spirit, the power of love, unity and fellowship? Much of what we can see is explainable as natural living.

As I have spent much time in study, some of it in prayer, and have contemplated and pondered the whole matter of the people of God, one thing has struck me so forcibly. It has been that the church when living in power following its inception, had the clearly discernible marks of three virtues—those of faith, hope and love. The more one examines these, the more one is convinced that in a perfunctory kind of way all in the church acknowledge that these three virtues ought to be present, but their concern for them being largely absent is just as perfunctory. I believe that most think these virtues are present in sufficient form, quality and action. We can be very offhand about such matters, but we think we are not.

For myself I have felt very deeply the need to know more of these marks and to live strongly in them. I trust that my inner mourning is as in the beatitude, and not just human weariness as life in this world draws to its end. I have looked into the life of the church,

asking myself whether we realise the responsibility of being the Community of the Father, Son and Spirit in the age in which we live. The last century passed in an horrific way, and this century is hastening in the pace of its evil. Much as one delights in the mystery of Christ's church and her glorious future when she shall be a kingdom of priests unto God and the new creation—the new heaven and the new earth—it is the present inertia in hope which is damaging. Faith, hope and love so much depend on each other and cannot be operative when they are separated. There is either faith, hope and love as a trifold presence and action, or all these are lacking.

The other matter which has troubled me for the past few years is that the early Community was not composed of localised churches which were monadic, i.e. individualistic in notion, concerned each for its own local unit, and not much aware of other like communities scattered over continents. I think we have reason to believe that the apostles saw the areas in which they had worked to be their continuing responsibility. Where churches sprang up out of the word they proclaimed, then there were communities which had yet other churches in mind, continually. It is quite a large study to see the nature of the mobile ministries of apostles, prophets, evangelists and teachers—if not pastors—and to realise that the formed churches needed them no less than the gifted ministries innate to their formation.

It seems to me that the present situation in our own churches calls for a more sensitive awareness of one another—as churches. Faith, hope and love spring from the salvation God gives us personally and by which He gathers us into His Community. Faith, hope and love naturally draw us beyond individualistic self-concern. It is true that we have—each and all of us—personal concern, but a passage like Philippians 2:1–4 teaches us to place others before ourselves and to have their interests primarily in sight. In this way the Community becomes a city set on a hill, a light of the world, salt to bring the savour of life to the bitter, disillusioned, weary and cynical. It is the true proclamation of God's love and a powerful witness to it.

Discernment is a gift to be used, but with it should also come prophetic wisdom. It is one thing to show the shortcomings of the Church at large, and of our many churches in particular, but yet be without wisdom in regard to what may be done, and indeed should be done. Others have spoken more largely than I have on the condition of the churches today, especially the churches in what we call 'the West', yet they have not always spoken prophetically into our situation. The past few years in which my heart has been involved in the ecclesial life of the Trinity and its out-flowing life and action in the communion into which it has drawn the Body of Christ, it has come to me that there are no solutions, no methodologies which can be recommended, but only that we should start where we are. We should enlarge the actions of our love, the opening of ourselves to others, the giving of ourselves to others and the receiving of them into our enlarged hearts. It goes without saying that the dynamic of such love-actions is born of God's love to us in Christ, the gift of the Holy Spirit who is the Spirit of love, fellowship and unity. He causes us to forgive all things, humbly to receive forgiveness, to be kind, gentle, tender hearted, compassionate, placing others before ourselves, always having the interests of others in mind. All things of pride, conceit and selfish ambition should give way to the honouring of others, as well as giving place to them. If all of this should seem to be a pious action, a continuing 'soft' endeavour, and that more business-like actions should be undertaken, then let us consider how practical the things we have said are the fruits of faith, hope and love. They were, and are, the fruits of Christ, the harvest of the Spirit, the family manner of life received from the Father. They are the life of the Sermon on the Mount, the ways of the powerful Kingdom of God. With them go prayer to the Father, the intercession of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. They are the life of the Community and the way of its revival.

*G. C. Bingham, Kingswood, 2/9/02*