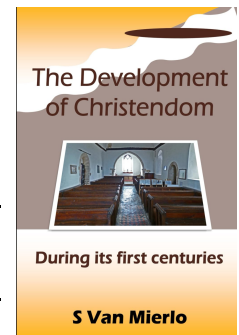


Excerpt from:
The Development of Christendom
S. Van Mierlo

*Excerpts selected by Bob Evelyn
Wilmore, Kentucky; 2026.*



The Acts Period (p. 5)

All Christians of the Acts period lived in the expectation of the literal fulfillment of the prophecies concerning Israel, and more particularly of the impending return of the Lord to establish His Kingdom on earth.

Shortly after the year 60, Paul, in prison, wrote his last epistles, making known the subject of the special revelations he had received about the above-heavenly (*epouraniois*) sphere of blessings, and announcing a complete change of “dispensation” brought about by the temporary setting aside of Israel: no longer a chosen people, no longer any sign of the nearness of the Kingdom, no more fulfillment of the prophecies. But, on the other hand, access to the fullness of God’s grace through faith.

In Asia minor and the coastlands of the Mediterranean (part of the Roman Empire) local assemblies were formed by Paul and his friends. Some of these assemblies where the Christian Jews were in the majority could probably also be considered as Christian synagogues, but, in general they were mixed assemblies which could be composed of Christians both of Jewish and heathen origins and became known as “*ekklesia*” distinguishing them from the Jewish synagogues existing in those places.

From a spiritual standpoint most of the members were probably regenerated believers, but not yet justified. After Acts, as soon as Paul had made known the latest revelations concerning the above heavenly-sphere those local assemblies may also have included a few “faithful saints” who had followed the Apostle along the way of salvation. These members were, in spirit, members of the Church of the great mystery of which Christ Himself is the Head but the mixed assemblies did evidently not represent this church.

There existed no general organization at that time. The local assemblies were independent, and it was through the visits and the writings of Paul that they were “established in the faith and increased in numbers daily” (Acts 16:5).

The Christian synagogues were naturally organized more or less on the same pattern as the Jewish ones. Very likely, there was a “ruler” (*arkisunagogos* – Mark 5:22), someone who led the meetings. There were also “elders” (*zaqen*) already known since ancient times (see e.g. Exodus 3:16, 18). We understand, therefore, that the New Testament never mentions the *institution* of these functions.

The assemblies, largely made-up of Christians of heathen origin, probably did not follow these Jewish customs very closely. However, we know from the New Testament that each assembly had its “elders” (*presbuteros*) and one “bishop” (*episkopos*) chosen from among the elders and corresponding probably to the *arkisunagogos*. All these functions had thus been known by Israel for a long time (see e.g. Exodus 3:16,18; 12:21; Deuteronomy 1:15; 1 Chronicles 23:4). Similarly, the “presbytery” of 1 Timothy 4:14 (*presbuterion*) was a council of elders which was already in existence in the organization of the synagogue (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5).

However, none of these leaders had anything to do with a “clergy” which would have been instituted by God, and which would have had authority in matters of faith. The function of the leaders of these assemblies was to help and serve.

It will be noted that the epistles written by Paul *before* Acts 28:28 are not addressed to bishops or to elders, but to local assemblies in general. *Afterwards*, there were still elders in each city (Titus 1:5) as well as bishops and deacons (1 Timothy 3) because the setting aside of Israel as God's elect people did not mean that any organization among the Christians of Pagan origin was to be suppressed. But nevertheless, the change of dispensation and the widespread abandonment of Paul did produce repercussions on these assemblies and on the attitude of the Apostle toward them.

We see, for example, that the epistles he wrote from prison are no longer addressed to assemblies as such, but to individuals.

The prophets and apostles had laid the foundation (Ephesians 2:20), and the evangelists, pastors, and teachers were not related to "functions" but were gifts from God, people who were led by the Spirit to "prepare anew" (*katartizo*) the saints in this most critical transition period.

Thus there was no general organization during the period of Acts, nor any authoritative center instituted by God. The elements of the local organization resembled the ones existing in Israel since ancient times.

Then came the year 70, the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple, confirming the words of Paul regarding the setting aside of Israel at the end of the Acts period (Acts 28:28).

Only the few who had remained faithful to the teachings of Paul were prepared for this event and understood that a new dispensation commenced, an era unknown of the ancient prophets, and which formed a hiatus as it were, in the "normal" realization of the divine plan to save the world by means of Israel.

The Catastrophe of the Year 70 (p. 17)

All who have attempted to write a "History of the church" have noted – Eusebius in the first place – that the writings of the first centuries gave little, and often confusing information. This would certainly seem very strange if the Assembly of Christ had indeed been formed at that time.

The prophecies of the Lord as we have them in Matthew 23:36-39 could have prepared them for the destruction of Jerusalem, but *not* for the rejection of Israel. After the disaster of the year 70, it became clear that Israel was indeed set aside *before* His return!

The true Christians ... were therefore obliged to reconsider their concepts and find a solution to this problem.

The great majority retained the whole Scriptures, but "spiritualized" many of the parts referring to Israel.

Not only had the Lord and the apostles never said anything about a well-organized visible church *before* the return of the Lord, but until about 100 years after Pentecost *nobody* had been thinking about such an institution.

But the Lord tarried, and gradually they started to believe that this return ought not to be taken literally, that the Lord had already come back "spiritually." It became necessary, therefore, to start the preparation of a well-organized church through which the Kingdom would be established.

The Present Situation (p. 43)

The Twelve did nothing more than execute what the Lord had charged them to do. They were witnesses that "this Jesus" had been raised from the dead and seated at the right (hand) of God, that He was really the Christ. They invited their people to repent and to be baptized in water for the remission of their sins. Then the Lord would come back in glory and establish His

Kingdom on earth, which had been announced by the prophets as well as by the Lord Himself. Naturally, the Law remained.

There was complete agreement between the messages of the Lord as known to us through the gospels, and the teaching of the twelve apostles of the circumcision. The grace of God does not set aside the Law but enables us to accomplish its commandments. The "letter" must be kept, but in spiritual disposition.

The universal mission of the Twelve could only start after the repentance of Israel – while Paul, due to the hardening of his people – could already address his gospel to the nations.

Paul's teaching went further than the new birth and the remission of sins. He spoke about the heavenly sphere of blessing where the earthly differences no longer apply. The earthly institutions, such as those of the Law, do not concern the spiritual position of those who belong to this sphere. They symbols are no longer needed by those who are dead with Christ to sin (not "sins"), who are "in Christ", who – according to their spiritual position (not their walk) are justified before God by their faith "in Christ Jesus."

For these the Law had fulfilled its function of "*pedagogos*," they are no longer little children (*nepios*) but sons (*huios*) of God. They were baptized "into Christ" (Romans 6:3), not merely in water – and had "put on" Christ (Galatians 3:24-29).

The Christian Jews had to keep all commandments to the letter, not in order to be justified thereby before God, but in love to God, out of reverence for what God esteemed to be right; in love to other Jews. Neither for the Lord, nor the Twelve, nor Paul had the ceremonies and offerings any value in themselves; they were only representations and shadows of spiritual realities. But these symbols were nevertheless indispensable in order to lead the masses to Christ.

Peter had to admit that in all of Paul's epistles there were some things hard to understand and which were twisted by some (2 Peter 3:15,16). We should not be surprised that most of the Jews, and even of the Christians, did not understand. How easy it was to find excuses and to abandon Paul.

The Expansion of Christendom (p. 51)

There remained a certain organization of the local assemblies, but this was not of paramount importance. The epistles which Paul wrote after the so important time boundary of Acts 28 were no longer addressed to assemblies, but to individuals.

In Acts 20:17,28 the Apostle still spoke to the elders (*presbuteros*) of the assembly of Ephesus and admonished them to take good care of the flock, but in Philippians 1:1 the bishops (*episkopos*) and deacons (*diakonos*) are only mentioned as individual believers, and even then only after the "saints in Christ Jesus." There is no question of church authorities who would have divine power, but of individual Christians, "faithful men, such as shall be competent to teach others" (2 Timothy 2:2).

Paul had never spoken about a visible, universal Church which would have been instituted by God before the return of the Lord and had done nothing to prepare for it. He knew that his teaching would be neglected or rejected, that there would arise men speaking perverse things to draw disciples after them (Acts 20:29-31), that there would come a time when people would not endure the sound doctrine (2 Timothy 4:3,4). His friends had to be satisfied to hope that God would give repentance for the acknowledging of the Truth to those who opposed them (2 Timothy 2:25,26).

Paul was therefore far from thinking about a general church which would already, in the present evil eon, introduce God's Kingdom on earth in a powerful and visible manner.

We may therefore conclude that it was through the operation of the Holy Spirit on *individuals* that, in spite of the abuses and errors of men, many could become true Christians, even if most of them remained in the sphere of the new birth. We may also suppose that, due to the true Christians, many assemblies did not drift away into a vague Christianized paganism, or even into a real anti-Christian state.

It also comes about that all along the ages, movements have arisen which did not proceed from ecclesiastical superiors, but from individual Christians who tried to come back to a more Scriptural teaching and who have opposed themselves against authoritative and worldly churches.

But why have the attempts to return to the Scriptures, in most cases, achieved only meager results and even degenerated? Why has it been only possible to form countless churches, denominations, sects, and groups – or to produce only a few spiritual minorities within the churches? How is it that so many competent and earnest Christians have only produced numerous theological systems which are more or less contradictory?

They have not succeeded in establishing a “science of the Scriptures” which, in due time, could have led to a unique synthesis, always perfectible, which would have contained all our knowledge about revealed truth.

Why has destructive criticism taken possession of so many theologians? Why this continual wrestling between Christian groups, these separations, and these difficulties in achieving an ecumenical regrouping?

We believe that, besides the normal tendency of man to resist God and His Word, and the blinding activities of the powers of darkness – the fundamental [difficulty] is the idea that Israel was only a symbolic people, and that a universal, visible church should be formed before the return of Christ. All spiritual movements were paralyzed because they continued basing their doctrines on human traditions which had resulted from this idea. All present theological systems are still based on these false premises. It follows that all revision and reforms could only be a new pieces of cloth put on an old garment.

Further [we] should examine anew the written Word of God, this time without preconceived ideas, either of a scientific, philosophic, or ecclesiastical character. [We] need not necessarily *reject* all traditions, but should not consider them as fundamental, and should examine them again in the light of Scripture.

It should not be supposed that we would lose anything other than human traditions when we leave to Israel all that belongs to them.

Further, if it is suggested that Christ has already been reigning for 1900 years by means of Christendom or “the church,” and that God has already set up His Kingdom on earth, what a scandal this presents to a reasonable man who observes not only the divisions and discords in “the church,” but also the miserable general condition of the world and its continuous de-Christianization.

The present action of the Spirit is limited to the enlightenment of the mind in order to be able to understand what had already been revealed and can be found in the written Word (Psalm 119:18; Luke 24:45).

Concerning Assemblies and Churches Today (p. 63)

As regards the concept of “Assembly” we believe that Scripture refers only to a unique Assembly which, as such, is visible – namely the Assembly of Christ (Matthew 16:18) – which He will form by means of the converted people of Israel during the next eon. This Assembly will be led by the twelve apostles of the circumcision, after their resurrection at the end of the

present eon. It is this Assembly which will have the mission of discipling all nations (Matthew 28:19).

Assemblies [today] are not a visible representation of either the general Assembly of Christ of the next eon, or of one of its parts; and most certainly not the Assembly of the great mystery, the body of Christ, of which Christ Jesus placed at God’s right (hand) is the Head.

We have no objection at all against the formation of assemblies or organizations, provided that it is not suggested that they are instituted by God and represent the future Assembly of Christ, or the Assembly to which Paul refers to in his last epistles.

Since the majority of believers have always felt and will continue to feel even in the next age, the need for a visible representation of spiritual realities, it may be necessary for the members of the local assemblies to come together, not only to have fellowship with one another, to help each other understand the Truth, to assist each other in all things – but also to observe ceremonies. Such a ritual can then be copied more or less from the ceremonies of Israel and follow venerable human traditions, *provided that in this case also it is not claimed that such ceremonies are instituted by God, that they are “sacraments” or that they have to be observed strictly in such or such manner.*

However, we add that the Christian will feel less need for such ceremonials, etc. the farther he will have progressed along the way of salvation, and in real spiritual communion with Christ, and become more “spiritual” in the sense in which Paul uses this term.

Assemblies may have “evangelists”, “pastors”, and “teachers” in the spirit of Ephesians 4:11; that is, according to individual gifts which are freely acknowledged by the members and not nominated by a so-called Divine or ecclesiastical institution. There would not [then] be a complete revolution in the customs, but mainly in the ideas of the theologians and ecclesiastical leaders. In this way many causes of discord and division would cease to exist.

A variety of usages in the local assemblies is quite normal in our present dispensation for which God has not instituted a universal organization and a visible unity.

At present, with the idea of a visible church replacing or absorbing Israel, the existence of different churches and groups with different ceremonials is a real scandal.

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Note: Born in Antwerp, Belgium in 1888, Van Mierlo trained in the scientific disciplines, eventually becoming responsible for the direction of research activities in the laboratories of an international telecommunications corporation in five European countries. To these responsibilities he added extensive research in archeology, theology, philosophy, ancient writings, and records of abnormal phenomena. A frequent visitor to the British Museum Library and other centers of information, he met and consulted with many biblical authorities in several countries. He spoke several languages and knew Greek and Hebrew.

Bishop Butler has stated that the only way to study the Word of God is the way in which physical science is studied. In his “Analogy”, Part II, ch. 3, he says, “The whole scheme of Scriptures is not yet understood, so if it ever comes to be understood before the restitution of all things, and without miraculous interpositions, it must be in the same way as natural knowledge is come at – by the continuance and progress of learning and liberty, and by particular persons attending to, comparing, and pursuing intimations scattered up and down it, and which are overlooked and disregarded by the generality of the world.” [Joseph Butler, 1692-1752, wrote “The Analogy of Religion” in 1736.]

Excerpts selected by Bob Evelyn