Real Christianity
and
Church History

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Real Christianity and Church History

Introduction

This book had been produced with the intention of showing that:

— The belief system that Jesus Christ taught, as summarised in the Holy Bible, is the truth:

John 14:6
Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.

— This truth has been so distorted by men throughout history that what passes as Christianity in churches today is nothing like the truth of the Bible. No Christian church is excluded from this problem:

Matthew 15:9
But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

— We should worship God rather than men:

Acts 5:29
Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.

— This has all happened because of a fundamental disbelief in the total depravity of man. Man thinks of himself far too highly:

Genesis 6:5
And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Religion

Let's first take a look at all the different belief systems, or religions, that there are in the world.

We can't say all religions are true, because they aren't. We need to stop pretending all religions lead to God because they don't. All religions are different from one another. They all teach completely different things. There can be only one "true religion" or philosophy of life. That "true religion" must be the one that can both recognise the fundamental problem with this world, and have the correct solution.

This "true religion" is what we ought to understand as truth. All other religions and philosophies of life must be **rejected** because they either don't recognise the problem, or, if they do, they don't have the correct solution. In other words, they are **wrong**. Yes, the religion or philosophy of life that we hold, or were born into and brought up with, may be **wrong**. Have we ever thought about that? Believing a religion that is **wrong** is believing a lie.

(1.) Recognising the Problem

If we don't think there is a fundamental problem with the world at all, then we need our heads examining. It is obvious that there is a problem in the world. A big problem.

What is it? Evil. The world is full of evil.

We can straight away **reject** any religion or philosophy of life that cannot see this. Consequently:

(a.) We need to define "evil" correctly.
(b.) We need to find out where "evil" comes from.

(a.) Defining "evil."

An atheist cannot define "evil" nor say where it comes from. It is a total mystery to him. In fact nothing is "evil" to him. Everything is the way it is just because it is the way it is.

— Therefore atheism has no morality.
— Therefore atheism is meaningless.

Atheism cannot even recognise that there is a problem, let alone tell us what that problem is. Therefore atheism must be **rejected**.

Neither a Buddhist nor an Hindu can define "evil" nor say where it comes from.

— Therefore neither Buddhism nor Hinduism has any morality.
— Therefore Buddhism and Hinduism are also meaningless.

Both these religions believe in reincarnation. Endless cycles of life. In these religions, "I" don't really exist as myself, rather "I" am just an incarnation that will disappear again shortly and become somebody else. Therefore, in these systems:

(a.) Nobody has any responsibility for anything they do.
(b.) There is no incentive to say sorry to anybody for anything.
(c.) There is no incentive to help anyone in need.
(d.) If we don't know what we've done wrong in a "previous life," how can we ever improve? We are bound to make the same mistakes over and over again.

One look inside any Hindu or Buddhist temple and we will find statues of many "gods." But none of them can be a real "god" at all because none of them can be all-powerful. Just a bit bigger than us, that's all. And, in any case, any religion that has "gods" with elephant heads, blue faces, or any other frightening appearance, are figments of drug-induced imaginations and cannot possibly be real.

Neither Buddhism nor Hinduism can define nor even recognise the problem of "evil." And both are filled with so many other ridiculous ideas, therefore these religions must be **rejected**.

There can only be one God who is all-powerful. "Evil" can only be defined by reference to that one God. "Evil" is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of that God.

— If there is no God, "evil" cannot be defined, because there are no laws.

— If there is more than one "god," which one are we following? What defines "evil" would differ in each case.

— If we say that the law is defined by "the will of the people," then different people groups have different ideas. Cannibals think it's perfectly all right to eat people. And in any case, "the will of the people" always changes over time.

Therefore only monotheists can define "evil" correctly. So, "true religion" can only be found in a monotheistic religion. Every other religion or philosophy of life must be **rejected**.

(b.) Where does "evil" come from?

— "Evil" could come from a demonic spiritual world completely separate from ourselves. But we can't change a demonic spiritual world. And we can't know anything about such things anyway. So we must **reject** trying to solve the problem of "evil" by attempting to "exorcise" it. We don't know what we're doing.

— "Evil" is out there in the world, we read about it in the news every day. But we can't change the world out there. So we must **reject** trying to solve the problems of the world in political movements. If we form a political movement, we are adding to the world's problems, not solving them. Politics cannot change the human heart.

— "Evil" is far more local than that. It's in our town, in our street. We know of child abusers and sexual predators living near us. But we can't change our neighbour. We can advise him that what he is doing is not right, we can get him sent to jail, but we can't change his heart. We can't actually stop him behaving the way he does. So we must **reject** all forms of counselling, because outward help can only advise, not change anyone.

So, where does "evil" come from? From within ourselves. From the human heart. All we can do is deal with the problem of evil within ourselves as individuals. We can't deal with it in anybody else. Only

people individually being changed from within can solve the problem of "evil."

(2.) Finding the Solution

So far, we have found out that the "true religion" must be a monotheistic religion that believes in each individual human being needing to be changed from within. Everything else must be **rejected**.

There are two popular ideas we now need to examine:
(a.) Many believe they have the one "true religion" by birth.
(b.) Many believe that "true religion" is living a "good" life.

(a.) Religion by birth

Millions believe they have been born into the one true religion, so they don't need to think any more about it. After all, their family has been in that religion for generations, so surely they must be right. And some are prepared to fight to the death if necessary to defend this idea. This is madness. It just isn't logical. Maybe we and our family have been wrong for generations.

And nobody can go back all that far into their family history anyway. For example, no Jew today can prove he is directly descended from Abraham.

Even if we have been born into the one true religion, surely we shouldn't just blindly accept that. We should always try to think things through for ourselves, and then believe whatever religion we conclude to be the truth. And we should all have every right to change our belief whenever we come to new conclusions. But many religions hate this idea and would throw us out of family privileges if ever we decided to leave the "family" religion. Some would even try to kill us if we left. How dreadful is that.

If we think that the one "true religion" is automatically the one we are born into, without any thought, then we are **wrong**. And if our religion seriously teaches that, then it should be **rejected**.

(b.) Living a "good" life
First of all we must ***define*** "good."

"Good" in any religion is all about keeping the laws of God, as defined in the religion's "holy book".

— Islam has the wrong "holy book." Its followers are told, amongst other things, "*annihilate the infidel*" and "*kill them wherever you may find them*." So "good" is defined completely wrongly. Therefore Islam is to be **rejected**.

— Judaism and Christianity have the correct "holy book." The difference being that Christianity claims to have extra revelation in the New Testament, which Jews reject. But, at least, in both Judaism and Christianity, "good" is defined correctly. Both have the moral law of God, summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments.

So we are only going to find the truth from somewhere within these two religions.

Secondly, we must ask ***how*** "evil" has come to be in the human heart? There are three possibilities:

— (a.) We are all born "good," and become "evil" simply by our own bad choices in life. This is so obviously wrong. We don't have to teach a child to be naughty, or selfish. He naturally is from birth. We need to teach him to be "good," because he naturally doesn't know how to be.

Muslims believe that we are all born "good." But we are not, and so Islam must be **rejected**.

— (b.) We are all born "neutral," and become "good" or "evil" depending on the environment we grow up in. This is wrong too, because poor and privileged alike are "evil." There is no distinction. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Jews believe that we are all born "neutral." But we are not, and so Judaism must be **rejected**.

Eastern Orthodox "Christians" of all persuasions (Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, etc.) also believe that we are all effectively born "neutral," albeit with a predisposition to sin. But we are not like this, and so we must also **reject** huge swathes of "Christendom" here too.

— (c.) We are all born "evil." This is the only explanation for the world. And, if we're all born "evil," it must follow that we cannot keep the law of God within ourselves, no matter how hard we try.

Many people think that true religion is about keeping the law of God by trying hard enough. But if we're born "evil" to start with, we can never do this. So any religion which seriously teaches that we actually have the ability to keep God's law and that all we must do is try hard enough, must be **rejected**.

The "true religion" must believe that we cannot keep the law of God no matter how hard we try, and therefore we need a Saviour to save us from this situation.

We are left with Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. These two branches of Christianity have the problem correct. Every other religion on the face of the earth has the problem wrong, so we shouldn't even be going there. None of them know the first thing about human nature, so everything else they teach will never fit into place. **Reject** them.

So, truth can only be found somewhere within these two branches of Christianity. Let us examine them.

Roman Catholicism

Roman Catholics believe we are all born "evil," so they understand the problem correctly. But this problem is solved, in their eyes, by a priest simply splashing water in baptism. Easy.

After baptism, so Roman Catholics believe, we are no longer "evil." This is why they think it so important to rush a priest to a dying baby so it can be splashed in time. With regards sins after baptism, if we keep coming to mass and confession, then all these sins can be removed by the priest pronouncing them removed as and when they occur. In other words we are under the church's control all our lives.

But, this means that, those who have been baptised are effectively the same as those who are supposedly born "good" or "neutral." But people are no different whether before or after their baptism. Splashing water by a priest, or anyone else, does not remove "evil." A priest is a mere man. Therefore Roman Catholicism must be **rejected**. They had the correct problem originally, but have the wrong solution.

On top of this, Roman Catholicism is far too similar to Buddhism in many respects:

— Roman Catholic "meditation" is very similar to Buddhism — a withdrawing in of oneself away from the world, emptying the mind.

— Both Roman Catholic and Buddhist monks and nuns hide away in single sex monasteries.

— Both religions are full of superstitious practices, e.g. Roman Catholics genuflect and cross themselves. Buddhists always have to walk around a stupa clockwise (never anti-clockwise) etc. etc.

— Both religions engage in money-generating scams that play on our emotions for dead relatives. Roman Catholicism believes that after death they all go to a place called "purgatory," and time for dead relatives there can supposedly be shortened by paying money to the church. We can also pay the church to buy "leftover" good works from great "saints" of the past to help them along too. Buddhists worship their ancestors. People pay money to a "living buddha" to give them "advice." People pay money for rituals for dead relatives. All such practices are pure evil, squeezing money out of poor people by telling them things about their dead relatives in the afterlife that nobody can possibly know.

Roman Catholicism has the original problem correct, but they solve it wrongly. It is also filled with so many other ridiculous things, therefore it must be **rejected**.

None of these religions we have come across so far can help anyone solve the fundamental problem of our being born "evil." So the rest of what any of them has to say is not going to help anybody in any way. All must be **rejected**.

So we are left with Protestantism.

Protestantism
They have the correct problem. We are all born evil.
They have the correct solution. We are saved by grace through faith in the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, who came to save us from our sins, something we can never do for ourselves.
This is indeed the "true religion."

But, have we ever been to a Protestant church? Dear me! They are some of the worst places we could ever go to! What's wrong with them? Well, for example:

— Very, very light view of sin. "If Christ has saved me from my sins, I don't need to think about sin any more."
— Loud preachers exalting themselves.
— Men convinced they are right, yet all differ from one another.
— Thousands of tinpot little denominations going it alone.
— Aggressive evangelism.
— No seriousness. Too much frivolity, laughing and joking.
— No humility.

And the list goes on. How can anyone take Protestants seriously? Nobody can possibly condone any of these practices. They have "true religion," but completely wreck it. Why is this?

For the very same reason all the other churches wreck it. Because "church" is led by men, who, as we have seen, are born "evil" and cannot do "good" no matter how hard they try.

"Church" is not the answer at all. We simply cannot trust in any "church." We must trust in the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

Just read Scripture for ourselves. Read what the Lord Jesus Christ said and did. Ask the Lord Jesus Christ Himself, through prayer, to reveal the truth to us. This will confirm the "true religion" in our hearts and help us grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, exactly as we are supposed to do.

"True religion" is a heart thing, not a "church" thing. And Jesus Christ alone is the answer. Never men.

Real Christianity

1. What is Truth?

Sin

We all have a major problem. We are selfish. Self-centred. Living for me, me, me, my pleasures, my desires. As if I was the centre of the universe. Not just that, but we are so proud, thinking we are so much better than others. How arrogant! In fact, if the real truth be known, we are vile, stinking cesspits of iniquity deserving of eternal conscious torment in hell-fire forever.

Nobody is going to ever admit that, or even see themselves as being anything like that. By nature, we are far too proud to accept such a description of ourselves. Indeed, our modern world keeps on telling us that we must never think like that. We must have a sense of self-worth, self-acceptance and self-esteem. Otherwise, so they tell us, we will end up with some kind of mental problem.

But that's not true. Rather, it is those who at first agree with the world's assessment of themselves, and who then later realise that it is all wrong, who are more likely to end up with a mental problem, because they were originally taught a lie by their educators, people who they once trusted, only to find that they have been deceived.

The sooner we accept the truth about ourselves, the sooner we can get the help we need.

But we're not going to get help from men. They are too full of themselves, thinking how wonderful they are. They are the ones peddling this modern psychology in the first place. We need help from a far higher source, namely God. This is where the Bible comes in.

The Bible is the only book which acknowledges the truth about human nature:

Genesis 6:5
And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Genesis 8:21
….the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth….

Job 40:4
Behold, I am vile….

Job 42:6
Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Psalm 5:9
For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulchre; they flatter with their tongue.

Ecclesiastes 7:20
For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

Ecclesiastes 7:29
Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.

Jeremiah 17:9
The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Matthew 15:19
For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies

Mark 7:21-23
For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

Romans 3:10-18 (quoting from various Psalms)
As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the

way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: And the way of peace have they not known: There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Salvation

And the Bible also tells us that there is an answer. God has provided a way out of this mess. That's the most wonderful thing in the world. There is no need to despair! How do we avail ourselves of this way out? The way is very simple. Ask God.

Matthew 7:7,8
Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened.

We don't need to do anything. As if we could impress God! We just need to simply ask. But we must be absolutely genuine in our seeking of Him, and ***want*** with all our heart to be changed:

Jeremiah 29:13
And ***ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart****.*

Hebrews 11:6
But ***without faith it is impossible to please him****: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that* ***he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him****.*

When we do ask God for help in all sincerity, He will change us from the inside. This is what all of us most desperately need:

John 3:3
Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, ***Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God****.*

2 Corinthians 5:17
Therefore ***if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature****: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.*

We then have that most precious of things — a real relationship with the One True Living God, Lord of Heaven and Earth, who created us and upholds all things in His providence. We have all our sins forgiven. We can communicate directly with Him. Tell Him everything. And the most wonderful thing is that God keeps and looks after His people. What a privilege! The world knows nothing of this. We should never take such a privilege lightly, but always take Him deadly seriously.

Sanctification

Once we have been changed by God, we grow in this new faith:

2 Peter 3:18
But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.

But what is this growth exactly? Many Christians think that, with the Lord's help, they are slowly getting better and better all the time. But this is a great mistake. And this has created much wrong thinking throughout church history.

Even so, we have still most definitely changed. We are far, far better people after having been changed by God than before. All thanks to the Lord at work within us. But we, in and of ourselves, never actually get better and better. Christians look for a far greater hope. A new body which cannot sin. But this is promised to us after we die, not here in this world, but in the next:

1 John 3:2
Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.

As long as we have these bodies, we are still the same vile sinners as ever we were:

Romans 7:25
So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

So, if we're not getting better and better, how do we become different? In many ways:

— We began to learn more about God, and more about ourselves.

— We now want to live for God, not for ourselves any more.

— We are kept from the grosser sins that we used to have no qualms about, thanks to God giving us a far more sensitive conscience.

— We now love the law of God, no longer hate it and want to keep it, although we still fall so far short of this in ourselves.

— We now hate our own selfishness. Another incentive not to pander to it.

— We now grow in grace and knowledge

— We become more and more set apart from the world and it's ways:

John 17:17
Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

All of these changes should engender humility and stop us ever boasting again about ourselves, because, all the time these things are happening to us, underneath everything, we're still no better than anyone else:

Romans 3:27
Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.

It is very easy to see selfishness in others. We see plenty of it in others every day, even without the need of an experience of God changing our heart. But it's only after God has really changed us from the inside that we begin to see it in ourselves. This is what we essentially have to deal with in this life. Ourselves. We can't change others. We can't even change ourselves. But if God is living within us, we can now hate our selfish nature and want to be changed by God from within, even though we all too often still fail by letting self get in the way.

This is the real, authentic, true Christian life.

The more we realise the truth about the depth of our sinful nature, the more we realise our desperate need of a Saviour. A Saviour who doesn't just lightly forgive sin and then forget about it. So many religions have that idea. A forgiveness of sin that is so easy. Sin is far, far more serious than that. It needs atoning for. We need One to die in our place, as the only way to placate the wrath of God. That is exactly what Jesus Christ came into the world to do. And not only that, but He comes into the hearts of His people and changes them permanently from the inside. Not that we become better, but rather we see more and more the truth about ourselves, and more and more our need of Him if we are to do any good at all:

Matthew 1:21
And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

2 Corinthians 5:21
For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Galatians 2:20
I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.

This is the fundamental message of Christianity.

So, to conclude: True Christianity is all about three simple truths regarding ourselves:

(1.) — We are all born with selfish natures. We live for self. We are self-centred. We cannot get out of this condition by ourselves. We have no desire to. If this is not dealt with, we will get what we deserve, which is eternal conscious torment in body and soul in hell-fire forever.

(2.) — To know God for ourselves, and to escape the wrath to come, we must be "born again" by the Spirit of God. This is an internal experience which could only possibly come from God. We can't whip

it up for ourselves. All we can do is cry to God for mercy, and He chooses whom He chooses:

Romans 9:15,16
For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. So then ***it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy***.

(3.) — Once we have been "born again" in this way, we are fundamentally changed from the inside. God comes to dwell within us. We are saved to eternal life. We grow in grace and knowledge. We become more and more set apart from the world as we learn more and more of the truth, which only the Lord can reveal to us through His Word.

Let's take a look at these truths in more detail.

2. The Necessity of Self-Loathing

Try this: Go to any crowded place, and take a good look at everybody's faces. They are all busy, busy, busy with their own little affairs, so confident in what they are doing and saying. Many of them are indeed positively taught to be that way. Americans in particular, and other nations who copy them, are taught from an early age to have such cocky confidence in themselves. How few in the world see that such a "me-first" educational philosophy is so foolish. And if we come to realise this truth and start mentioning it to anyone, it is we who will soon be regarded as having a mental problem. But in fact we are the only ones who are sane. It is the cocky, confident majority who are empty and deluded.

Or try this: Look around at everybody passing by, and try to spot one truly humble person. There aren't any. They are all full of themselves, busying themselves about all sorts of things of no consequence. Me, me, me all the time. Nobody, nobody, nobody humbles themselves to the dust. Yet that is the only way of being honest with ourselves. We are nothing. When we die, no one will remember us. So we need to stop thinking that it's all about "me," because it isn't.

Or try this: Look out from a high viewpoint. From such a height the tiny people on the ground look just like maggots crawling around. How small and insignificant they are! But at ground level, approach any of them, and they think that they, their opinions and their relationships with each other are so important. But they are maggots. They are nothing. The Bible teaches us how utterly insignificant we all are:

Psalm 8:4
What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

Psalm 9:20
Put them in fear, O LORD: that the nations may know themselves to be but men. Selah.

Psalm 39:5
Behold, thou hast made my days as an handbreadth; and mine age is as nothing before thee: verily every man at his best state is altogether vanity. Selah.

Psalm 39:11
When thou with rebukes dost correct man for iniquity, thou makest his beauty to consume away like a moth: surely every man is vanity. Selah.

Psalm 62:9
Surely men of low degree are vanity, and men of high degree are a lie: to be laid in the balance, they are altogether lighter than vanity.

Psalm 146:3,4
Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goeth forth, he returneth to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.

Isaiah 2:22
Cease ye from man, whose breath is in his nostrils: for wherein is he to be accounted of?

Isaiah 40:15
Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing.

Jeremiah 17:5,6
Thus saith the LORD; Cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the LORD. For he shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited.

All of us are really NOTHING! We must begin there. If we don't believe that, it is for no other reason than because we don't want to.

But that is not all. Not only are we so small and insignificant, we are also such vile creatures. Indeed, that's what living for self all the time inevitably makes us. We are no good to anybody in that state. The Bible teaches us about our utter vileness too:

Genesis 6:5
And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Job 40:4
Behold, I am vile….

Psalm 5:9
For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulchre; they flatter with their tongue.

Ecclesiastes 7:20
For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.

Jeremiah 17:9
The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?

Matthew 15:19
For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false witness, blasphemies

Mark 7:21-23
For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.

This is the absolute truth about every one of us. We are all so small, and we are all so vile. Forget self-worth, self-esteem, self-acceptance. All these are modern false humanistic philosophies of no consequence. Every philosophy men invent is a lie. They all exalt man far too highly. Look at the truth. After all, we can't get away from it, no matter how hard we try. The truth is that we are so small and so bad. Start there. Admit this, then we can start looking for a solution.

The solution to a world full of such small, vile, self-centred people like this, can be found nowhere else but in the Bible. No other religion teaches this or even believes anything like this about human nature. Not even churches believe it. Jesus Christ is the only one who has

confronted this situation head on. And we can read about Him only in the Bible. The Bible alone is our manual of living in this corrupt, evil world.

Other religions may speak of how we need to do things to placate whatever god or gods they espouse. Priests or pastors in churches may speak about how "precious" we all are and how God loves us all just the way we are, regardless of our utter, wretched self-centredness. The Bible, on the other hand, speaks of our ***inability*** to placate God and our ***need*** of a Saviour.

Galatians 6:3
For if a man think himself to be something, when he is ***nothing****, he deceiveth himself.*

Surely King Solomon was right when he said:

Ecclesiastes 2:17
Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

But we think ourselves so wonderful:

Revelation 3:17
Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked

In our being so overly confident in ourselves, we can't see how stupid we really are. And as a consequence, we don't see the depth of how bad, and how selfish, we actually are at heart. That's why most people don't have time for religion. Because they don't want to come to any such conclusion about themselves. Most would admit to making a few mistakes in life, but they can't see, and don't want to see, how absolutely vile and self-centred their lives really are. We need to realise AND admit that we are all this bad. The more we look at ourselves, look back at our lives, and have a truly honest opinion about ourselves, surely, the more we will find the truth about how stupid we have been and how absolutely wretched we are.

We must come to the point where we ***loathe*** ourselves, because we ***are*** like this, it's the truth, and we can't do anything to change that fact. We must be honest with ourselves about this. More to the point, we must be honest with God about it too. Then, and only then, can we truly cry out to Him. And He ***will*** hear us, because He is a merciful God.

Isaiah 55:6,7
Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

Jeremiah 29:13
And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart.

3. Only Evil Continually

Genesis 6:5
And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

When we are young, we think far too highly of the human race and just can't see how wicked and evil human beings really are. Even if we've experienced their true nature in some way, for example, by being bullied at school, or taken advantage of, or sexually assaulted, or cheated, or been let down so many times by them, we still have this ridiculous idea that, underneath everything, the human heart is essentially good.

And even when we become a Christian, we still don't fully understand the truth about human nature straight away either. Nearly all newly converted Christians have a problem with believing the Biblical doctrine of hell-fire for eternity. This, the Bible tells us, is the place where we all deserve to go:

Mark 9:43
And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched.

Matthew 25:41,46
Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.... And these shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.

An unbeliever can never believe the truth that he deserves eternal conscious torment in hell-fire for ever. He just laughs at the concept. He is too proud in himself to ever be able to acknowledge that he, personally, deserves to go to a place like that.

And new Christians can also have a similar problem. Many would rather it not be mentioned in the church. They just want to talk about the love of God. Any suggestion that hell is real, they find uncomfortable.

So, not surprisingly, there's a whole false gospel out there in the churches today, that Satan has invented especially to cater for these people. This false gospel is built around, not only avoiding the mention of such a place altogether, but not even mentioning anything about our sinful nature, and the fact that without Christ we're utterly lost. And it's very attractive to many people. It doesn't involve thinking about our sin and having a need for any kind of repentance. We're just told to accept Christ as our Saviour. That's it. Now we're a believer. We must now realise Jesus Christ dealt with sin a long time ago, so we're not to let sin bother us any more. Just think good thoughts about ourselves. We are somebody. We're worth something. This is nothing more than modern secular humanistic psychology with a religious veneer. It's not Christianity at all. It's nonsense. We're sinners. We need salvation, or we justly perish everlastingly. And even after we've come to Christ, there is a need to continually repent of our sin:

Matthew 6:12
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.

It's only as we mature in the faith and get closer to Christ, that we see more and more of the filthiness we have inside ourselves. The Holy Spirit is holy, like a shining light picking out all the dirt we never saw before. Growing in the faith involves recognising more and more how sinful we really are, and coming to the realisation that the doctrine of hell-fire is actually true, because it begins to dawn on us that that's exactly the place where I, myself, personally, deserve to go.

We can only really come to an understanding of the true nature of man, by coming to an understanding of the true nature of ourselves. Once we see ourselves for what we really are, we can see others for what they really are. And if everybody else is as bad as we are, then we must be extremely careful whenever we deal with people. Christ tells us:

Matthew 10:16
Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.

John 2:24,25
But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

We ourselves should be kind, harmless and genuine in everything we do, and by the Lord's grace alone we can do that. But we should always be aware that hardly anyone will treat us in the same way. If we try to be genuinely kind to a vast majority of people, we will always be taken advantage of. Oh yes, they may put on an outward show of kindness themselves, and we can so easily be fooled by that. But underneath everything, they are only ever after what they can get out of us for themselves:

Psalm 146:3
Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help.

Micah 7:5
Trust ye not in a friend, put ye not confidence in a guide: keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom.

We should know this already, because we used to be just like that ourselves before we became a Christian.

And not only that, but so many of these wretched creatures have the uncanny ability to attract others and get them to do exactly what they want. Whether it's a forceful politician who can persuade people to vote for him because he's (supposedly) got all the right answers, or a big name evangelist who can fill churches with his (or her) smooth-talking charismatic personality (rather than filling them because of Christ), or an abusive partner, where the one abused will never leave and keep on going back for more punishment time after time.

How is it that other people can have such a hold on us? It is so, so important that we tear ourselves away from anything of that nature. We ought never to get taken in by the deceit of others — by their persuasive abilities, by their dominating personalities, by their controlling methods. Many people become salesmen, because they know jolly well that they have this frightening ability to persuade others to buy something they don't really need or want. And they will

abuse us, trick us, deceive us, and pester us, until they have closed the sale. Then we'll never see them again.

Many, many lives have been utterly ruined by the persuasive abilities of others.

Look at Herod:

Acts 12:21,22
And upon a set day Herod, arrayed in royal apparel, sat upon his throne, and made an oration unto them. And the people gave a shout, saying, It is the voice of a god, and not of a man.

We may ask, Who would be taken in by a despot like Herod? And the answer is, just as many as were fooled by Adolf Hitler and so many other dominating people throughout history. We think we'd never get taken in by that sort of person, but week after week, we hear about so many people, ordinary people like ourselves, who actually are.

But Herod got his come-uppance in the end:

Acts 12:23
And immediately the angel of the Lord smote him, because he gave not God the glory: and he was eaten of worms, and gave up the ghost.

And that's exactly why we ought to understand and believe in the doctrine of hell-fire for ever. Because, except we repent and genuinely, really, and unfeignedly, turn to the Lord, all of us will eventually get exactly what we deserve. We should never ask God for what we deserve. We should be so thankful to our Lord God that He will judge all men justly at the end of time. And as a result, we have no need to fear or worry about anything or anybody else, no matter how forceful they are.

But, at the same time, we also have to admit that we ourselves are children of wrath, and deserving of such a judgment too. By nature we can do no good thing:

Ephesians 2:2,3
Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.

Romans 7:18
For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not.

And God knows exactly how evil we all are by nature:

Jeremiah 17:9,10
The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord search the heart, I try the reins, even to give every man according to his ways, and according to the fruit of his doings.

That's why every single one of us so desperately needs a Saviour. A Saviour to save us from ourselves. Not just from a list of sins (albeit a long list), but from our very sinful natures that we can never get away from by ourselves, even if we had the desire to do so, which naturally we don't.

We must seek reality, and stop pretending that we're not so bad. All of us are:

Revelation 3:17
.... wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.

The sooner we realise this, and call upon the Saviour that God has provided, the better. He is our only hope.

4. I'm Saved, but I'm not Getting any Better!

Here's a question: What's the minimum amount of doctrine we need to know in order to be saved to eternal life?

Do we need to believe the Trinity, perhaps?

To join the unbiblical, ecumenical World Council of Churches, we do. Unitarians are excluded. Every other theological position under the sun is accepted, but to not believe in the Trinity isn't.

Do we need to believe a Creed, perhaps?

Many churches think so. In fact one of the orthodox Creeds, the Athanasian Creed, states precisely that:

"1 ***Whosoever will be saved****, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith; 2 Which faith* ***except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.*** *3 And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity....* [then follows a lengthy definition of the Trinity]....

28 He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity. 29 Furthermore ***it is necessary to everlasting salvation*** *that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. 30 For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man....* [then follows a lengthy definition of the orthodox view on the being of Christ]....

44 This is the catholic faith, ***which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved****."*

But the thief on the cross never believed any of this. I didn't believe any of this when I was saved. I only came to an understanding on these things later.

The film "*The DaVinci Code*" opened my eyes to this issue. (It didn't open my eyes to anything else. Don't watch it, it's rubbish). At one point it is complained that, one day Christ was not God, and the next

day (after the Nicene Creed had been passed by the Ecumenical Council) Christ was God — so we're now free to persecute those who don't believe this. The passing of a Creed in some ecumenical council somewhere, does not define the truth. Christ always was God, whether anybody believed it or dogmatised it in a Creed or not.

Assertion of a Creed does not determine who is saved to eternal life and who isn't. In Islam, it does. All you have to say is, "Allah is the one true God and Mohammed is his messenger," and you're a Muslim. That's their Creed. It's not like that at all in Christianity.

Do we need to believe the gospel, then?

Surely we do. Surely Paul's answer to the Philippian jailor is our minimum requirement:

Acts 16:31
Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

Well, that's the gospel message that we are called to send to the ends of the earth. Let's tell people that message. But how much of it do we actually need to know, in order to be saved?

Do we need to know:
— that Christ died on the cross as a substitutionary atonement to take away sin?
— that Christ died for me personally?
— that I must repent and exercise faith in Christ in order to be saved?
— that we must believe that Christ atoning sacrifice on the cross is the alone and sufficient sacrifice for our sin, without anything of our own, either in whole or in part being at all added to it?

All of the above are true statements, but do we need to know all of them, or some of them, in order to be saved? How much do we actually need to know?

The answer to that question is actually.... nothing!

But, surely we at least need to know about Christ, his atoning work, and put our trust in Him for our salvation? Well, hang on a minute, let me explain.

To be saved to eternal life, we must be born again:

John 3:3
Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

We need the Lord to give us a new heart:

2 Corinthians 5:17
Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.

Ezekiel 36:26
A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh.

The Bible is quite clear in that we are saved by grace alone:

Ephesians 2:8,9
For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.

2 Timothy 1:9
Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.

Titus 3:4-7
But after that the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man appeared, Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Jonah 2:9
Salvation is of the Lord.

John 6:44
No man can come to me [Christ], *except the Father which hath sent me draw him.*

The gospel call is a call to repent and believe in Christ. So, in order to respond to it, we need repentance and faith. But the Bible tells us these are gifts of God:

Ephesians 2:8
For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God.

Acts 11:18
Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.

We can't whip these attributes up from within ourselves. We need to be born again by the Holy Spirit first, before we can receive and exercise faith and repentance at all. Only then can we respond to the gospel call.

So, does this mean that we can all just sit back in our armchairs and do nothing, thinking that if God wants to save us, He will do so in His own good time, but if not, that's just the way it is? Of course not. God forbid that we should think that way! People use that idea as an excuse not to bother with the things of God at all.

We can at least realise our inability to respond, be bothered by it, and cry to God to grant us these gifts, even though we don't deserve them. Even if God won't hear us and we end up in hell-fire for ever, that's just what we deserve anyway, so God won't have done anything wrong to ignore our cry. But the Bible tells us that He is a merciful God and that He does save sinners. That's a marvellous thing, and it's our only hope.

Am I saying then, that it is possible to come to salvation without even knowing about the Lord Jesus Christ? What about people who practice other religions? Can they be saved even though they never come into

contact with the Bible, a church or anything else that proclaims the truth? Again, I say, God forbid!

The preaching of the gospel (which is the spreading of the truth of the Bible throughout the world), and the responding to it (which can only be done if God regenerates the heart), is the ordinary means of salvation. Ordinarily, God uses means. So, it is always the church's job to proclaim the gospel, and to bring people into contact with and to a knowledge of the truth of the Bible.

Ordinarily the Lord works by causing all those that are going to be saved to come into contact with the truth somehow. Whether it be into contact with the Bible itself, or a tract or a gospel meeting or a church. God will make sure that all the elect will come into contact with the truth, through which He can then work by giving them a new heart, repentance and faith.

But God is always free to work without, above and against means if he so wishes. This is the case, for example, for all elect persons who are incapable of being called by the Word, such as elect infants and elect imbeciles. But we should never presume on this. Ordinarily, the job of the church is to bring people into contact with the truth, tell them about Christ, and leave the rest to the Lord as to whether He saves them or not.

What I am trying to get across is that it is not what we *know* that saves us, neither is it even what we *believe*, but salvation is only of the Lord. Many people go to church for years, and know their Bibles backwards, but they're not saved. Only when the Lord regenerates their heart does the truth of the Scriptures, that they may have known for many years, come alive for them. This is the new birth, and we can do nothing to attain it for ourselves. Neither our faith, nor our understanding, can help get us to heaven, otherwise we could boast that we did something our neighbour didn't do, namely have faith, or understand the Scriptures better. No, no, no. Salvation is of the Lord alone. We learn everything else later.

The Word of God is living and powerful:

Hebrews 4:12
For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

The Word of God has power to regenerate hearts. But it's only after we've been born again in the heart that the Scriptures really come into their own.

Christ prayed to the Father (with regards his disciples):

John 17:17
Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

This is the main role of the Scriptures, and the reason we need to stay close to the Word of God for as long as we're in this world. We're justified by grace through faith alone, but we're sanctified through the truth, the Scriptures.

It's here that we learn of the doctrine of the Trinity, and all the other doctrines of truth. And not only do we learn of them with our minds, but if we're born-again we also know them for sure in our hearts, and they begin to change us from the inside.

It is possible to know correct doctrine, without a new heart, simply through reading the Bible. But just knowing the truth can't change anybody. We can say we believe in all the orthodox Creeds, all the orthodox doctrines, and mean it, and still go to hell in the end. It's only after we've been born again that the Scriptures come alive to us. They affect our hearts and change our way of life altogether.

But many Christians make a mistake by thinking that sanctification is me "every day in every way getting better and better." They think that as we mature in the faith, and we learn more and more of how we should behave from the Scriptures, then we really become better people as a result. I'm a lot better than I was, say, ten years ago.

But I find in myself that this is just not true. Try as much as I can, even with the Lord's help, I'm still not getting better and better. Well, I'm in good company. The apostle Paul said:

Romans 7:14-26

I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I. If then I do that which I would not, I consent unto the law that it is good. Now then it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

This is not a description of a person before conversion to Christ, because there was no battle going on at all in his soul, then. Neither can we say it was something else not relevant to the Christian today, such as Paul, a Jew, telling us of his experience in relation to the Jewish law. No. It's a description of the truly converted Christian, with the spiritual battle against the flesh continually going on within him until he dies.

Our proper understanding of this, leads us to realise that we're not getting better and better at all, but rather we're coming to see our sins more and more. Our very need of Christ then becomes clearer and clearer as we grow in the faith.

I'm just as much a totally depraved sinner in need of Christ the second before I die as I was the second after I was conceived, even though, in between, I've been born-again and had a new heart put within me. If for one moment I was getting better and better, it would mean that the more mature I got in the faith, the less I'm in need of Christ, which can't possible be.

Christ said of Himself:

John 17:19
And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.

Sanctification cannot possibly mean our getting better and better, because Christ said that He sanctified Himself, who was altogether perfect and could not possibly get better.

Rather, what is meant here is that Christ was setting Himself more and more apart from the world, as He got Himself ready to perform the task He was about to endure on the cross.

To us, sanctification is not becoming better and better, it is a becoming more and more set apart from the ways of the world and from all false doctrine, in order to live for Christ. And this is directly proportional to our knowledge of the Scriptures. Only as the Holy Spirit opens the Scriptures to us, can we become more and more set apart unto the Christian life. The Scriptures are therefore vital for our Christian walk in this world, which is the practical outworking of our faith. The nearer we are to Christ and the truth, the more we can be Christ-like in our daily lives.

Only after death, is sin got rid of completely from our lives (what a glorious thing to look forward to!). But while we are in this world, we are given new hearts and the Holy Spirit within us, to understand the Scriptures, in order for us to mortify the old nature, and nurture the fruit of the Spirit. This is how the Christian should spend his life. As we do this, we become more and more sanctified — i.e. set apart from the world's ways of doing things, and conformed to the Scriptural way of living. But all the time, we're still the vile sinners that we always were by nature.

Upon having a new heart put within us, our slavery to sin is immediately broken, so anyone with an addiction has hope! It can be broken, if you come to Christ! However, sin itself will still be there. We have our slavery to sin broken, but we still need victory over individual temptations as they present themselves to us. The drunkard can have his habit broken if he comes to Christ, but it would still be a good idea for him to avoid the pub.

Christ tells His disciples that they need to pray daily:

Luke 11:4
Forgive us our sins.... and lead us not into temptation.

Job was a true believer throughout the book named after him. But only after his experiences, does he come to the mature spiritual conclusion of a well-exercised believer:

Job 40:4
Behold, I am vile....

Job 42:6
....I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes.

Our sanctification gives us victory over sin, as we need it. It doesn't make us better and better people, because then, resisting temptation would become easier and easier. We should never think of sin as easy to conquer:

Galatians 6:1
Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted.

In the Christian life, we grow in two things as we mature in the faith. We:

2 Peter 3:18
....grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The more Scripture we know, as we mature in the faith, the more weapons we have in our armoury, as we fight the world, the flesh and the devil. Overcoming sin does not become easier, but we have more weapons at our disposal in the constant battle that we have against our spiritual enemies — a war which won't end, nor become easier, until we rest and go to be with Christ, which is far better.

One day, in heaven, there'll be no more need for the Bible. Sin will have gone from our lives completely. There will be no more need of setting ourselves apart; we will be apart from our enemies for ever, as

they all get thrown into hell-fire and we don't. But while we are here on this earth now, we need the Word of God, for our sanctification:

Romans 12:2
And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.

What we have mentioned so far about the depth of our vileness, and our need of being saved from such a condition through Jesus Christ, is real Christianity. But the church is very different. Let's now go on to see what this stark difference is.

Church History

1. The Church or Christ?

In the Old Testament, two major events stand out above all the others.

The first one is the Exodus of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. They were in sore bondage for over four hundred years, until the Lord provided Moses who, through a series of miraculous events culminating in the parting of the Red Sea, set the Israelites free from their slavery. They wandered in the wilderness for forty years, before Joshua led them into the promised land they were to inherit, the land west of the River Jordan.

All this actual history is for us today a picture of the way God deals with us spiritually. We are all in spiritual bondage as slaves to sin. Christ leads us out of that bondage by miraculously changing our hearts and making us new creatures. We wander in the wilderness of this world just for a short while, before being translated into the real promised land, which is in the next world. That's true religion, about which the history of the Israelites is merely a picture. We're told this:

1 Corinthians 10:1-4
Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock *that followed them: and that Rock was Christ.*

It is good that we have physical pictures of spiritual realities like this, because we're physical beings, and without physical pictures we would find it difficult to learn about spiritual things:

1 Corinthians 10:11
Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come.

And there's something else in this physical picture too in v.5:

1 Corinthians 10:5
But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

God miraculously led the Israelites out from their slavery, but after they were freed, not all of them by any means reached the promised land. Most of them lusted after evil things, were idolaters, committed fornication, tempted Christ and murmured (vv. 6-10). So God quite rightly overthrew them in the wilderness. Only a remnant entered the promised land, in fact only two who were over twenty at the time of the Exodus, Joshua and Caleb. Even Moses, because of a particular sin, died without reaching it.

So what does this physical picture teach us spiritually? It can't be teaching that we can be saved by Christ into the freedom He brings, only later on to be lost again and never get to heaven in the end. There are so many other verses which teach that this just can't happen. We can't be un-born-again:

Philippians 1:6
Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Romans 8:38,39
For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

John 10:27,28
My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand.

Moses never made it into this world's promised land, but he certainly made it into the real promised land in the next. And there were many who did get into this world's promised land who never made it into the real one. So we see it is all simply a picture.

To understand this picture more clearly, let's look at the other major event in the Old Testament, the exile into Babylon.

The Israelites entered and conquered the land west of the River Jordan. For many centuries they lived there. They built a Temple in Jerusalem. They thought that they were in the real promised land, and would be there forever. They became so proud of the idea that they were God's chosen people, never realising that none of what they had or did was true religion, but was only ever meant to be a picture of the spiritual reality.

They needed to repent as individuals. They needed to call on the Lord to save them from their sins, because they couldn't save themselves. They needed to put their trust in the Messiah that God had promised was to come. But they never did any of these. They never thought for one moment that the Lord wasn't pleased with them. They performed all the outward observances that God Himself had given them, the animal sacrifices, the dietary laws, and so on, and they really thought that by doing these things outwardly they were pleasing God, after all, God had told them to do these things. Again and again, God sent to them prophets to tell them they needed to turn their hearts towards Him, not rely on outward observances, which were only ever pictures, pointers to the real thing:

1 Samuel 15:22
And Samuel said, Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.

Isaiah 1:11-17
To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from

before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Amos 5:21-24
I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.

But they wouldn't listen, so finally the unthinkable happened. God sent the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem and its Temple. And He sent His prophet Jeremiah to tell them in Jerusalem that it was too late to try to defend their city, and that they should give in to these enemies and go into exile with them:

Jeremiah 38:2,3
Thus saith the Lord, He that remaineth in this city shall die by the sword, by the famine, and by the pestilence: but he that goeth forth to the Chaldeans shall live; for he shall have his life for a prey, and shall live. Thus saith the Lord, This city shall surely be given into the hand of the king of Babylon's army, which shall take it.

But most were too proud and didn't listen, so they were destroyed. They believed in being loyal to their doomed city and nation to the end. But those who took Jeremiah's advice, and did go into exile in Babylon and settled there, were saved, and seventy years later their children were allowed to return.

Jeremiah 29:4-14
Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon; Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace. For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Let not your prophets and your diviners, that be in the midst of you, deceive you, neither hearken to your dreams which ye cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely unto you in my name: I have not sent them, saith the Lord. For

thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the Lord: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the Lord; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.

The majority worshipped their nation, rather than obeying God. And, just as in the Exodus, they were destroyed for their sins. But the remnant who didn't worship their nation, but rather obeyed the Lord, survived and had their lives saved. Again, this is another picture of spiritual things.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Israelite nation is a picture of the visible church. Stephen even called them "*the church in the wilderness.*"

Acts 7:38,39
This is he [Moses]*, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us: To whom our fathers would not obey, but thrust him from them, and in their hearts turned back again into Egypt....*

Most of the visible church throughout history has rebelled against God, only a remnant from within that visible church has ever been the true church, God's true chosen people:

Isaiah 10:21-23
The remnant shall return, even the remnant of Jacob, unto the mighty God. For though thy people Israel be as the sand of the sea, yet a remnant of them shall return: the consumption decreed shall overflow with righteousness. For the Lord God of hosts shall make a consumption, even determined, in the midst of all the land.

And this phenomenon continues today.

So many people today think "my church right or wrong." And they worship their church or denomination, and follow it, never dreaming of disagreeing with it or seeking to follow Jesus Christ for themselves. This is very sad. And if the Biblical events of the Exodus and the Babylonian exile are pictures for us today, which they are, we have to say that these poor souls, even though they may have been good church-goers for all of their lives, will not escape the wrath to come.

Going to church doesn't make anyone a Christian. We must come to Jesus Christ for ourselves personally. Have a real relationship with Him. Talk to Him, pray to Him, learn from Him.

John 8:12
I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

The visible church today is a huge edifice, consisting of millions of followers. But throughout history, God has always by-passed its hierarchy and instead used ordinary people like you and me to proclaim His message.

Who were the prophets? We don't know much about most of them at all. They weren't great men in Israel. They were ordinary people. We know Jeremiah and Ezekiel were priests, but in those days men were born into the priestly line rather than chose it as a vocation. The only other prophet we know anything about, was Amos, who was a simple herdsman from Tekoa:

Amos 1:1
The words of Amos, who was among the herdmen of Tekoa, which he saw concerning Israel in the days of Uzziah king of Judah, and in the days of Jeroboam the son of Joash king of Israel, two years before the earthquake.

Amos 7:14,15
Then answered Amos, and said to Amaziah, I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son; but I was an herdman, and a gatherer of sycomore fruit: And the Lord took me as I followed the flock, and the Lord said unto me, Go, prophesy unto my people Israel.

And when Christ came to earth, He didn't come to the Temple and reveal Himself to the great church leaders of the day, asking them to proclaim Him to their followers. He revealed Himself to ordinary people: a young couple from Nazareth, shepherds, fishermen. The priests and great religious leaders of the day completely missed Christ's coming. God by-passed them altogether. In fact, they ended up becoming Christ's worst enemies.

We should feel sad at this, even though it was always the Lord's will to by-pass them. The church is the visible witness of Christianity to the world. It's what the world sees as Christianity. When the world wants to know what Christians think, where do they go? The church. I'll give you an example of this. Think of the present-day city of Jerusalem. Christians there number about 2% of the population, the rest are mainly Jews or Muslims. There's a Christian Quarter in the old city, and there are plenty of Christian so-called "holy sites" to visit. But every one of them is absolutely full of icons, paintings and statues, none of which is what true Christianity is about. But it's the only witness the Jews and the Muslims ever see. They think that Christianity is what they see around them, so they run a mile, and I don't blame them. They don't seem to have a problem with idolatry, but the churches certainly do.

So when the church is a bad witness for Christ like this, we should be sighing and crying over it. The witness for Christ has been ruined, the glory has departed, and it will one day be judged with greater judgment even than the world:

Ezekiel 9:4-6
And the Lord said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof. And to the others he said in mine hearing, Go ye after him through the city, and smite: let not your eye spare, neither have ye pity: Slay utterly old and young, both maids, and little children, and women: but come not near any man upon whom is the mark; and begin at my sanctuary.

Luke 12:48
For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more.

I'm sure there are some good leaders in the hierarchies of the various churches today. In Christ's day there was Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. But not many. Most leaders in the visible church miss what Christ came to do and teach altogether. They set up their own empires, get themselves involved with politics, embrace the trends of the day, do anything but read and teach what their Bibles clearly tell them.

A church can, and ought to, be useful, and we should be fully involved with one that teaches the truth if at all possible:

Hebrews 10:25
Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

But the church is not a means of salvation. We don't go to hell without it. We need to read the Bible. Ask God to give us His Holy Spirit so we may understand it properly. Start a real, living relationship with Jesus Christ. That's true freedom. That's real religion. Religion of the heart. That's what the Lord came to earth to give us. Let's worship Him.

Joel 2:12-14
Therefore also now, saith the Lord, turn ye even to me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repenteth him of the evil. Who knoweth if he will return and repent, and leave a blessing behind him; even a meat offering and a drink offering unto the Lord your God?

2. The Church: Altogether Different from Jesus Christ

The most fundamental problem we all have in our lives, is our selfish nature. This needs sorting out. That's what Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ came into this world to do. The Bible shows us this. The Bible is full of the subject of sin. The Old Testament is mainly the history of men rebelling against God time and time again. And the New Testament teaches us how God deals with sin and reconciles such rebels to Himself in Jesus Christ.

However, men don't like to be taught how evil they are by nature. It annoys them. So, throughout "church history" this vital subject has been continually watered down. Sin is treated as being unimportant, yet it is the one thing we all so desperately need to know about and have dealt with.

Men try to change the fundamental understanding of human nature to make it appear far more palatable. Theologians prefer to invent many lighter "theories of the atonement" rather than accepting the plain teaching of the Bible that Christ had to die to atone for the sins of His people. They vaguely realise that "sin" exists, but then the excuses come to lighten the problem:

— Christ didn't really need to die, His life was just an example to us.
— We can get rid of "original sin" simply by a priest splashing water in baptism.
— We don't have to think about sin any more because Jesus Christ has taken it all away.
— We don't deserve hell-fire forever, just a limited time in purgatory.
— Unbelievers are just annihilated after death.
— With a bit of effort, we can become "gods."
— God will save everybody in the end.

And so on. Anything and everything except acknowledging how vile and deserving of hell-fire forever we really are.

Church leaders throughout history have thought it far more important to be able to formulate fine descriptions of God in human language. So, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity is regarded as far, far more important than any doctrine about sin. So important in fact, that people were cast out of the church as heretics if they didn't believe it.

The only two well-known names in "church history" who understood the truth about the depth of sin within us were Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century, and John Calvin of Geneva in the sixteenth. There were others, but most who really saw this truth about human nature are nearly all unknown to us. All because the "great" theologians of history didn't ***want*** to think about how bad they really were. They just wanted to impress men.

How can we trust the church, if it doesn't even ***want*** to believe the most important thing about life, namely, the true depth of depravity of the human soul? How can we believe anything the church has to say, if it has a totally wrong idea about human nature to start with?

Churches instead have developed for themselves whole new systems, with whole new vocabularies, which not only have absolutely nothing to do with the faith described in Scripture, but are very confusing to anyone from outside. As an example, here are some random words from various different traditions:

Eucharist
Scapular
Trinity
Archimandrite
Holy Orders
Evangelical
Antidisestablishmentarianism
Hypostatic Union
Parish
Lent
Iconostasis
Vespers

Do we know what any of these words mean? Anyone who has not been born and brought up in an environment where words such as

these are regularly used, cannot possibly know what is going on. The churches are essentially speaking a foreign language to outsiders. But those entrenched in such organisations are quite happy there, knowing the vocabulary, and going along with it all.

So much of what passes as Christianity today is nothing like what Jesus Christ came to give the world. It is what men have developed over the centuries as to what they ***want*** Christianity to be like.

With this in mind, let's re-evaluate everything that we know about "church history."

The Change Begins

The Bible was completed before the end of the first century. There is now no more revelation from God. The last book to be written was the book of Revelation, written by the apostle John. And he warned:

Revelation 22:18,19
For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book.

But rather than recognising the depth of the sinfulness of our human nature, the need of calling on God for mercy and of having our hearts changed from within by Jesus Christ, which is the true message of Scripture, the churches began to change it. They didn't like the original message given by God, so they simply altered it.

As soon as the canon of Scripture had been completed, and John, the last of the apostles, had died, the great change began.

Apostolic Succession

One of the earliest post-apostolic leader we really know anything about was Clement of Rome. He died around 100AD, so he would

have been contemporary with the apostles. He became the bishop of Rome for the last few years of his life.

The one letter we know he wrote, was not Scripture. This is clear from some of the nonsense in it:

"*There is a bird, which is named the phoenix. This, being the only one of its kind, liveth for five hundred years; and when it hath now reached the time of its dissolution that it should die, it maketh for itself a coffin of frankincense and myrrh and the other spices, into the which in the fullness of time it entereth, and so it dieth. But, as the flesh rotteth, a certain worm is engendered, which is nurtured from the moisture of the dead creature and putteth forth wings. Then, when it is grown lusty, it taketh up that coffin where are the bones of its parent, and carrying them journeyeth from the country of Arabia even unto Egypt, to the place called the City of the Sun; and in the daytime in the sight of all, flying to the altar of the Sun, it layeth them thereupon; and this done, it setteth forth to return.*"
— 1 Clement 25:2-4

How a "Christian" leader can write such drivel is beyond me.

But in his letter, we can just see the beginnings of the idea of apostolic succession, i.e. that the church is continued by an unbroken succession of men and ***their*** teachings, rather than belief in the teachings of a completed canon of Scripture:

"*And our Apostles knew through our Lord Jesus Christ that there would be strife over the name of the bishop's office. For this cause therefore, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the aforesaid persons, and afterwards* ***they provided a continuance, that if these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed to their ministration***."
— 1 Clement 44:1,2

Clement himself could not possibly have foreseen the abuses in the church that would occur many years later, as a result of this fairly benign statement of his. But one small seed is all that is required for a false doctrine to blossom out of all proportion.

Clement is now regarded as one of the first "popes" of Rome, supposedly in "apostolic succession" to Peter himself (of whom there

is no actual Biblical evidence of ever having been in Rome). Consequently, in mediaeval art, Clement is anachronistically depicted in papal robes, but he obviously never wore such things. What we find generally depicted in "church history" today is quite often nothing like the reality. In every generation we change "history" to suit ourselves.

Men just love the idea that they can exalt themselves. And, to go along with this man-exalting view, they invent a "history" of great men of the past who are altogether too much like them:

Psalm 50:21
These things hast thou done, and I kept silence; ***thou thoughtest that I was altogether such an one as thyself****: but I will reprove thee, and set them in order before thine eyes.*

And this low view of sin and high view of man is what, over time, has changed the church completely.

Only a few years later came a man who had far more influence in changing the church from its original apostolic foundations than Clement had. That was Ignatius, bishop of Antioch. He arrogantly signed all of his letters "*Ignatius, who is also called Theophorus*," which means "God-Bearer." In around AD107, as he was journeying to Rome to be martyred, he wrote a series of letters. And these letters became the foundation for two major changes in the church.

Elevation of the Bishops

Ignatius of Antioch was the first person to change the leadership of the church from the two-fold Biblical pattern to becoming a three-fold hierarchical structure.

The Bible states that there are only two offices in the church: bishops (or overseers) and deacons:

1 Timothy 3:1
This is a true saying, If a man desire ***the office of a bishop****, he desireth a good work.*

1 Timothy 3:13
For they that have used ***the office of a deacon*** *well purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus.*

Elder (or presbyter) is not an office, rather a generic name for the older, more mature members in a congregation.

But Ignatius elevated presbyters to an office in itself, and, more to the point, elevated the position of bishop (the position he held) to a higher office over all the others. He is really strong on this, with many references in his letters, drilling it in, to the recipients, who's in charge:

"….***if the prayer of one or two possesses such power, how much more that of the bishop*** *and the whole Church!….* ***Let us be careful, then, not to set ourselves in opposition to the bishop, in order that we may be subject to God***."
— Letter to the Ephesians 5

"***Have respect to the Bishop as to Christ Himself. Now the more any one sees the bishop keeping silence, the more ought he to revere him. For we ought to receive every one whom the Master of the house sends to be over His household, as we would do Him that sent him. It is manifest, therefore, that we should look upon the bishop even as we would upon the Lord Himself***."
— Letter to the Ephesians 6

"*I rejoice in your messengers. Since, then, I have had the privilege of seeing you, through* ***Damas your most worthy bishop, and through your worthy presbyters Bassus and Apollonius, and through my fellow-servant the deacon*** *Sotio, whose friendship may I ever enjoy, inasmuch as he is* ***subject to the bishop*** *as to the grace of God,* ***and to the presbytery*** *as to the law of Jesus Christ*, [I now write to you]."
— Letter to the Magnesians 2

"*Take care to do all things in harmony with God, with* ***the bishop presiding in the place of God****, and with* ***the presbyters in the place of the council of the apostles****, and with* ***the deacons****, who are most dear to me, entrusted with the business of Jesus Christ, who was with the Father from the beginning and is at last made manifest*."
— Letter to the Magnesians 6

"*As therefore the Lord did nothing without the Father, being united to Him, neither by Himself nor by the apostles, so* ***neither do ye anything without the bishop and presbyters****….*"
— Letter to the Magnesians 7

"*….****there is one bishop, along with the presbytery and deacons, my fellow-servants: that so, whatsoever ye do, ye may do it according to [the will of] God****…..*"
— Letter to the Philadelphians 4

"*….But the Spirit proclaimed these words:* ***Do nothing without the bishop****….*"
— Letter to the Philadelphians 7

"*Remember in your prayers the Church in Syria, which* ***now has God for its shepherd, instead of me****.*" [as he was about to be martyred]
— Letter to the Romans 9

"*For, since* ***ye are subject to the bishop as to Jesus Christ****, ye appear to me to live not after the manner of men, but according to Jesus Christ, who died for us, in order, by believing in His death, ye may escape from death.* ***It is therefore necessary that, as ye indeed do, so without the bishop ye should do nothing, but should also be subject to the presbytery, as to the apostle of Jesus Christ****, who is our hope, in whom, if we live, we shall [at last] be found.*"
— Letter to the Trallians 2

"*In like manner, let all reverence the deacons as an appointment of Jesus Christ, and* ***the bishop as Jesus Christ****, who is the Son of the Father, and* ***the presbyters as the sanhedrin of God****, and assembly of the apostles.* ***Apart from these, there is no Church****. Concerning all this, I am persuaded that ye are of the same opinion. For I have received the manifestations of your love, and still have it with me, in* ***your bishop, whose very appearance is highly instructive, and his meekness of itself a power****; whom I imagine* ***even the ungodly must reverence****, seeing they are also pleased that I do not spare myself. But shall I, when permitted to write on this point, reach such a height of self-esteem, that though being a condemned man,* ***I should issue commands to you as if I were an apostle****?*"
— Letter to the Trallians 3

"***Let nothing be done without the Bishop. See that ye all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as ye would the apostles****; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God.* ***Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist, which is [administered] either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude also be; even as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful without the bishop either to baptize or to celebrate a love-feast; but whatsoever he shall approve of, that is also pleasing to God, so that everything that is done may be secure and valid.***"
— Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8

"*Moreover, it is in accordance with reason that we should return to soberness[of conduct], and, while yet we have opportunity, exercise repentance towards God.* ***It is well to reverence both God and the bishop. He who honours the bishop has been honoured by God; he who does anything without the knowledge of the bishop, does [in reality] serve the devil****.…*"
— Letter to the Smyrnaeans 9

Elevation of the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper was meant to be a simple remembrance of the Lord's death:

1 Corinthians 11:24-26
And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: ***this do in remembrance of me****. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood:* ***this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me****. For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup,* ***ye do shew the Lord's death*** *till he come.*

But Ignatius elevated the Lord's Supper into a superstitious, mystical ceremony, which only the bishop and his cronies could rightly administer, being the only ones who supposedly had the awesome power to magically turn the bread and wine into the true body and blood of Christ:

"*….**if any one be not within the altar, he is deprived of the bread of God….***"
— Letter to the Ephesians 5

"*Assemble yourselves together in common, every one of you severally, man by man, in grace, in one faith and one Jesus Christ, who after the flesh was of David's race, who is Son of Man and Son of God, to the end that ye may obey the bishop and presbytery without distraction of mind; breaking one bread, which is **the medicine of immortality** and the antidote that we should not die but live for ever in Jesus Christ.*"
— Letter to the Ephesians 20

"*It is fitting also that **the deacons, as being [the ministers] of the mysteries of Jesus Christ**, should in every respect be pleasing to all. For they are not ministers of meat and drink, but servants of the Church of God. They are bound, therefore, to avoid all grounds of accusation [against them], as they would do fire.*"
— Letter to the Trallians 5

"***Take ye heed, then, to have but one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup to [show forth] the unity of His blood****….*"
— Letter to the Philadelphians 4

"***They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ**, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again. Those, therefore, who speak against this gift of God, incur death in the midst of their disputes. But it were better for them to treat it with respect, that they also might rise again. It is fitting, therefore, that ye should keep aloof from such persons, and not to speak of them either in private or in public, but to give heed to the prophets, and above all, to the Gospel, in which the passion [of Christ] has been revealed to us, and the resurrection has been fully proved. But avoid all divisions, as the beginning of evils.*"
— Letter to the Smyrnaeans 7

Just two changes by Ignatius, but already the church is very different from what it was originally intended to be.

Becoming "gods"

If we have a wrong idea about the depth of human depravity, we begin to think we are not as bad as we really are. Consequently, sin becomes less important, and the way becomes wide open to the false teaching that, given a bit of effort on our part, and maybe with the Lord's help too, we can all get better and better.

Most Protestants believe in "*progressive sanctification.*" They would believe, correctly, that we do need Christ to change us from the inside, but they go on to believe, wrongly, that He then begins to "sanctify" us in a process whereby we become better and better at keeping His Commandments and doing what pleases Him, although it is still admitted that we never get rid of sin altogether until the next life:

1 John 3:2
Beloved, ***now*** *are we the sons of God, and* ***it doth not yet appear what we shall be****: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*

But that is not what sanctification is. When God comes to live within us, we certainly change. We grow in grace and knowledge:

2 Peter 3:18
But ***grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ****. To him be glory both now and for ever. Amen.*

That growth in knowledge is what sanctifies us:

John 17:17
Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

True sanctification is our being set apart more and more from the world. It is not us getting better and better in ourselves. We remain the vile sinners in need of salvation that we ever were:

Romans 7:24,25
O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.

But, as usual, men don't like to think of themselves as being that bad. They ***want*** to see an internal improvement, so they see one.

There are other Protestants, notably Methodists, Quakers and Pentecostals, who go one stage further, and believe in "*entire sanctification.*" This is the belief that, if we really try hard enough, with God's help, we can actually achieve a state in this world of being without sin. They misunderstand such verses as:

1 John 3:6
Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not*: whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.*

1 John 3:9
Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and ***he cannot sin****, because he is born of God.*

1 John 5:18
We know that ***whosoever is born of God sinneth not****; but he that is begotten of God keepeth himself, and that wicked one toucheth him not.*

Far from these verses teaching that we cannot sin, they are rather teaching that it is only to the extent we "abide" in Christ, that we don't sin. But we never "abide" in Christ fully whilst we are in this world. Self always gets in the way.

The frightening thing about this teaching that we "cannot sin" in this world, is that, if it is taken to its logical, ultimate, man-exalting conclusion, we could end up believing that we can become "gods."

Before we think that this is a radical idea, only believed by strange groups such as the Mormons, we find out, shockingly, that it is actually the mainstream teaching of the church throughout history.

There are three Scriptures which are misused to try to back this idea up. The first one is:

Genesis 3:22
And the LORD God said, Behold, ***the man is become as one of us****, to know good and evil….*

But this idea that they would be "*as one of us,*" i.e. "*as gods,*" originated from the serpent as an evil temptation:

Genesis 3:5
For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ***ye shall be as gods****, knowing good and evil.*

After they ate, they indeed became autonomous "*gods*" over themselves, being now free and able to do whatsoever they wished. Except that they found this to be a sore bondage, being totally enslaved to an evil, selfish nature. We need to be set free from our bondage to sin to worship the one True Living God instead.

The second Scripture that is misused, is:

Psalm 82:6
I have said, ***Ye are gods****; and all of you are children of the most High.*

Before the Fall of Adam, God gave man such privileges. We were made in His image. We were given a god-like dominion over all the Creation:

Genesis 1:27,28
So ***God created man in his own image****, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them,* ***Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth****.*

But we lost that image when Adam fell. Psalm 82 continues:

Psalm 82:7
***But ye shall die like men**, and fall like one of the princes.*

We all die, which is the wages of sin:

Romans 6:23
For the wages of sin is death….

So, these verses in Psalm 82 are actually telling us that we no longer have His image nor a god-like dominion over Creation, but are pathetic, selfish, fallen creatures instead.

Psalm 82:6 is actually quoted by Christ as He spoke to the Pharisees:

John 10:34-36
*Jesus answered them, Is it not written in your law, I said, **Ye are gods**? If **he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken**; Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?*

Here, Christ claims exclusivity. ***He*** is the only One who actually was the Son of God. Nobody else ever can be.

The third Scripture that is misused, is:

2 Peter 1:4
*Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be **partakers of the divine nature**, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.*

Upon becoming a Christian, we become the adopted sons of God. Christ comes to dwell within us. We will get to heaven to be with Him for ever. The image of God is restored in us. But we are always His creatures. We never become "gods," even in the next life.

God Himself has made it quite clear in the First Commandment:

Exodus 20:3
Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

This idea of us becoming "gods" began very early on in "church history," and is far more widespread in Christendom than we think. Many of the early so-called "church fathers" taught it. It was they who developed this false idea. A few examples will suffice:

"*The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.*"
— ***Irenaeus*** (c. 130-200) *Against Heresies* Book 5, Preface

"*For we cast blame upon [God], because we have not been made gods from the beginning, but at first merely men, then at length gods; although God has adopted this course out of His pure benevolence, that no one may impute to Him invidiousness or grudgingness he declares, 'I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are sons of the Most High.'* "
— ***Irenaeus*** (c. 130-200) *Against Heresies* Book 4,Chap. 38

"*For it was necessary, at first, that nature should be exhibited; then, after that, that what was mortal should be conquered and swallowed up by immortality, and the corruptible by incorruptibility, and that man should be made after the image and likeness of God.*"
— ***Irenaeus*** (c. 130-200) *Against Heresies* Book 4,Chap. 38

"*The Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God.*"
— ***Clement of Alexandria*** (c. 150-215) *Exhortation to the Heathen*, Chap. 1

"*For if one knows himself, he will know God; and knowing God, he will be made like God"*
"His is beauty, the true beauty, for it is God; and that man becomes God, since God so wills. Heraclitus, then, rightly said, 'Men are gods, and gods are men.' For the Word Himself is the manifest mystery: God in man, and man God"
— ***Clement of Alexandria*** (c. 150-215) *The Instructor*, Book 3, Chap. 1

"*He who listens to the Lord, and follows the prophecy given by Him, will be formed perfectly in the likeness of the teacher — made a god going about in flesh.*"
— ***Clement of Alexandria*** (c. 150-215) *Miscellanies*, Book 7, Chap. 16

"*And to be incorruptible is to participate in divinity...*"
— ***Clement of Alexandria*** (c. 150-215) *Miscellanies*, Book 5, Chap. 10

"*Men were made like God, free from suffering and death, provided that they kept His commandments, and were deemed deserving of the name of His sons, and yet they, becoming like Adam and Eve, work out death for themselves; let the interpretation of the Psalm be held just as you wish, yet thereby it is demonstrated that all men are deemed worthy of becoming 'gods,' and of having power to become sons of the Highest.*"
— ***Justin Martyr*** (c. 100-165) *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chap. 124

"*For if He had made him immortal from the beginning, He would have made him God. Again, if He had made him mortal, God would seem to be the cause of his death. Neither, then, immortal nor yet mortal did He make him, but, as we have said above, capable of both; so that if he should incline to the things of immortality, keeping the commandment of God, he should receive as reward from Him immortality, and should become God...*"
— ***Theophilus of Antioch*** (c. 120-190) *To Autolycus*, Book 2, Chap. 27

"*And you shall be a companion of the Deity, and a co-heir with Christ, no longer enslaved by lusts or passions, and never again wasted by disease. For you have become God: for whatever sufferings you underwent while being a man, these He gave to you, because you were of mortal mould, but whatever it is consistent with God to impart, these God has promised to bestow upon you, because you have been deified, and begotten unto immortality.*"
— ***Hippolytus of Rome*** (c. 170-235) *Refutation of All Heresies*, Book 10, Chap. 30

"*If, therefore, man has become immortal, he will also be God. And if he is made God by water and the Holy Spirit after the regeneration of the laver he is found to be also joint-heir with Christ after the resurrection from the dead.*"
— ***Hippolytus of Rome*** (c. 170-235) *The Discourse on the Holy Theophany*

"*Therefore He was not man, and then became God, but He was God, and then became man, and that to deify us*"
— ***Athanasius of Alexandria*** (c. 296-373) *Against the Arians*, Discourse 1, Para. 39

"*….for as the Lord, putting on the body, became man, so we men are deified by the Word as being taken to Him through His flesh.*"
— ***Athanasius of Alexandria*** (c. 296-373) *Against the Arians*, Discourse 3, Para. 34

"*For He was made man that we might be made God.*"
— *Athanasius of Alexandria* (c. 296-373) *On the Incarnation*, Sect. 54

"*Since the God who was manifested infused Himself into perishable humanity for this purpose, viz. that by this communion with Deity mankind might at the same time be deified, for this end it is that, by dispensation of His grace, He disseminated Himself in every believer.*"
— *Gregory of Nyssa* (c. 335-395) *The Great Catechism* 37

"*For just as He in Himself assimilated His own human nature to the power of the Godhead, being a part of the common nature, but not being subject to the inclination to sin which is in that nature (for it says: 'He did no sin, nor was deceit found in his mouth'), so, also, will He lead each person to union with the Godhead if they do nothing unworthy of union with the Divine.*"
— *Gregory of Nyssa* (c. 335-395) *On Christian Perfection*

"*'For He hath given them power to become the sons of God.' (John 1:12) If we have been made sons of God, we have also been made gods.*"
— *Augustine of Hippo* (c. 354-430) *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, Psalm 50

"*He came down into our condition solely in order to lead us to his own divine state.*"
— *Cyril of Alexandria*

"*He continues to wear the Body which He assumed, until He make me God by the power of His Incarnation.*"
— *Gregory of Nazianzus* *Orations* 30:14

"*Through the medium of the mind he had dealings with the flesh, being made that God on earth, which is Man: Man and God blended. They became a single whole, the stronger side predominating, in order that I might be made God to the same extent that he was made man.*"
— *Gregory of Nazianzus* *Orations* 29:19

"*becoming a god is the highest goal of all*"
— *Basil of Caesarea* *On the Spirit* 9:23

These are all well-respected, "orthodox," early Christian leaders, whom we read about in our books on "church history."

And all the various Eastern Orthodox churches go one step further. They don't even believe that men are born with sinful, selfish natures at all. They believe that we are all born "neutral." They may believe that we eventually, inevitably sin after we are conceived, but they argue that we are not guilty of Adam's sin, and therefore, in their mind, we aren't actually conceived in sin and sinners by nature at all. But we are:

Psalm 51:5
Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

Consequently, in their belief system, there is no obstacle to our getting better and better, and becoming "*gods*" in the end. They call this process "*theosis*." To them, this is the main purpose of every believer.

Without the belief that we have inherently sinful, selfish natures, they don't even see our original problem in the first place, so how can these churches be of any help to anyone?

In practical terms, Roman Catholicism is very similar. They do believe that we are all born with sinful natures, but they believe that simply getting a priest to splash water on a baby in baptism removes that "original sin" and thus renders him "neutral" — the very same starting point as the Eastern Orthodox churches.

And becoming "gods" is indeed the official teaching of the Roman Catholic Church:

"*The Word became flesh to make us 'partakers of the divine nature': For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God. 'For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.' The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods.*"
— Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph 460

"*Now the gift of grace surpasses every capability of created nature, since it is nothing short of a partaking of the Divine Nature, which exceeds every other nature. And thus it is impossible that any creature should cause grace. For it is as necessary that God alone should deify, bestowing a partaking of the Divine*

Nature by a participated likeness, as it is impossible that anything save fire should enkindle."
— *Thomas Aquinas*

So, we see that a large bulk of mainstream "Christendom" goes along with such a false idea.

The truth that we are all born sinful, that we are all called to hate our sin and have a real living relationship with the One True God, who then takes us to heaven to be with Himself despite our sin, has gone missing from the church completely. It has been replaced by a man-exalting false religion believing that we are not even born with sinful natures and can become "gods" at will. This is an altogether different religion to the one Jesus Christ came to give us. And it has all developed from too light a view of the depth of human sin.

Mental Assent

At the beginning of the fourth century, the Roman Emperor Constantine professed a "conversion" to Christianity. How real this was is disputed. He consequently allowed Christians to be tolerated in the Roman Empire from AD313 onwards, and the persecutions of previous centuries finally came to an end. But this had the knock-on effect that many unbelievers now wanted to get into high places in the church. They wanted status in the Emperor's newly established religion. None of them had any idea about the true religion of the Bible. They knew nothing about the sinfulness of human nature, the need of repentance, the necessity of new birth and having a real, living relationship with God. All they wanted was a high position in the church. And, once they got where they wanted to be, they started to make the rules. Instead of believing the truths of the Bible, they began instead to believe that simple mental assent to certain doctrines was all that was necessary to being a "Christian."

— Creeds

It is difficult to ascertain when the first Creed of the church was created. There is nothing inherently wrong with a Creed or Confession of Faith as such. They are simple concise statements of what is believed by whoever wrote it. These can be good, useful tools to define exactly what we believe about the things of God. But as mental assent to doctrine replaced any concept of being born again in the heart, Creeds became the new device to ascertain who was a Christian and who was not.

The Bible says:

John 3:3, 5-7
Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, ***Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God****…. Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee,* ***Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God****. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee,* ***Ye must be born again****.*

This new birth is what makes someone a true Christian. But, nobody can see the heart. And unregenerate men don't understand this anyway. Consequently, men decided that mental assent to a Creed was far easier for them to police. We can't see the heart, but at least we can hear people confess what they believe.

One of the orthodox Creeds, the Athanasian Creed, actually states that mental assent is absolutely necessary to faith, or we cannot be saved from hell-fire:

"1 ***Whosoever will be saved****, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith; 2 Which faith* ***except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.*** *3 And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity....* [then follows a lengthy definition of the Trinity]....

28 He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity. 29 Furthermore ***it is necessary to everlasting salvation*** *that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. 30 For the right faith is that we*

believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.... [then follows a lengthy definition of the orthodox view on the being of Christ]....

43 And ***they that have done good shall go into life everlasting; and they that have done evil, into everlasting fire****. 44 This is the catholic faith,* ***which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved****."*

Do we really have to believe everything that this Creed states or else we go to "*everlasting fire*"? But the thief on the cross never believed any of this, yet he was saved to "*life everlasting*":

Luke 23:43
And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, ***To day shalt thou be with me in paradise****.*

And the devils believe all of it, yet they go into "*everlasting fire*":

James 2:19
Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: ***the devils also believe, and tremble****.*

Matthew 25:41
Then shall he say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, ***into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels****.*

— Ecumenical Councils

Then, there were a series of "Ecumenical Councils," which were meetings of church leaders, all convened by the secular Emperor of the day, not the church. The Emperors called these meetings every so often, to counteract various "heresies" that came along. Indeed, in some of these meetings, new, or expanded Creeds were produced for the faithful to assent to.

But, if one didn't assent, then one was thrown out of the church as an heretic and persecuted. So, every controversy that came along, split the church further and further.

Some of these council decisions were dubious, some were mere semantics, some were even reversed by later council decisions. Yet, every time a decision was made, the majority vote in the council always became the "orthodox" dogma, and the minorities who disagreed were cast out and persecuted. They could no longer be church members. Those cast out formed new churches based on their own beliefs, and they too became just as intolerant with anyone who opposed them in their church councils.

Even today, nearly two thousand years later, Eastern Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox are still arguing over whether miaphysitism or dyophysitism is the true doctrine. And neither church will accept anyone from the other church into their communion.

Monasticism

From the third century onwards, people began to separate themselves physically from the world and went to live on their own in the desert. This was seen as a good and holy spiritual exercise to devote their lives "to Christ" as monks or nuns.

Anthony was the most well known of the first of these "desert fathers." He heard a sermon on:

Matthew 19:21
Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.

This was Christ's particular exhortation to a rich young ruler who loved his riches a little too much, but Anthony saw it as a call to himself, to sell all his own possessions, give the proceeds to the poor and go and live in complete solitude in the desert.

Monasticism was seen as a far higher level of religious life. Setting oneself apart from the world and withdrawing in on oneself was seen as an altogether holier and higher life than that of the riff-raff still in the world.

Many followed Anthony's example and lived on their own, but others formed monastic communities of like-minded people. Their common philosophy was to renounce worldly possessions, live an austere life of "prayer" in poverty, chastity and obedience — the latter being, not obedience to God but blind obedience to the leader of their community.

But this is all wrong. There is no two-tier Christianity. By withdrawing in on ourselves, what are we trying to achieve? We may be able to get away from temptations out there in the world, but we can never get away from the temptations of our own hearts, no matter where we live.

And, it is no use thinking that if we can just work hard enough, "meditate" hard enough, say enough "prayers," we can please God enough to get to heaven. Maybe even become a "god" in the end. The simple fact remains, that none of us can do it.

The apostle Paul was such a zealous religious person, a "*Pharisee of the Pharisees*". But after coming to know Christ, he counted all that he had attained in the religious life "*but dung*":

Philippians 3:4-11
Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do ***count them but dung****, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead.*

The sixteenth century German monk Martin Luther, too, strained himself. He wanted to be a far better monk than all other monks around him, until in his privileged position of having access to the

Scriptures, he came across a verse originally from the prophet Habakkuk:

Habakkuk 2:4
Behold, his soul which is lifted up is not upright in him: but ***the just shall live by his faith***.

But it kept on being repeated throughout the New Testament:

Romans 1:17
For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, ***The just shall live by faith***.

Galatians 3:11
But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, ***The just shall live by faith***.

Hebrews 10:38
Now ***the just shall live by faith****: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.*

He came to realise that we need God to freely impute Christ's righteousness to our account, rather than trying to whip up a righteousness of our own, because our own righteousness is as filthy rags. And we receive Christ's righteousness by faith alone. His understanding of this, freed him from the sore bondage he was under of trying to achieve anything in his own strength.

Trying to be a holier person by locking ourselves away, keeping a severe ritual, "praying" and "meditating," will not achieve anything.

There is nothing wrong with "prayer," when it is a real, living communication with the Lord of glory. All real Christians will have this relationship, and it is beautiful. But the "prayer" used in monasteries is recited. It is just going through the motions of reading and reciting words. It has no real communicative use at all. Buddhists recite their "prayers." They write their "prayers" onto prayer flags, which they let blow for ever in the wind, thinking that is somehow doing something super-spiritual.

There is nothing wrong with "meditating" on the Scriptures, asking the Lord to reveal truth through it. That's a good practice. But the sort of "meditation" where one withdraws in on oneself as a supposed means of becoming more "holy" is no different from Buddhist meditation. But Buddhists are trying to empty their minds. That's dangerous.

Roman Catholic mystics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross practised self-emptying, self-abandonment and ridding self of all attachment to this world. Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic theologian and monk, died in Thailand whilst at an ecumenical conference with Roman Catholic and Buddhist monks together. That is not what Christianity is about at all. We should not be trying to be a poor copy of Eastern, mind-emptying meditation.

In the monastery or convent, there is very little concept of sin, let alone any need for us to be saved from it. We simply "pray" and "meditate" our way to higher and higher levels, and even, depending on which church we are from, maybe one day we will become a "god." Nonsense.

Forced Religion

In 380AD, Emperor Theodosius I declared Nicene Christianity the only legal religion of the Roman Empire, and branded all other religions as "heresies." Consequently, heretics and unbelievers were given the choice to "convert" by being baptised, or face penalties. "Conversions" were not exactly at the point of a sword, but legal and economic pressure made it more and more difficult to not conform. Christianity had become institutionalised.

And what have church leaders been like over the centuries since? They have nearly all been evil men, in league with the state, exalting themselves and trying to impose such conformity throughout "Christendom."

Sometimes there were two or even three popes at the same time competing for the title. Which one do we choose? Different nations chose their own.

And the Spanish and Italians had "Inquisitions," offering torture, expulsion, death or forced "conversion," to try to flush out the "heretics" from amongst them.

And then there were the Crusades, those wars in the Middle Ages waged by various popes of Rome, supposedly in the name of "Christianity," against Muslims and Jews. There was such a terrible, terrible slaughter amongst both those communities, just so that the pope of Rome could say he owned the "holy" sites in and around Jerusalem.

Many popes were themselves grossly, and openly wicked. Yet the ordinary citizens were forced to bow the knee to these people.

How can ordinary Christians possibly follow and support such men? All this was a total disgrace to the name of Christ, and a terrible witness to Him. But what could have been done about it?

Some movements did split from the church of Rome, but they were heavily persecuted. And some of these had other very strange ideas as well. There was little alternative but to at least outwardly conform to a system that, underneath everything, was so vile.

Then, five hundred years ago, came the Protestant Reformation. Coming, in the Lord's providence, just after the invention of the moveable type printing press, it brought ordinary people the Bible to read for themselves in their own languages. That can only be a good thing.

But, even so, still, the established religion was forced on people. If the leader of a land became Protestant, the whole land would have to automatically follow and Catholics would be persecuted. If he stayed Catholic, the whole land would have to remain Catholic and Protestants would be persecuted.

And also, in England, for example, it became the law of the land to go to the established Anglican church. We could be fined for not turning up to church, or even jailed if we ever became a dreaded "non-conformist."

And then there came the era of colonialism. All the far-flung colonies of nations such as Britain, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands, were forced to conform to "Christian" norms. Seeing photographs of natives of foreign lands dressed in Victorian suits with high collars and being forced, against their will, by means of strict schooling, into a mould of moral uprightness with "Christian" values, does nothing but alienate people from the truth of Christianity altogether.

So many people are put off Christianity by what has happened in the name of Jesus Christ throughout history. How can anyone even want to become a Christian if that's all they see?

That's not what Jesus Christ came to give the world. Christianity is altogether different from waging wars and persecuting those who don't agree with us.

There is a right and wrong in this world. The Ten Commandments are a summary of God's moral law. This defines right and wrong in an absolute sense. Christians should love and do righteousness and hate and avoid wickedness. Christians should try to keep themselves from sin. But they can only do this with the aid of the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell within them. Unbelievers don't have the Holy Spirit, so they can't keep themselves from sin:

Romans 8:7
Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.

Isaiah 26:10
Let favour be shewed to the wicked, yet will he not learn righteousness: in the land of uprightness will he deal unjustly, and will not behold the majesty of the LORD.

So we can't force them to stop sinning, by passing laws. We should tell them what's right and wrong in God's sight. We should flee from sin

ourselves. We should be an example to them of living a godly life. We should tell them the danger, that if they continue in sin they will justly end up in hell-fire. But if they just laugh at us and continue to sin anyway, we can't stop them. Should we even try to stop them? Should we legislate against sin and force that legislation on others, who have no ability to keep it?

We're not here as a great social movement for change. An unbeliever being forced by law against his will to keep the Ten Commandments is still an unbeliever on his way to hell-fire. God isn't going to be pleased with him. He needs Jesus Christ to come into his heart and change his life so that he'll love the Ten Commandments and want to keep them from a willing heart.

Also, we are not to think that "If only we had a Christian government, wouldn't it be wonderful." Because it wouldn't. If we had a "Christian" government enacting "Christian" laws, all the unbelievers would be out on the streets rioting and protesting that they couldn't do what they wanted to do any more. It would be chaos. So we can't win either way. Politics is a losing game. We're not to get involved with any of this.

Revelation 22:11
He that is unjust, let him be unjust still: and he which is filthy, let him be filthy still: and he that is righteous, let him be righteous still: and he that is holy, let him be holy still.

"Freedom" of Religion

Today, we have the exact opposite situation from most of past history. Nowadays, nobody is forced to go to church any more. So most people don't.

We might think this "freedom of religion" is a wonderful thing. "At last, we are free to believe what we like." But that's always been the case. The expression of the truth publicly has been the main issue.

Now, anybody can set up a "church" of their own. And anyone can split from an existing "church" on the slightest disagreement, and

form their own clone of that "church" down the road, with them now in charge.

There is such a variety of "churches" to choose from. But is this really healthy?

— All the "churches" have become so weak.
— Each "church" thinks it is the correct one, and ignores the rest.
— Unbelievers are even more put off Christianity. All there is around us is confusion.

No church is perfect. None has all truth. If we think one does, we're deluded. So we need to stop trying to make or find a perfect church. We may be now free to choose which "church" to go to, but, wherever we go, we're never going to be fully satisfied.

And if we do choose to settle in one of these "churches," we can so easily get stuck. We may no longer be forced by the state to go to church, but there are plenty of forceful men in high places in their cosy little empire they call a "church," pressurising people to follow them and be under their control. Persuasive people can have an iron grip on those weaker than themselves.

None of this is true Christianity.

The True Church Throughout History

The Lord chooses His people as individuals. So, despite all this "church history," the Lord has always had His people in every generation.

But we don't know who most of them are. The Bible tells us:

1 Corinthians 1:26-29
For ye see your calling, brethren, how that ***not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which***

are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are*: That no flesh should glory in his presence.*

True believers are always going to be the weak things of this world. Most of the men we read about in "church history," indeed, most of the men who get into high places in the church, are those who want to assert themselves and make a name for themselves. Whereas Christians, in contrast, are called to be meek:

Matthew 5:5
Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

So, by definition, from a study of "church history," we are never going to know who most of the true Christians have been at all.

The Lord, in His providence, guides all His people into the truth:

John 6:37
All that the Father giveth me shall come to me*; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.*

John 8:31,32
….If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ***ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free****.*

And the Lord usually uses means. He has given us two witnesses to His truth: Scripture and the Holy Spirit within us to interpret it correctly:

Matthew 22:29
Ye do err, not knowing ***the scriptures, nor the power of God****.*

We don't need a whole Bible. Most people throughout history have never had one. All we need to do is to come into contact with *some* of it. This contact could be in written form, but, as most couldn't even read in past history, it was more likely to come through personal witness of the truth from generation to generation. One person telling another the truth about their sin, their inability, their need to call upon God for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, so they can be changed

and have a real, living relationship with their Creator. This is the real "apostolic succession," but we can't see or measure it in any way.

The Lord does still use the visible church, despite how bad it has become. For example, the Jews were the recipients and keepers of the Old Testament Scriptures:

Romans 3:1,2
What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that ***unto them were committed the oracles of God****.*

Monasteries faithfully copied out the Scriptures through many centuries until the invention of the movable type printing press, which automated the process. And the church even today still has the responsibility of being the keeper of the New Testament Scriptures:

1 Timothy 3:15
But if I tarry long, 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****.*

Just because God uses these institutions, doesn't mean that we should follow them blindly. This is the Lord's providence at work. He uses all sorts of means, even evil people, to perform His purposes. That does not mean that these sources are right, or vital means of true religion. History clearly tells us otherwise.

We are comforted to know that, in every age, despite everything, even the church, not one of God's little flock will be lost:

Luke 12:32
Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

John 6:37
All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and ***him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out****.*

Conclusion: Go to Church

None of what the churches teach and do is ***real*** Christianity. Jesus Christ came to give us something altogether different. And the only way we can find out what Jesus was really like and what He taught, is not to listen to men who have never met or experienced Him, but to read our Bibles. The Bible only. No extra misinformation about Him, just the Bible.

And this dreadful situation in the churches can be reduced down to the one major problem: Not having a correct understanding of human nature. Nobody ***wanting*** to see the depth of their own sin. We exalt ourselves far too highly. We don't see our desperate need of Jesus Christ, but rather, we worship men. We think the "church fathers" and great "saints" of the past were so holy. We think our church leaders are such godly men. We follow our minister, priest, pastor, or whatever we call him, because, after all, he's been to theology college and we haven't. He must know what's right. But he doesn't. All theology colleges have an agenda, and only teach whatever their associated church has set in stone for them to believe. We should rather listen to Jesus Christ as He speaks to each of us through the Scriptures.

Look in people's faces. And our own in a mirror. What do we see? So proud. So smug. So arrogant. People's faces say to us: "I've got all the right answers, listen to me." Cocky. Confident. That's what we're all like by nature. We think we're God's gift to the world. And we look at photographs of church leaders on the back of their best-selling books or see their faces in their YouTube videos, and they all look so smug too. No humility on any of their faces. For a start, a truly humble person would never want a photograph or video to be taken of them at all. They would rather want to hide away from people.

"But we're made in the image of God," we may say. Yes, but we've fallen from that position. We've lost it. We're "*only evil continually*" (Genesis 6:5) now. We are vile. We always will be vile. We can never be anything else. But we can be saved from our sins if we embrace Jesus Christ. Then, when we die, we will be given new bodies which will be sinless. That's the blessed hope of the Christian.

We need to pray to Jesus Christ. Speak to Him. Ask His forgiveness for our many sins. Daily. And, if we are genuine, He will respond. We don't need to go to church to receive His forgiveness. "Church" is, in fact, irrelevant. It teaches all sorts of irrelevant nonsense.

However, once we have become a real Christian, it is always good to meet with other real Christians, who will be mainly found scattered in one or other of the churches. So it's not wrong to go to church, it's good to meet these people. This is our true church family, this is the true church. But it is invisible, we can't see it, only God can see the heart.

Most churchgoers attend a church out of tradition. They will probably have been born into the church and will blindly follow it. They will love "their" church more than Christ. They will have no idea about sin, or their need to be "born again." The leaders of the church will more than likely be of this nature.

We must realise that any church we may go to, will contain a mixture of real believers and unbelievers, and the real believers will usually be in the minority.

So we should never put our whole hope and trust in a church, any church, and especially in those who run them. We must put our trust only ever in Jesus Christ alone.

James 1:26,27
If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain.

Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.