

The Frustrations Of Church

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I

The Frustrations of Church

Prepare to be Surprised

The Christian life is full of surprises. The biggest one of all is right at the beginning. On December 25th 1977, when I prayed, “God, if you exist, let me know,” I got the biggest surprise of my life when He actually answered, not by an audible voice, but by a quickening in my heart.

John Wesley talked about his heart being “strangely warmed,” and I have heard many other testimonies from people to whom this has happened, often asking the very same question of God as I did, and who least expected an answer at the time. Being transformed from darkness to light, is the biggest surprise we’re ever going to get.

Acts 26:18

To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me.

2 Corinthians 4:6

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

But after our conversion too, the Christian life continues to be full of surprises.

Three weeks after my heart had been changed so permanently, I had a desire to go to church. I wasn’t from a church-going family, so I had no idea what to expect. I was thoroughly convinced that everybody else in church would have had the same experience as myself. Wrong. This was the next surprise. I couldn’t find anybody who had had the same experience at all. Most people I met in church had been born and brought up in the church. It was just a social club to them. They had absolutely no idea about the new birth, and the new life that the Lord gives to all who truly repent and turn to Him.

And it wasn't long before I discovered that many churches didn't even teach the Bible at all. Another surprise. I eventually learned that churches that call themselves "evangelical," were the ones that did. So I have migrated towards "evangelical" churches ever since. The Bible warms my heart. Every time I read it, I get the same experience as the two on the road to Emmaus:

Luke 24:32

And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?

But the surprises didn't stop there. I had spent several years in evangelical churches, when I came across some students who started talking about the difference between Arminianism and Calvinism. I'd never heard these expressions before, because I had been cocooned in Arminian churches, where they don't tell you about these things.

These students were telling me that I didn't have free will. I was shocked at this. "Of course I've got free will," I thought. I am free to choose what I like. But the argument wouldn't go away in my mind. After six months of thinking on these things, I woke up one morning and realised that they were right. I do have some kind of free will to choose what colour socks to wear every day, but I have no free will whatsoever to choose good. I'm a slave to sin. We all are.

This was like having my legs kicked from under me. Everything I had been taught in the past, even in evangelical circles, was wrong. I had to go back to the beginning and relearn everything I had blindly taken in. I realised that preachers can be wrong. A preacher can appear so confident in the pulpit that he's right, but we should still be like the Bereans, who didn't even believe Paul the Apostle until they had themselves compared what he had taught with the Scriptures:

Acts 17:11

These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.

Fine. So I've now moved to a Calvinistic evangelical church, and I'm not following the pastor blindly. Good. Praise the Lord. But I was then

led astray, would you believe it, by my love for the truth. In my hunger for correct doctrine, which in itself is good, I sought out the church that seemed to have the most correct doctrine. I knew all along that no church was perfect, but at least I could attend the best I could find. And everything was fine for a while. Even today I can recommend the preaching in that church.

But... the surprise came when I realised that I could go to a church that seemed to have everything right doctrinally (well, most things anyway), but there would still be three main problems:

Firstly, it tended to be quite exclusive. Joining that church, I was separating myself from every other Christian who isn't quite as doctrinally enlightened yet – and probably never will be until they die.

Secondly, the ministers are held in far too high esteem. That's supposedly in order to keep the doctrine pure. They are the only ones who are allowed to preach, who are regarded as having all the correct doctrine and who are expected to be followed implicitly. No man should ever be exalted like that.

Thirdly, to them, a good church is defined solely on how sound in doctrine it is. But it is possible to have all the right theology and still go to hell. Nobody anywhere is going to have all their theology right anyway:

1 Corinthians 8:1,2

Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth. And if any man think that he knoweth any thing, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know.

Right theology is not what defines a Christian, although we should be seeking truth. It's whether we are born-again in our hearts that defines a true Christian.

And then, another surprise. I used to know an old lady, who knew her Bible very well and was a professing Christian. And I had no reason to doubt her profession, she seemed to exhibit many Christian graces such as kindness, patience and so on. She had been a Christian for a lot longer than I had, so I certainly respected her. But she had a problem

with the church we were both attending at the time. She didn't like the church talking about indwelling sin in the believer.

To back herself up, she came up with this Bible text:

Hebrews 10:1,2

For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins.

This tells us that the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament could never take away sin, but were only ever meant to be a picture of the true sacrifice that would come later in Christ. The argument is that, if they could have taken away sin, then they would have ceased to have been offered and the worshippers "*should have had no more conscience of sins.*"

We were both agreed that animal sacrifices could never take away sin, but Christ's blood can. But this lady was quite adamant that this verse taught that if we continue to think about indwelling sin all the time, then we still have a conscience of it and therefore we can't be true Christians, because we can't have had our sins taken away by Christ yet. That's what this verse, in her mind, was effectively saying.

But my Christian experience is very different. Now I have become a Christian, the Holy Spirit has come to dwell in my heart, and it is as though a light has been switched on. I now see all the dark and dingy corners of my life I never saw before. In fact, the closer I get to Christ, the more sin I see in myself. Yes, as a true believer, I know, praise God, it has all been forgiven. It has all been taken care of and put on Christ...

Galatians 2:20

...who loved me and gave Himself for me.

But as a Christian, I still have an ongoing struggle with indwelling sin. I don't like my sin, I don't want to do it, I hate it. I don't do it deliberately or wilfully, but I fall into it. I never had this problem before

I became a Christian. Sin never bothered me then. But it does now. The apostle Paul concluded about himself:

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.

And I'm a wretched man as well. But, thanks be to God, I have a Saviour who has saved me from this wretched condition, and has put a new heart within me so I can now to some extent begin to live the life He wants me to live. But this experience of a spiritual battle within the Christian, was totally foreign to the likes of this old lady.

I tried to explain to her that after we become a Christian we still sin, and I quoted the Lord's Prayer:

Luke 11:4

Forgive us our sins.

We still have to ask forgiveness for our sins from God on a regular basis, even though we are truly born-again Christian people. But she simply told me, "Well, you've come out of Egypt, but you've not entered the Promised Land yet!"

At least we can still have Christian fellowship with someone who differs from us in a point of doctrine. We can put that down to the fact that either they, or we, or both, haven't come to a full knowledge of the truth on that issue yet. If we are both truly born-again of the Spirit of God, we can still have sweet fellowship with each other despite the differences. But anyone who claims to be born-again, and has had no experience at all of indwelling sin, I really have difficulty having fellowship with, because their experience is so different from mine.

That old lady died. I'm sure that she is with the Lord now. If she never knew about her indwelling sin while she was in this world, she knows about it now, and is eternally thankful to have been saved from it. But a difference in experience, rather than theology, really surprised me and made me even more careful never to judge others.

And then a few years later, I spoke at a meeting, mentioning in my message that we're all sinners in need of salvation. Nothing unusual. But after the talk, the group had a testimony time, where anyone could get up and give a testimony as to how the Lord has worked in their life over the past week. What a good idea! Would to God we would have more "testimony times"!

But one young lady got up and repeatedly said, "We shouldn't condemn ourselves." And it became evident she hadn't liked my message about sin at all. Not only did she think she didn't have any sin now, but it seems that she didn't believe she ever had any sin in the past either.

This is one stage further than anything else I have ever come across before. In the past, all the Christians I had met at least acknowledged that they, as individuals, were born sinners, but are now redeemed by Christ. But this new theology believes we were never born sinners at all. It denies the doctrine of Original Sin. What's the point of Christ then? Well, presumably, according to them, He did come into the world to take away "sin," but that was a long time ago, and it was just "sin" in general that was taken away. Ever since then, everybody is now born without any sin, because Christ has taken it all away. So, Christ's dying on the cross generally for "sin" has no real relevance to any of us as individuals at all today.

In this new system, we don't need as individuals to repent and change our lives in any way. No! We are all to be told Jesus loves us as we are, there's no need to change. We are all called now simply to recognise our condition, our "freedom in Christ" as some of them call it, which we didn't realise before. It's just a question of simply recognising something that already exists but which we are simply unaware of until we're told about it.

This must be the ultimate infiltration of humanism into the church. This is so absolutely against the true gospel, that it's clear that all those who embrace this have no concept whatsoever of their need of a Saviour, and in my book surely, surely, surely they can't possibly be Christian in any sense of the word. Can they? I really don't want to be judgmental, but a false gospel is a false gospel, isn't it?

And, yes, it's all about the humanistic doctrine of having a good feeling about oneself. The same young lady who said, "We shouldn't condemn ourselves," then went on to tell everybody about how she used to be really shy, but since coming to realise her new-found condition in Christ, she now has a good, positive feeling about herself, and has become very outgoing. She couldn't stop chattering. This is the opposite of Christianity.

Many years ago, when I started a new job in a hospital, I used to live in temporary accommodation in a room right next to the hospital kitchen. One lady in particular would arrive at 6.30am for work, and she was the loudest person you could imagine. I had my automatic 6.30am alarm call every day. But I met her a few years later, at a Christian meeting, and she had been completely transformed. No longer was she brash and loud, but she had been given a gentle and quiet spirit, and it was a joy to see her there. That's what true Christianity gives people. It doesn't make them extrovert, but exactly the opposite.

1 Peter 3:4

....the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price.

And then, a while ago my wife and I went on a short break to the city of Chengdu. On the Lord's Day we ended up in the "Chengdu International Christian Fellowship," which held services in English. It soon became obvious that they had imbibed this "self-confidence" religion too. There was no humility, no reverence, no gospel, hardly any Bible (three unrelated verses from a dodgy translation), no mention of sin, and, worst of all, no mention at all of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Just feel good about yourself.

Groups like this are now commonplace. And yet they would all claim to be Bible-believing. A think-positive, self-confident, feel-good humanism is NOT what Christ came to give the world. It's so contrary to the truth, yet today, this "self-confidence" religion has now become the new mainstream evangelicalism.

When the true Christian leaves this world for the next, he will have the second biggest surprise of his life, second only to his conversion, because I'm sure the next world won't be anything like what we think

it's going to be. (The unbeliever will have by far the biggest surprise of his life at that point). But before then, while we're still in this world, there surely can't be any more surprises lurking just around the corner, can there?

The Great Dilemma

1. Introduction

The true believer in the Lord Jesus Christ has had a fundamental inward heart change. God has plucked him from the wide and broad way that leads to destruction, which is the way of the world, the way of the natural man; and placed him on the strait and narrow way that leads to life:

Matthew 7:13,14

Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.

God has given him a new heart and a new spirit has been put within him:

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.

He now no longer follows the way of the world, but begins to love and follow the things of God instead.

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.31

Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, he doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ, freely offered to us in the gospel.

Once set upon this path, the believer now spends the rest of his days on this earth in pursuit of learning more and more about God and His ways and, with the knowledge thus attained and the help of the Lord, putting this into practice in his life. He will never become perfect on this earth, but with the aid of the Holy Spirit teaching him through the

Scriptures, he will be continually improving, being led along the right path and growing:

2 Peter 3:18

...in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Only upon his death will he then be translated directly by God to a place where he will finally be freed from sin, and be able to live a perfect life.

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.38

At the resurrection, believers being raised up in glory, shall be openly acknowledged and acquitted in the day of judgment, and made perfectly blessed in full enjoying of God to all eternity.

In the meantime, he has to live down here, in this world, with all these visible organisations calling themselves churches, every one claiming to be the true church with all the right answers. The poor man! What is he to do?

Millions of people throughout the world profess Christianity as their religion. The vast bulk of them are imprisoned in the errors of either Roman Catholicism, or in some manifestation of Eastern Orthodoxy. All think that they are continually sacrificing Christ again and again in their Mass or Eucharist, and all elevate the decisions of men – either the pope of Rome or their so-called Ecumenical Councils – above the Scriptures. These huge organisational systems have degenerated so much that the true way of salvation has been completely obscured. Most of the poor wretches in these churches (who we can have nothing but pity for) are there ignorantly, maybe because they were born into the church and know nothing else. And if they did consider leaving, they would fear reprisals from the clergy or their own families.

When we then look at the Protestant churches, do we find much different? We ought to find God's blessing there, after all, since the Reformation they became:

Romans 3:2

...the keepers of the oracles of God,

and

1 Timothy 3:15

....the pillar and ground of the truth.

But the Protestant churches have fragmented a thousand different ways, each one having nothing to do with any of the others, and each having their own set of theological beliefs which each is convinced is the truth. An “infallible” pope of Rome has been replaced by an army of “infallible” preachers speaking “*ex cathedra*” from their pulpits, whom nobody is allowed to question.

But this cannot be possible. There is only one truth that exists in reality, the truth of the Bible. But just as every individual believer in the world makes mistakes in his interpretation of Scripture by reason of the infirmity of our sinful flesh, so, no one church can ever claim a monopoly on truth. Otherwise we have a sect, not a true church.

So, the great dilemma is that, as we are faced with a plethora of churches around us, which one do we join?

2. The Impossibility of a True Visible Church

First of all, we need to get into our heads two facts with regards the doctrine of the church:

No Visible Church has All Truth

(1.) It is impossible for any one visible church to have all the truth.

On 18th April 2008, the pope visited New York. Faced with a predominantly Protestant nation where there are thousands of little groups all claiming to be Christian, he said:

“Allowing individual congregations to interpret the gospel undermines evangelism at a time when the world is losing its bearings and needs persuasive common witness to salvation in Christ.”

What is wrong with that statement? On the face of it, it appears good. We only have to watch the religious channels on television, or look on the internet to find thousands upon thousands of tinpot groups all claiming to be Christian and to have the truth, none of which has any connection with any of the others. The fact is that none of them have a monopoly on truth. The best we can say is that some have more truth than others. And this is where the pope of Rome is wrong. He believes, as do many people, that he is that “*persuasive common witness*” that is needed, whereas in reality he is just another leader of a tinpot group like all the rest. Just because the Roman Catholic church is large numerically, this makes no difference. Nobody, not even the pope of Rome, should ever be arrogant enough to claim that he has a monopoly on truth.

As Christians, we believe that truth (or at least all the truth that God has decreed for us to know in this world) is supernaturally revealed by God in the Bible. The 66 books which make up the Old and New Testaments in the original languages are directly inspired of God and are:

2 Timothy 3:16,17

...profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness; that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

This is the only source of truth we have. God does not speak directly to men any more:

Daniel 9:24

...to seal up the vision and prophecy....

Hebrews 1:1,2

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son.

All the truth we need to know is in the Bible and everything that can be deduced by good and necessary consequence from it. This is our final source of authority.

But there are two problems here. The first one is that many people don't stop there, and introduce other information from other sources

into the system. Roman Catholicism and the Eastern Orthodox churches add “the traditions of the church” to operate alongside Scripture, with supposedly equal authority (although these “traditions” will always end up usurping Scripture when the crunch comes). Again, if we start to introduce archaeology, science or history from sources outside the Bible into our thinking, we are adding material that MAY be in error – we can’t be sure whether it is true or not, because, unlike the Bible, the source is fallible. So, consequently, we may go astray from the truth at this point.

It is possible for a totally unbiased person to open a Bible and, with the use of reason and logic alone, come to a knowledge of the truth. And here we come across the second problem, in that nobody is unbiased. We are all fallen in our forefather Adam having eaten the forbidden fruit, and:

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.19

All mankind, by their fall, lost communion with God, are under His wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries in this life, to death itself, and to the pains of hell for ever.

So in our wretched, enslaved state, men only ever see what they want to see, which is invariably not the truth, because the truth is unpalatable to men by nature as it condemns them as sinners against a holy God.

Because of these two problems, nobody can search out truth perfectly, we all make mistakes. So no one person, and (note especially) no one church (which is made up of a collection of people) has a monopoly on the truth. All we can say is that some have more truth than others.

Now as Christians, the truth is important to us, because it is our guide. Without it, we would, by definition, be living a lie. We need to know the truth so that we can order our lives in the light of it. This is the life-long, ongoing pursuit of the Christian, which will not be complete until death takes him away. We all grow in the faith as individuals, and we all die as individuals. True believers will all be heading in the same direction, but at the same time there will always be differences between them while they are in this world. All of us are wrong somewhere.

Blindly following a church, or any individual, right or wrong, is not true religion; it is rather the religion of blind faith, from which the Reformation was supposed to have cleansed us.

Very few people had books in previous generations, and the Bible was only found in monasteries and similar places. People had to rely on the priest. Where he stuck to Scripture they had the truth in their heads. But most priests either didn't have access to the Bible or, worse, deliberately kept it from the people, for their own ends – i.e. so the people would get to rely on the priest himself for all their spiritual needs. It is similar in Evangelical circles today. People are too reliant on preachers telling them what to believe. Ordained ministers and pastors are the only ones who supposedly know the original Hebrew and Greek, and have been “educated” in these things, so they are blindly followed. Nobody ever thinks of actually looking up the Hebrew and Greek words *for themselves* (which is easy enough to do, with today's Bible aids). Blindly following the man in the pulpit is a far easier option than actually thinking through things for oneself. So that's what people do.

No Visible Church Contains All Believers

(2.) It is impossible to have a visible church that has every true believer in it.

We have been given details in the Bible as to how to organise visible churches. So, ordinarily, that's how we should do it. But, once we start organising, things start going wrong. Apart from the fact that hypocrites will want to get in and take over (which is another problem altogether, which we are not dealing with here), a church, quite understandably, would want to formulate or adopt a Creed, or Confession of Faith, in order to define and keep the testimony of what they consider to be the truth. But once just one doctrinal item is accepted by the church as true, that church can no longer cater for every single true believer in the world. Some, who are genuinely born again of the Spirit of God, will not yet have come to embrace that particular truth yet. So as soon as one doctrine is accepted by the church as true, we automatically begin to exclude true believers from the visible church.

Now let's consider a church that accepts many doctrines as true. Take the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland for example, which not only has the whole Westminster Confession of Faith as its standard, but it also holds to a lot of other peculiar church practices as well. I want to use this church as one of the best examples of Scriptural practice, I'm not trying to denigrate it at all. The church would on the one hand rightly agree that the only criterion for membership into the church would be a credible profession of Christ. But on the other hand, they would then refuse into membership those who don't agree with them on their peculiarities. In fact, by denying membership to people who don't hold their view on just two practices, exclusive psalm-singing and Sabbath transport, they are denying membership to 99.999% of all truly born-again Christians, just on these two issues alone.

No matter how much a church tries to hold to what they consider to be the truth and defend it; the more it tries to do so, the larger the number of true believers who will be excluded from it. And that's because these true believers themselves are still growing in the faith and haven't yet come to understand the truth on these things for themselves. We must come to a knowledge of the truth for ourselves:

Romans 14:23

And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

In fact we may never come to the truth on many things before we die. So people will be permanently excluded from churches that have a whole array of peculiarities, like the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland. These folk are indeed very welcome in such congregations, but they are also welcome in many other churches, and if they have a choice, they will always end up migrating to the church nearest in belief to what light they have received so far. Hence the many variety of churches exists and continues.

Church councils do not make truth. For example, it is common to believe that the church decreed what books should be in the canon of Scripture, and that this was supposedly eventually done at the Council of Carthage in AD 396. This idea is particularly used by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches to defend their false idea that the church comes before Scripture, and so is the higher authority. In

fact, the Council of Carthage did not decree what Scripture was at all. Scripture was Scripture as it came off the pen of the writer, not when a church council decreed it to be so.

Indeed, Carthage got it wrong, because when it came to the Old Testament, they decreed that the Greek translation of the Septuagint (which includes the Apocrypha) was canonical, which is not true. The Hebrew Scriptures are canonical, not a Greek translation with additions to it.

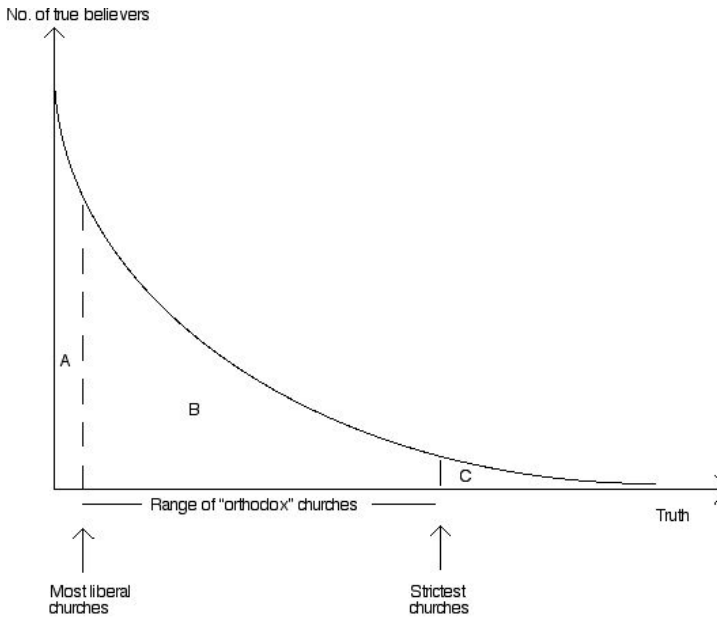
Similarly, the Council of Nicea in AD 325 decreed the doctrine of the Trinity. The film/book “*The DaVinci Code*” is not to be recommended, albeit it has been very popular. However, it has one scene in it that rightly ridicules the idea of a church council decreeing truth. It is argued that this would mean that one day Christ was not God, and the next day (after Nicea had decreed it), He was God, so all those who are no longer in line with the church today (but were yesterday) can now be hunted as heretics. This all goes to prove that councils do not decree truth, God does. Christ always was God, whether a church council has decreed it or not.

In any case, although language is the only tool we have to describe things, language is limiting. How can you adequately define the Trinity? The Nestorians left the orthodox religion because they couldn’t agree on *the wording* that the church councils came up with regarding the two natures of Christ. But they shouldn’t be completely dismissed because of that. We don’t need to believe the official wording of the doctrine of the Trinity to be saved, but the problem is that we are not considered to be a member of the visible church if we don’t.

Many people think that what is needed is for true believers everywhere to all come out of the old denominational structures and form pure churches, and everything will be all right. But here we have just proven that the whole concept of calling out a pure church from amidst gross error is a complete impossibility. So we shouldn’t try.

3. Diagrammatic Representations of the Church

Two diagrams may or may not help here.



- A = infants, imbeciles, new converts
- B = most believers, members of visible churches
- C = mature believers, will not find a visible church to suit them

(Fig. 1) First of all let us look at a graph with truth on the x-axis and number of truly born-again believers on the y-axis. Remember, all true believers are growing in the truth all the time, so they should all be slowly heading along the x-axis in a positive direction.

At any one time, only some true believers will be within a visible church. People will be outside a visible church either (A) because they are ignorant (infants, imbeciles or new believers) or (C) because they have embraced so much truth that no church can satisfy them, and they feel they cannot join any without becoming culpable in knowingly propagating error.

Visible churches range from being very liberal, where there would be little truth, to being very strict, which would dogmatise lots of truth

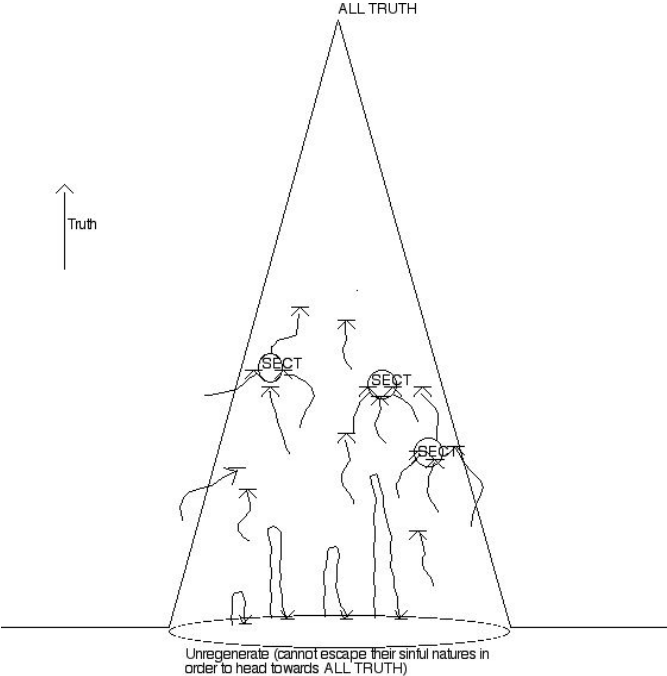
(although there would always still be some error, because no church is perfect). The liberal churches would attract the ignorant and those with little knowledge of the truth, so they would tend to be large. The strict churches would attract those who have come to agree with that particular church on most or all of the issues concerned, so these churches would always tend to be small.

True believers will inevitably have to move churches every so often, as they grow in the faith and come to embrace more and more truth. In the end, though, if the Lord doesn't take them away first, they will eventually come into area C, where no church is found to satisfy. Praise the Lord that our real home is in the heavens and not down here.

Colossians 3:2,3

Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

(Fig. 2) The other diagram is in the form of a cone:



The cone represents the visible church. Unregenerate men are represented as those who can't "fly" upwards. So they can't even begin to head towards the apex of the cone "ALL TRUTH." Their hearts and minds are darkened:

Ephesians 4:8

Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart.

The natural bent for man is downwards. He hasn't got "wings."

Each individual will start from a unique point in space, whether outside the cone (outside the visible church), or within. Many start from the ground with complete ignorance, but some, with some background knowledge of the Scriptures, will start higher up. Others will start well by being born into a church where truth has been imbibed since birth.

Upon regeneration, God gives a man a new heart, and he now, for the first time, is able to head upwards on the "wings" of faith. His natural bent is still downward, but as God enables him, he can begin to head toward the ideal "ALL TRUTH."

Nobody can reach that point in the distance called "ALL TRUTH" at the apex of the cone, but that is where all true believers should at least be aiming for. Long before anyone reaches "ALL TRUTH" they will die, as God cuts them off from the land of the living and translates them directly to heaven to inhabit new bodies that will know "ALL TRUTH" and will be perfect, i.e. that no longer have a bent downwards.

However, our growth is not necessarily a straight road, because we get influenced from outside.

In theory, all believers should be trying to help each other forward on their journey towards "ALL TRUTH." But people, being people, tend rather to instead attract others towards themselves and their own ideas of what is right, which is not necessarily the same as helping them forwards towards "ALL TRUTH" at all.

But as we stay close to Christ and His Word, we will see our mistakes and correct ourselves and continue on the journey.

Because we all start from different positions, and are all heading towards the same point, by definition no two of us on this earth are ever fully agreed. We should never expect this to be the case. This is important to know, because in many churches it is drummed into the members that we should never disagree with one another, but always at least outwardly show perfect agreement with each other and with the church at all times, otherwise the witness of the church is supposedly ruined. This is not so. It is perfectly normal to have differences whilst we are on this earth. We need to understand and accept that. Of course, the nearer we all get to “ALL TRUTH,” the nearer we will naturally come to each other, without even thinking about it.

The circles in the diagram represent SECTS. They can be cults, or denominations, or evangelical churches – all of these I have defined as a “SECT.” They all have one thing in common. They have all been started by particularly dominating individuals who have persuaded other people that they have a monopoly on truth, and that everyone should be following them, rather than heading towards “ALL TRUTH.” In fact, they believe that they have already arrived at “ALL TRUTH.” Examples of this in real life include the pope of Rome (the largest sect leader in the world), television evangelists with their smooth words, or a dominating preacher. All of these I have defined as a “SECT,” because they lead people away from their individual path of following “ALL TRUTH,” claiming they in the “SECT” have all the truth themselves. Once entrapped by a “SECT,” people are told they have arrived at “ALL TRUTH,” but are really blindly following the “SECT” wherever it goes instead. This is, sadly, the state of many true believers today. The Lord may keep them in that state for a long time, but eventually, if He doesn’t terminate their lives first, He will lead them out again and back onto the right path.

Note that all the “SECTS” have some truth. That is why they are so dangerous. They also demand error to be embraced by demanding blind faith in the organisation or leader. But people who are caught up in “SECTS” can’t see that, until or unless the Lord reveals it to them and leads them away.

These “SECTS” are like blood clots that get in the way and restrict the path to “ALL TRUTH.” As they linger, future generations are born and grow up in them, who are not born-again true believers, but they are held in the “SECT” and don’t easily float back down to the ground again, which, because they are without “wings,” they otherwise would do. Once they renounce the “SECT,” they fall straight to rock bottom, unless they have renounced the “SECT” because they have been born-again of God’s Spirit, of course.

All of us need good teaching, but a “SECT” that sets itself up as the only church with ALL the truth, must be a lie, because nobody in this world has “ALL TRUTH.” Never blindly follow a “SECT.”

4. The Followed and the Followers

At any time, on any one subject, some people will have been led, by God, into more light than others. Consequently, nobody on earth has all the truth. All of us embrace truth and error as a mixture, and then we have to weed out the error as we receive light from the Scriptures to do so. As we grow in the faith, we hope we are growing more and more in embracing the truth and rejecting the error, but we never on this earth achieve that completely.

This is a vital concept to understand, because in all churches – whatever denomination – two types of people exist, neither of which seems to understand this concept at all. These two types are the “followers” and the “followed.” Because of our totally depraved nature, we all have a propensity to worship the creation rather than the Creator. Today, in the Western world this manifests itself in our following men, especially if they are charismatic, dominating, smooth-talking orators, who have the ability to hold people’s attention. These “followed” tend to attract a following, and the “followers” tend to want to find someone to blindly follow.

The “followed” know what they believe, think they are right, and will not budge for anyone. These pushy people will force themselves into positions of authority in the church, and attract their own followers. The “followers” think that those they follow are right on everything. This leads them into holding a tradition, and having the threat of being

ostracised by their families and friends hanging over them if they ever dare criticise...

1 Peter 1:18

...the vain conversation received by tradition from your forefathers.

Even if our forefathers taught the truth, we should not blindly follow them. But so many people do, because they can't bear to believe that their fathers were wrong. This is back to the world before the Reformation, when men followed men blindly, rather than the ploughboy having the Scriptures to read and think through *for himself*.

If two of the "followed" in a church ever clash, a split or disruption occurs in the church, and the two eventually go their own separate ways – each taking their blind followers with them. Hence we have the fragmentation of the church. So when we walk down the street and see so many different denominations, then this is invariably what has happened.

It is wrong to blindly follow men. We should be neither followed, nor blind followers. We should instead be people who want to know truth, and are prepared to change our beliefs as soon as we receive more light as we become convinced by Scripture and guided by the Holy Spirit of the truth.

This is not to say that we should be wishy-washy, changing our minds every five minutes – the Holy Spirit does not convince of truth like that. Neither should we not be willing to be taught and helped by others, as long as we realise that no man has all truth, and that no man should be blindly followed. In fact, if we blindly follow, and have to rely on someone else all the time to know what to believe, then we don't really know it for ourselves, and therefore we don't believe it for ourselves. It will also do us no good whatsoever on Judgment day, because we will all have to stand before God as individuals. No other man, or church will be able to help us then.

We are constantly changing. So we will never be in agreement with the church we are in, unless we are blind followers, in which case we will follow the church and its leaders wherever it goes.

The “followers” will tend to make sure that their own little church fully embraces 100% their own theology. The “followers” will blindly follow. But every church, no matter who starts it, will still have errors in it, because all of us are wrong somewhere. In history, whenever a church has experienced the Lord’s revival to some degree, ordinary believers did not “come out” and start a new denomination, but rather brought their revived religion into the already existing churches, with all their foibles. Christ Himself said:

Matthew 23:2,3

The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

Knowing all the corruptions in the church, He never told them to come out and form something new.

The “followers” will always look to “mother church” to give them all the answers, so they can follow blindly. This is not faith, but...

Luke 6:39

...the blind leading the blind into a ditch.

The Protestant Reformation occurred in an attempt to get us away from exactly this kind of thinking. Our duty is to repent and believe, not repent and blindly follow.

5. What Church Do I Join?

So, again, the big question is: What church do I join? No church can be recommended because that would be recommending error. So what do we do?

Time is short. This life is a preparation for the next world. It is not church politics. Whereas we should do all we can to promote truth and righteousness, both in ourselves and in the church, our great comfort is that the true church is invisible, and not a visible manifestation of a church at all. And Christ will build that church, invisible to the human eye:

Matthew 16:18

I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Not one of His flock will be lost:

John 10:29

....no man is able to pluck them out of the Father's hand.

Those who reach glory (by the grace of God) will be a number that:

Revelation 7:9

....no man could number.

These are the comforts of the true believer in this life.

We also see in the Scriptures that we are to expect our fiercest persecution to come from church authorities. Christ found most of His persecution came from the church leaders, so His followers should not expect anything less. Not that we should deliberately look for persecution, but we should expect it, if we are following Christ – i.e. truth and righteousness – and not men.

John 18:38

Pilate saith unto him, What is truth? And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault at all.

Pontius Pilate asked Jesus the question, “*What is truth?*” before delivering his judgment that “*I find in Him no fault at all.*” We could very well be as perplexed as Pilate when we look at the church scene today. Jesus Christ on an earlier occasion said:

John 14:6

I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man cometh unto the Father but by me.

So if Christ was who He claimed to be, then it is vitally important that we find out what truth is and follow it.

But there are so many different organisations, all claiming to be the true church of Jesus Christ. Which one is the true church? Well, as the Bible is God’s Word, is all truth, and is God’s final revelation to men;

we could say that we should join ourselves to a Bible-believing church. But there are so many of them! Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Brethren, all claim to be "Bible-believing" churches, but they all believe different things. They cannot all be right. They claim to follow the Bible, but they all differ in the way they interpret it. So who is right?

The answer is none of them. We must get this into our heads at the beginning. Whereas there is only one truth (which is found in the Bible), because of the fallen nature of man, no one church or denomination or organisation of any kind in this world has got everything right. Not even those who really claim that they have, and demand unswerving obedience. In fact, any person or church that demands such, should be avoided, because it is a sect, not a church. To think upon and begin to believe the whole concept that none of them are completely right, is a breath of fresh air, as it stops us from either worshipping an organisation, or worshipping a silver-tongued smooth-talking preacher.

So if no one church or organisation has got it right, where are all the true Christians? The true church of Jesus Christ is invisible. We can't see it or detect it with our senses. It consists of all those people who have truly had their hearts changed by the Lord, and who have become "*a new creature*":

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 can't see anyone's heart but our own, so we can know if we personally have had our heart changed, but we cannot know if this change has occurred in anyone else – only God can see the hearts of every man. As we cannot detect who is the Lord's or not, so we must surely humble ourselves and:

Matthew 7:1

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

This should change our outlook on the church completely. The home of the truly born-again, Bible-believing Christian, to whom God has given a new heart, is in heaven, not on this earth:

Colossians 3:1-3

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

Therefore we should not look for a home, or a visible church to call home, on earth.

In the light of this, we should no longer be tempted to worship any one organisation, leader or visible church anywhere. This does not mean that we should not go to a church at all, as it is always good for us to be:

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 should we really follow any one denomination, want status in it, want a position where everyone in the church will look up to us and see us as a great Christian leader in it? Indeed, recognising the weaknesses of churches, should we ever have a desire to split and form a new church, even with the seemingly good motive of forming a purer church than the one we have just come from? Should any of this really be the Christ-like man's desire?

We should always remember that if we are truly in receipt of new hearts from the Lord, we should be humble creatures:

Philippians 2:5-8

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Also, we should learn from Christ. What did He do? There were plenty of separatist groups in Christ's day, such as the Essenes, who kept what are now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. But the only places of worship that we have Biblical record of Christ actually visiting were the synagogues of the national church and its temple in Jerusalem. Christ was not a separatist.

He righteously condemned the abuses that went on in the church and stood up against them. The synagogues and temple of Christ's day were places full of disorder, insomuch as He said:

Matthew 21:13

It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves.

The church leadership in Christ's day was split into at least two factions, the Pharisees and the Saducees. Both hated each other, but nevertheless they were still in one national church. Christ hated them both, and said to them in no uncertain terms:

Matthew 23:33

Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?

His preaching the truth put Him at odds with the leaders of the national church of His day, so much so, that they eventually handed Him over to be killed.

But at no time did Christ ever say to His disciples, "To 'keep the testimony to the truth' we're coming out and forming the Free Sanhedrin (Continuing)!" No, Christ was never a separatist. On the contrary, despite the absolute wickedness of the church leaders, He said:

Matthew 23:2,3

The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: all therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

Note, no call to split and form a purer church and, incidentally, no desire to enter into a leadership position in the visible church either.

Despite the many corruptions in the church of Christ's day, yet He made no separation from it, but rather, when He had opportunity, he preached both in the temple and the synagogues. If the Separatists are right, He ought to have fled from amongst the Jews, and not so much as once to have come into the temple or taught in their synagogues; but on the contrary He joined Himself with them. Therefore we must conclude that the Christian way, following Christ's example, is that we cannot in good conscience ordinarily disjoin ourselves from the national church of our land.

The reason that the Church of England is so bad is because a vast majority of the evangelicals have left. If they all came back, stood up for what they believe as individuals inside the edifice of the church and started praying for the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Synod, the church would be transformed. And a similar thing can be said for whatever country we are in.

What we should do personally (not organisationally) is to:

Ephesians 5:11

Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.

We should stand up for truth as individuals, as much as we know what truth is. Of course we will make mistakes, but we do our best not to make them, by being led by the Holy Spirit to interpret the Bible as best as we have the capacity to understand it.

The apostles, when eventually (in the Lord's providence) they were thrown out of the synagogues, had to continue preaching the truth outside of the established Jewish church buildings. So the Christian church eventually was forced to separate from the unbelieving Jews.

But even in these times, there was no call for separation at all. John writing to the seven churches in Asia, in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, never calls anyone to come out and form a new church organisation, even when some of the churches had powerful heretical factions within them, some even being called "*synagogues of Satan*" (Revelation 2:9, 3:9). Rather the call is:

Revelation 2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21

To him that overcometh...

The Lord is looking for individuals in the churches who overcome individually. They do not follow the heretics, but follow the Lord as individuals. No mention is made anywhere of it being a good idea if they came out and started a “purer” church down the road.

And then in John’s third epistle, we see that he had written an earlier letter to a church asking them to receive some brethren, but:

3 John 9,10

I wrote unto the church: but Diotrefes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.

The leader of the church refused to obey John, and instead threw these brethren out of the church altogether. So, what did John do? He wrote this epistle to Gaius, a man in the church who he knew (to the best of his knowledge) to be a true believer, and told him what had happened, asking him to receive these brethren himself personally instead, despite the evil leadership in the church. He also made mention to him of Demetrius (v.11), indicating that he was also a trustworthy brother in the Lord, and that he could help him in this matter. See what John is doing. No call to come out and form a new denomination, but rather calling the true believers to stay in the current one, despite the evil in the leadership, and organising them to operate like a church within a church. This is the Biblical pattern.

Having said all this, in practice, in today’s church scene, we have a completely different scenario. Now the can of beans has been spilt, as it were, and so many different separatist groups have already been formed in many lands, the concept of going back into the national church would be difficult, if not impossible. If some of us did so, it would mean practically that all our closest Christian companions would probably still be in the separatist churches. This goes to show how evil separatism really is. Where is the witness for Christ, when so many

different groups exist, all with absolutely no connection with each another?

So, what do we do? We should firstly distance ourselves from the whole concept of membership in any humanly organised church. If we become members of any church, we are identifying ourselves with all its distinctives in doctrine and practice, whether they are right or wrong. As they will all be wrong somewhere, do we really want to do that? Rather, we should attend the best church that is most practical to do so, without worshipping it. No matter what situation the Lord has put us in in His providence, our true witness is always personal, not organisational. Our home is in heaven. Our striving should be to keep ourselves, personally, separate from sinful practices in our hearts. If we can live our lives in this manner, at least we will be free of all blame on the day of judgment.

Philippians 4:7

And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Appendix: Discussion Questions

Other questions we may wish to consider:

(a.) Is “church membership” in the Bible? After all, we are told “*Let a man examine himself*” (1 Corinthians 11:28), not “let the elders examine him.”

(b.) If the Westminster Confession is correct when it says that “*the visible church....consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion, and of their children,*” is an excommunicated member still in the visible church, if he still “professes the true religion”? Do we have to be a “member” in a visible organisation that calls itself a church to “profess the true religion”?

(c.) Why should the church have to be “public” meetings and in “public” buildings?

(d.) What was life like before the Reformation? How did true believers survive?

(e.) How much baggage do we have, imbibed from our surroundings?

(f.) The bishop of Milan before Ambrose was an Arian, and the Arian controversy went on for a long time after the Council of Nicaea, taking in 75% of the visible church at one point. How would we have reacted if we were alive in those days?

Am I An Heretic?

True believers are all those who have been born-again of the Spirit of God at a certain point in their lifetime. We start off our Christian lives knowing nothing. The Lord changes our hearts, and from that time on we come slowly, as we are being more and more sanctified, to a greater and greater knowledge of the truth:

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth.

So, every believer, at any one time, is at a different point in their spiritual knowledge of the truth from every other believer. But we are all, if we are being led by the Holy Spirit, heading in the same direction.

When churches come into existence, they decree Creeds and Confessions, in order to define to the world what they believe.

So, what happens if we come in the process of time, through study of Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to no longer believe a creedal statement of a church? I don't mean simply being ignorant of what it means, but wilfully believing something other than the stated creedal position? That puts us outside the church. There's a word for that: Heretic. We are told in Scripture:

Titus 3:10,11

A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition reject; Knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.

Heresy is defined by the church as false teaching:

2 Peter 2:1

But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.

Heresy comes in a long list of works of the flesh:

Galatians 5:20

...Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies....

So, what are we to do, if we find ourselves in such a position? Are we really an heretic?

In past church history, anyone who was found to disagree with church councils were not only excommunicated from the church, but hunted out, persecuted and killed. This surely was a totally wrong attitude. We should be ashamed of most church history.

However, things are not all that bad. The Westminster Confession of Faith tells us, helpfully, that:

Westminster Confession of Faith 31:3

All synods or councils, since the Apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.

So there is a distinct possibility that the church may be wrong, and not me.

We are told that God has ordained that heresies are among us, for a purpose:

1 Corinthians 11:19

For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.

And we find that the Jews called Christianity itself a heresy:

Acts 24:14

But this I confess unto thee, that after the way which they call heresy, so worship I the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the law and in the prophets:

In fact, the problem with a church is that as soon as one doctrine is adopted by it, that church automatically excludes all those truly born-again believers who either have not come to a knowledge of that truth

yet (i.e. they are ignorant of it), or who (correctly or mistakenly) believe something different. So therefore we must conclude:

- (1.) Creeds and confessions *limit* membership in visible churches. They will always exclude some true believers.
- (2.) Creeds and confessions are always package deals. We are expected to embrace the lot. What if we don't embrace one small article? We are thrown out of the visible church.
- (3.) This goes to show how stupid trusting in a visible church really is. We must put all our trust in Christ, and not in institutions.

To give a couple of examples: I must be an heretic because I differ from established church creeds in some areas:

– I don't like the phrase “*eternally begotten*” This puts me out of line with the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed, to name but three. The Bible uses the phrase “*only begotten*” to describe Christ. Christ was from eternity:

Proverbs 8:23

I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was.

But begotten as a man in time on a particular day:

Psalms 2:7

I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.

– I am a Monothelite. The Sixth Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 680-681 condemned Monothelitism, which is the idea that Christ only had one will. It decreed that this was a heresy and defined Jesus Christ as having two wills, a human and a divine. But that makes him a schizophrenic.

There are three Persons in the Godhead. Each Person has a separate will, but at all times they are always in perfect unity. If Christ didn't

have a separate will from the Father, His sacrifice would not have been voluntary. Christ had two natures, divine and human. He was fully God and fully man, but He could not possibly have had two wills *in Himself*.

Verses which are used to try to show He had two wills, really all show simply that He had a separate will from the Father, which we agree with. None of these verses show He had two wills within Himself:

Matthew 26:39

And he went a little further, and fell on his face, and prayed, saying, O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt.

Mark 14:36

And he said, Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt.

Luke 22:42

Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.

John 5:30

I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.

John 6:38

For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.

John 10:17,18

Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.

Hebrews 10:7

Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God.

Psalm 40:7,8

Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart.

I don't mind if I am wrong on either of these issues, if someone can come along and convince me from Scripture of the opposite. I will then willingly change my belief to conform to the new knowledge that has been given to me. We are all learning. But, what if I am right? The Westminster Confession of Faith, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, and indeed all councils of men *could* all be wrong. Whereas Creeds and Confessions can be useful, let's stick to Scripture.

Church Disputes

I was in a church once, and after the service one of the elders started shouting and screaming at the minister for some reason I knew nothing about. The minister, rather annoyingly, just stood there with a serene smile on his face, trying to keep calm in the face of all the people looking on. I went outside the church building and someone, presumably this elder, had scrawled graffiti all over the notice board calling the minister “a devil.” Well, you don’t see that every day. But it got me thinking.

Nearly every church I have been involved with has at some time or other had some kind of dispute rumbling on. This is nothing new. What usually happens is that the powers that be in the church try to sweep the whole thing under the carpet and pretend outwardly that nothing is amiss. But that only makes things worse, and it festers under the surface without being healed, and so gets worse and not better.

Most often the dispute is not even a matter of theology. If it were, we could at least understand that:

1 Corinthians 11:19

For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.

But rather, the dispute is usually a matter of some people objecting, rightly or wrongly, to a decision made by the leadership or decision-making body of the church.

In a church where everyone blindly follows the leadership, and are trained not to question them or think for themselves, no-one will ever detect a problem at all when one comes along. (Is this your church???)
But the Westminster Confession of Faith is very helpful here when it says that:

Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 31 Paragraph 4

All synods or councils, since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err; and many have erred. Therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith, or practice; but to be used as a help in both.

Proof texts:

Ephesians 2:20 – *‘And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone’*

Acts 17:11 – *‘These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.’*

1 Corinthians 2:5 – *‘That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.’*

2 Corinthians 1:24 – *‘Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand.’*

Isaiah 8:19-20 – *‘And when they shall say unto you, Seek unto them that have familiar spirits, and unto wizards that peep, and that mutter: should not a people seek unto their God? for the living to the dead? To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.’*

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

Needless to say, the people who become leaders in the church are more often than not those that have a lust to be in control all the time. Indeed the people who object loudest to them, tend to be those who would rather want to be in control themselves. Having said that, in the past, even as a truly regenerate believer, I have been caught up in such disputes, especially when there is substance to the grievance in question. Maybe a good minister has been unjustly deposed by the powers that be. Maybe a bad minister has been put in charge of the congregation by the powers that be. Maybe the leadership as a whole have decide something dreadful, such as to allow practising, unrepentant homosexuals into high places in the church hierarchy. All these things, and many more, I have seen, and quite rightly I have had my soul vexed for the injustices involved:

2 Peter 2:8

For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds.

But whereas true believers should rightly hate wickedness wherever it is found:

Psalm 97:10

Ye that love the LORD, hate evil.

Psalm 139:21,22

Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies.

Yet there is only so much we can lawfully do to stop it. Shouting and screaming at the minister, even if he is in the wrong, is not the Christian way. Most of the time, the decision-makers are far too powerful for us, and we need to simply walk away and leave the whole situation with the Lord:

Romans 12:19

Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

On the one hand, we should indeed be sighing and crying over all the abominations that go on in this world in the visible church, because this is what the world sees as Christianity (although we know it is not real Christianity at all):

Ezekiel 9:4

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.

On the other hand, we should not fret when the wicked are exalted in this life, in fact we should expect it:

Psalm 37:1-3

Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb. Trust in the LORD, and do good; so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.

Psalm 37:35,36

I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not: yea, I sought him, but he could not be found.

Rather, we should realise that our true home is not in any visible organisation that calls itself a church in this world. We are free, free, free, from church politics. Hallelujah! Therefore we should not get unduly stressed or surprised by anything that goes on here. Yes, ordinarily, we should join ourselves to a visible church if we can do so, and we should get actively involved, that is good:

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 let us cut our emotional ties to such organisations. Our true home is in heaven, where Christ dwells:

Colossians 3:1-3

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

And no man is going to split that church!

Hebrews 12:22-24

But ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

Matthew 6:19-21

Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

John 14:1-3

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

Accepting the Lord's Providence

What is our opinion on women ministers?

It doesn't really matter what our opinion is actually. It is what the Bible says that counts. The Bible is clear. Only men should be in authority in the church:

1 Timothy 2:11,12

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence.

1 Corinthians 14:34,35

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law. And if they will learn any thing, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church.

These two statements are the authoritative words of Paul the Apostle. They are not just for his time. They have been put in the Holy Scriptures, and so are binding on us today. Otherwise, if we say it was only for Paul's time, we could then be free to disregard many other clear teachings of Scripture as well.

Having said that, what would we do if a woman became the new minister of our church? Most people who agree with this truth about male headship would object, not pay attention to her and, presumably, if all efforts fail to get rid of her, they would leave that church completely.

But that's the wrong attitude altogether. We again need to come to the Bible to see what our real attitude should be.

Deborah was a Judge in Israel:

Judges 4:4-9

And Deborah, a prophetess, the wife of Lapidoth, she judged Israel at that time. And she dwelt under the palm tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in mount Ephraim: and the children of Israel came up to her for judgment. And she sent and called Barak the son of Abinoam out of Kedeshnaphtali, and said unto him, Hath not the Lord God of Israel commanded, saying, Go and draw toward mount Tabor, and take with thee ten thousand men of the children of Naphtali and of the children of Zebulun? And I will draw unto thee to the river Kishon Sisera, the captain of Jabin's army, with his chariots and his multitude; and I will deliver him into thine hand. And Barak said unto her, If thou wilt go with me, then I will go: but if thou wilt not go with me, then I will not go. And she said, I will surely go with thee: notwithstanding the journey that thou takest shall not be for thine honour; for the Lord shall sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. And Deborah arose, and went with Barak to Kedesh.

Israel accepted Deborah as the Judge whom God had provided for them. There was no objection that she should not be a Judge, and no suggestion that she should therefore be ignored and told to get back behind the kitchen sink where she belonged.

But why would God do something against His own ordained command of male headship? The way Deborah spoke to Barak gives us the answer. Barak would not go up to fight against Sisera unless Deborah went with him. That was a mark of weakness. Deborah told him that she would go, but the Lord would give Sisera into the hand of a woman (which He did, as Jael killed him). In days when the cause of God is weak, the Lord sets women up in positions of leadership to shame the men. In Barak's day, that was the situation. The Lord set up Deborah to shame the men because of their weakness. And God is doing the same today.

And then in the days of godly Josiah, after the terribly evil reigns of Manasseh and his son Amon, after true religion had almost been completely wiped out, Josiah began the task of cleansing and renovating the Temple. During this time they found the Book of the Law, and Josiah asked several of his men to enquire of the Lord as to what they should do. The only prophet of the Lord they could find in such days of declension was the prophetess Huldah:

2 Kings 22:13,14

Go ye, enquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that is found: for great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not hearkened unto the words of this book, to do according unto all that which is written concerning us. So Hilkiab the priest, and Ahikam, and Achbor, and Shaphan, and Asabiah, went unto Huldah the prophetess, the wife of Shallum the son of Tikvah, the son of Harbas, keeper of the wardrobe; (now she dwelt in Jerusalem in the college;) and they communed with her.

Again, there was no suggestion that they should not recognise her as a true prophet of the Lord, and her prophecy indeed came true.

Women are flooding into leadership positions in the church today. Many of them, just like the men, are unbelievers, but the fact remains that it is not unusual today for at least some women preachers to actually be better than most of the men. God has created this situation in His providence to shame the men. God has not allowed this to happen so that we can split the church even further by setting up tinpot little churches whose only difference with the parent church is that they insist on male headship. The situation we have in the church today is all so terribly worldly.

Rather, if the powers that be in our church accepts women ministers, our job is to be ashamed there are no men, to acknowledge that we are in a period of declension, to put up with the situation we are in, to pray for more prosperous days for the church, and finally ***to acknowledge these women's real authority in the church because of their position.*** God wants it to be so for the time being, just as He wanted Deborah to be Judge over Israel in her day.

And we can extend this principle to every situation where, in the Lord's providence, for a time, things are not quite what they should be.

Has our church introduced loud modern music into the worship? We shouldn't just get up and leave. Pray for better days. Don't join in with it all. We should sit at the back of the church during these "worship" times reading our Bibles and praying about the situation. Then at least some of the young people who introduced such "worship" in the first

place might come to see the necessity of serious religion, and the awful inadequate lightness of their so-called “worship” songs.

Has our church introduced a new modern translation of the Bible into the worship services? Is the new Bible based on the modern text, and not the Received text that the King James Bible is based on? Work with it. When given an opportunity, we should point out the differences and show where the new version is wrong, but we’re not to leave the church over it.

Has our church stopped insisting on the ladies covering their heads in public worship, contrary to the pattern in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16? Let’s not let it bother us. Ladies should keep their hats on, and keep praying for better days.

No church is perfect. We can split, and split, and split, and still we won’t get a perfect church. Splitting is not the answer. No. Put up with it. God has allowed it to happen in His providence for these particular times.

Matthew 23:1-3

Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not.

Instead, concentrate on personal godliness. Don’t compromise with these people and movements personally, but don’t leave the church either. It never ceases to amaze me that churches that particularly emphasise the sovereignty of God always seem to be the ones splitting on issues and forming new churches all the time. This hardly shows a practical reliance on the sovereignty of God at all. God will keep His own testimony, He doesn’t need us to try to keep it for Him by splitting the church.

Matthew 16:18

I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

John 6:39

And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.

No. We are not of this world. Church politics is beneath us.

John 18:36

Jesus answered, My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.

When the signs of the end of the world will appear (one of which is the appearance of false prophets and the scarceness of true religion), we are told:

Luke 21:28

And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.

Our home is in heaven. Here in this vale of tears that is this world, we are to put up with whatever the Lord brings our way in His providence. After all, He knows what He is doing:

Psalm 37:1,2

Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.

Psalm 37:35,36

I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. Yet he passed away, and, lo, he was not: yea, I sought him, but he could not be found.

This is our life here. And it is only for a short time:

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

But thus I say, brethren, the time is short: it remaineth, that both they that have wives be as though they had none; And they that weep, as though they wept not; and they that rejoice, as though they rejoiced not; and they that buy, as though they possessed not; And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passeth away.

James 4:14

Whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.

We ought to concentrate on living a godly life. That will be our eternal witness to the world around us:

Hebrews 12:28,29

Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire.

2 Peter 3:11,12

Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God.

Church Membership

The true church is invisible. It is made up of all those who have truly been born-again by the Spirit of God, changed permanently by God in their hearts. All of these will get to heaven, not one will be lost:

John 6:39

And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.

But while we are on this earth, Christians are called to gather themselves together into visible bodies, which are also called “*church*.” But these visible bodies will always be a mixture of true members of this true invisible body, and hypocrites, who may profess with their mouth that they are Christian, but are far from Christ. Jesus Christ Himself came across quite a few of them in the visible church of His day:

Matthew 15:7-9

Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

How do we deal with these visible organisations?

First of all, we're never to put all our trust and hope in them. We don't follow the “*church*,” whatever denomination it may be. We follow Christ. But, the Bible does give us some instructions as to how such visible churches are to be organised. After all, for the short time we're in this world, we need to gather together. We need a visible church to help us through the wilderness:

Hebrews 10:24,25

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 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.

So, how exactly should we organise a visible church? Different people have different ideas how this is to be done. As churches *ought* to only contain Christians, a popular way of organising it is by “*membership*.” Only those who can give a credible profession of faith in Christ being allowed to become a “*member*”. We all recognise that some hypocrites will slip through the net, but generally churches should only contain believers if at all possible. This makes a lot of sense.

However, having been in some of them, we see a whole variety of ideas as to how this is actually done. Some are very strict, only allowing members to partake of the church privileges of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Others also allow visitors from other churches to partake, as long as they are members in their home church. Others allow anyone to partake of these privileges, leaving it to the conscience of each individual believer as to whether they take the elements of the Lord’s Supper or not. I suggest this last way is the right way, because we are told:

1 Corinthians 11:28

But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup.

Notice, it does not say, “let the church examine a man” before he is allowed to partake:

Romans 14:4

Who art thou that judgest another man's servant? to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holden up: for God is able to make him stand.

But is “*church membership*” as such, in the Bible?

I remember many years ago, going to my regular evangelical church. The minister read Ephesians chapter 4, then told us that the subject he was going to preach on today was “Church Membership.” I looked again at Ephesians 4, and I wondered, where on earth is the subject of church membership in that passage? In fact, it began to make me wonder, where is church membership in the Bible at all?

Ephesians 4:11-16

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

We do have to organise ourselves into visible churches. And we are given gifts and offices by the Lord to do this. But where is membership?

The only argument people seem to use to support the concept of “church membership” is the fact that the Bible teaches excommunication, which it does:

1 Corinthians 5:1-5

It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife. And ye are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he that hath done this deed might be taken away from among you. For I verily, as absent in body, but present in spirit, have judged already, as though I were present, concerning him that hath so done this deed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.

But excommunication doesn't necessarily presuppose church membership. The person in this passage was a regular attendee of the fellowship, but was involved with gross sin. He therefore brought the church into disrepute. Someone like that should not be allowed to continue freely to use the church's name, because that would cast a stain on the fellowship. So he should quite rightly be stopped from church privileges until he has truly repented. But that doesn't mean he had any official kind of membership in it.

But, doesn't the Bible teach we should extend the "right hand of fellowship" and bring people into membership? This phrase occurs once in Scripture:

Galatians 2:9

And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.

This is not bringing someone into membership at all. It is James, Cephas and John making an agreement with Paul and Barnabas that they should go to Gentiles whilst James, Cephas and John go to the Jews.

In every church, there are going to be people who have definite opinions on various different things, and who want to fight their corner to get what they want. If the church has "membership," the members' meetings invariably end up becoming power struggles where factions assert themselves – the faction that can get the most votes winning the day. And there's a type of person who loves that kind of thing, who loves the fight, loves to contend, thinking they're God's champion. But where is God in all that, really?

And in any church, there will be well-meaning people, good Christian people, who really would try to encourage people like me to become a member, because I would be another vote on the "right" side. Their argument being that we need to keep a majority of evangelicals attending the members' meetings, in order to make sure the liberals will be defeated every time a vote has to be made.

That sounds good. I would certainly back the evangelical faction in any dispute. We certainly don't want liberals taking over the church. That's ruined so many churches in the past, and we don't want that to happen to another one. But is the only answer to fight, and to vote to try to get the right outcome? Surely prayer is the answer, not democracy. We should trust in the Lord to keep the church, not the decisions of majorities. Christ said:

Matthew 16:18

I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Let's suppose the liberals do manage to muster up enough votes in the "members' meeting" to get the upper hand. Whoever has the majority then has the power to do anything they want in the church, even throw an otherwise good minister out if they decide to. The minority becomes utterly powerless.

What would we do in that situation? Would we stay a member in a liberal church? Or leave and form a new one? Most evangelicals would leave and form a new one, and I can't say I blame them. But then what kind of witness is a "church split" of that nature to the surrounding community? They're not going to understand the reasons for it, they're just going to dismiss Christians in general because all they see is that they can't agree with one another.

Our home is in heaven:

Colossians 3:1-3

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God.

Church politics is not for the Christian.

Sometimes the church has to discipline, and we have to ask ourselves, who is "*the church*" in the following verses?:

1 Corinthians 5:3

*In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **when ye are gathered together**, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan....*

Matthew 18:17

*And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto **the church**: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an hearthen man and a publican.*

There are only two possibilities. Either it is an elite group who make all the decisions, or a wider body made up of the regular congregation.

If the former, it would frustrate the general congregation because they would have to follow every decision without knowing what has really

gone on in the leaders' secret meetings, not having any say about things themselves. If the latter, which is sort of implied in 1 Corinthians 5:3 above, there would need to be some kind of "*membership*" roll to stop irregular attenders having any say. That purely practical reason is the only argument there is for "*church membership*" as such.

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 in 1 Corinthians:

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 bear 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 it's 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 herdsman, and a gatherer of sycamore 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 Arimathaea 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?

Church History or Christian History?

The Bible has three main purposes: To shew how wretched men can be, to shew how bad the visible church can get, and to shew the way of redemption through a Saviour.

I want to concentrate on the second of those here. Throughout Scripture we see how bad the church can become. Three examples of evil practices that came into the church in the Old Testament will suffice:

Micah's Images

Judges 18:30,31

And the children of Dan set up the graven image: and Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Manasseh, he and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land. And they set them up Micah's graven image, which he made, all the time that the house of God was in Shiloh.

What is happening here? Where is the outward religion that God gave the Israelites not so long beforehand? Whatever happened to the Second Commandment?

Exodus 20:4-6

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

God's law and truth have so quickly been cast to the ground. People are doing anything they feel like doing:

Judges 17:6

In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.

Hophni and Phinehas

1 Samuel 2:12-26

Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the Lord. And the priests' custom with the people was, that, when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant came, while the flesh was in seething, with a fleshhook of three teeth in his hand; And he struck it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fleshhook brought up the priest took for himself. So they did in Shiloh unto all the Israelites that came thither. Also before they burnt the fat, the priest's servant came, and said to the man that sacrificed, Give flesh to roast for the priest; for he will not have sodden flesh of thee, but raw. And if any man said unto him, Let them not fail to burn the fat presently, and then take as much as thy soul desireth; then he would answer him, Nay; but thou shalt give it me now: and if not, I will take it by force. Wherefore the sin of the young men was very great before the Lord: for men abhorred the offering of the Lord. But Samuel ministered before the Lord, being a child, girded with a linen ephod. Moreover his mother made him a little coat, and brought it to him from year to year, when she came up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. And Eli blessed Elkanah and his wife, and said, The Lord give thee seed of this woman for the loan which is lent to the Lord. And they went unto their own home. And the Lord visited Hannah, so that she conceived, and bare three sons and two daughters. And the child Samuel grew before the Lord. Now Eli was very old, and heard all that his sons did unto all Israel; and how they lay with the women that assembled at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation. And he said unto them, Why do ye such things? for I hear of your evil dealings by all this people. Nay, my sons; for it is no good report that I hear: ye make the Lord's people to transgress. If one man sin against another, the judge shall judge him: but if a man sin against the Lord, who shall intreat for him? Notwithstanding they hearkened not unto the voice of their father, because the Lord would slay them. And the child Samuel grew on, and was in favour both with the Lord, and also with men.

It is interesting to note that Hophni and Phinehas were wicked, yet the boy Samuel wasn't taken away from the house of the Lord by his parents, rather he was left there alone with these wicked men hovering around:

1 Samuel 2:11,12

And Elkanah went to Ramah to his house. And the child did minister unto the Lord before Eli the priest. Now the sons of Eli were sons of Belial; they knew not the Lord.

Would you keep your kid in a place like that? Samuel's parents trusted in the Lord. He stayed in the visible church and became the only witness of true religion in his day:

1 Samuel 3:20

And all Israel from Dan even to Beer-sheba knew that Samuel was established to be a prophet of the Lord.

The Temple in Ezekiel's Day

Ezekiel 8:9-18, 9:1-7

And he said unto me, Go in, and behold the wicked abominations that they do here. So I went in and saw; and behold every form of creeping things, and abominable beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel, pourtrayed upon the wall round about. And there stood before them seventy men of the ancients of the house of Israel, and in the midst of them stood Jaazaniab the son of Shaphan, with every man his censer in his hand; and a thick cloud of incense went up. Then said he unto me, Son of man, hast thou seen what the ancients of the house of Israel do in the dark, every man in the chambers of his imagery? for they say, The Lord seeth us not; the Lord hath forsaken the earth. He said also unto me, Turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations that they do. Then he brought me to the door of the gate of the Lord's house which was toward the north; and, behold, there sat women weeping for Tammuz. Then said he unto me, Hast thou seen this, O son of man? turn thee yet again, and thou shalt see greater abominations than these. And he brought me into the inner court of the Lord's house, and, behold, at the door of the temple of the Lord, between the porch and the altar, were about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the Lord, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east. Then he said unto me, Hast thou seen this, O son of man? Is it a light thing to the house of Judah that they commit the abominations which they commit here? for they have filled the land with violence, and have returned to provoke me to anger: and, lo, they put the branch to their nose. Therefore will I also deal in fury: mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity: and though they cry in mine ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them.

[9:1] He cried also in mine ears with a loud voice, saying, Cause them that have charge over the city to draw near, even every man with his destroying weapon in his hand. And, behold, six men came from the way of the higher gate, which lieth toward the north, and every man a slaughter weapon in his hand; and one man among them was clothed with linen, with a writer's inkhorn by his side: and they went in, and stood beside the brasen altar. And the glory of the God of Israel was gone up from the cherub, whereupon he was, to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed with linen, which had the writer's inkhorn by his side; 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. Then they began at the ancient men which were before the house. And he said unto them, Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain: go ye forth. And they went forth, and slew in the city.

The Lord's people here were distinguished, not by how holy they were (that would have been their main distinguishing mark otherwise), but by whether they sighed and cried for all the abominations that were being done in the midst of the Temple, which was supposed to have been God's witness on earth.

All these examples, and many more in the Old Testament, are for us to learn from:

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.

So, we are not to think that anything different would be the case in New Testament times. It is noteworthy to realise that the nearer we get to the end of the New Testament, the more warnings there are against false teachers coming into the church. It seems we are being warned that this is what we are going to have to put up with, whatever age we live in.

And after the close of the canon of Scripture, what happened to the church? The more we look at church history, the more we see that it is absolutely nothing like the simple faith of the Bible. And that is the situation we are to expect. It was exactly the same in Old Testament times, it was like that in New Testament times, it's like that now. Sighing and crying over the state of the visible church is the norm for the true believer of every age.

We cannot rely on any church. Rather, we have the Bible alone as our infallible guide. The canon of Scripture was completed before the first century was out. The church, however, took another 300 years of arguing before deciding on which books should be in the Bible. And when they did, they got the Old Testament wrong because they included the Apocrypha. So, again, we should not rely on any church to tell us what to believe. We, as individual believers, have the Holy Spirit to tell us what is Scripture and what is not:

Luke 24:32

And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?

Jeremiah 20:9

Then I said, I will not make mention of him, nor speak any more in his name. But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not stay.

Scripture became Scripture as soon as it came off the pen of the writer, whether men or church councils recognised it as such or not:

2 Peter 1:21

For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.

2 Timothy 3:16,17

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

Immediately after the completion of the canon of Scripture, in the Lord's inscrutable providence, a man called Ignatius, bishop of Antioch (who arrogantly called himself *Theophorus*, which means "God-Bearer"), was raised up. In around AD107, as he was going to Rome to be martyred, he wrote a series of letters. In them he laid emphasis upon two things in particular: the elevation of bishops (such as himself) and the elevation of the Lord's supper into some kind of superstitious magic:

*"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 2, 6:1

*"**Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is not lawful to baptise or give communion without the consent of the bishop.** On the other hand, **whatever has his approval is pleasing to God.** Thus, whatever is done will be safe and valid."*

—Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8:1,2

*"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 20:2

The huge edifice of the visible church that we see today (in its various forms), all began here with Ignatius, immediately following the completion of the canon of Scripture. And it has been around ever since.

"Church History" is an interesting subject. It is always useful to know what has been going on in the name of "Christianity" throughout the ages. But we must always keep in mind that it is so far from the true

Christian life, as we find it defined in the Bible. Just a quick whistle-stop tour of church history will suffice to shew us this:

Soon after the close of the New Testament, we had the so-called “Church Fathers.” But if we actually read any of them, we’ll soon find out that they had some very strange views. For example, Origen, a supposed “church father,” castrated himself.

Then we had a series of “Ecumenical Councils.” But, if they decided on something, say, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity or finer points on the nature of Christ, everyone had to follow suit or they were branded an heretic, cast out of the church and persecuted. Now, I believe in the doctrine of the Trinity, so I can stay in, but every controversy that came along later, split the church further and further, and some of those council decisions were dubious to say the least. Some were even reversed. “*Synods may err,*” as the Westminster Confession of Faith puts it. Yet, every time a decision was made, the majority vote in the Council always became “orthodox” dogma, and the minorities who disagreed were cast out and persecuted. They could no longer be church members.

And those cast out never learned either. In turn, they formed new churches based on their own beliefs, only to end up behaving in exactly the same intolerant way with anyone who opposed their decisions in their manifestation of the church. What kind of organisations had the churches quickly become? Where is any of this in the simple, true, real Christian faith given to us in the Bible? When we read any book on church history, it’s always, “The bishops said this,” “Holy Synod decided that.” Who do these people think they are? This is madness.

And just look at church leaders throughout history. Many, many popes in Rome have been terribly wicked, evil men. Sometimes there were two or even three popes at the same time competing for the title. Are we really meant to honour these people and follow their every encyclical when they were so openly profligate?

We are told of small, localised movements such as the Waldenses, the Albigenses, and the Bogomils, who stood up against the visible Roman church of their day. But all of these too had some very strange,

unbiblical views that we couldn't possibly accept. They all split from the pope of Rome, so we are told they were proto-Protestants. But they weren't very much like us at all really.

Ah! But what about Thomas A Kempis. He had access to the Scriptures in his monastery, and in his most well-known work "*The Imitation of Christ*," he clearly shows that he was a real, true, biblical Christian, knowing the Lord for himself personally. So, there were such people about. But we find that he still worshipped Mary, believed in transubstantiation, believed in purgatory and lived a monastic life. None of this is in the Bible, so where did he get it all from? It all came from the church. These things were so ingrained into the everyday church life of his day, that he wouldn't have known any better *at the time*. This begs the question: What is ingrained into our everyday church life that is not right, but we don't know any better *in our time*? PLENTY of things, I'm sure.

Then, five hundred years ago, came the Reformation. That was a breath of fresh air, because, coming, in the Lord's providence, alongside the invention of the moveable type printing press, it brought ordinary people the Bible to read for themselves in their own languages. Well, that can only be a good thing.

But, even so, in those days, there were still some very unbiblical practices taking place. The established religion was forced on people. If the leader of a land became Protestant, the whole land would automatically follow and Catholics would be persecuted. If he stayed Catholic, the whole land would too and Protestants would be persecuted. It must have been traumatic for true Christians as they would end up having to move around to be safe.

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

Has the church really got any better since the Reformation? Today, in the Protestant churches, we have child-abusing priests and unbelieving bishops. Where do they rank amongst the terrible things that have gone on in the church of the past? They are right up there with them. They are certainly one in apostolic succession with all the other past

generations of the visible church. One in sin and filth together with the vile activities of past popes and the church in Ezekiel's day. So, what do we do? All we can do, together with Ezekiel, is to sigh and cry over all these abominations in the visible church, because they ruin the external witness of what outsiders see as Christianity

Yet, despite all this "church history," the Lord still had His people in every generation. We are comforted to know that, in every age, not one of His 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.

Now, today, in contrast to most of "church history," we, in the West at least, are not forced to acknowledge any one particular church any more. We are free to set up, join or leave any kind of religious organisation we like. So most good Christian people, seeing many problems in the large mainstream churches, get out. They decide, for whatever reason, they simply cannot continue in the mainstream church any more, so they join or form other little groupings with others of like mind instead. But that ruins the witness in another way. If I was an unbeliever, knowing nothing about Christianity, answer me this question: Why should I come to your tinpot little church? Rather, it would be far more logical for me, not knowing any better, to go to the big edifice that has the name of Christianity firmly attached to it, with history behind it, even though in reality it is far, far from actually having the true Christian religion in it. But I wouldn't know that. The tinpot little church, if we don't know any better, just looks like a spin-off, a weird sect. And many of them indeed are. Only after we learn and grow in the faith, would we ever consider leaving the big edifice and start attending more and more out-of-the-way tinpot little churches instead, because we would realise that that's where we would be far more likely to find something more biblical taught, as well as being able

to meet other fellow true believers. But how then do we get others to understand this?

The only way it is possible for us to give a true Christian witness to the world, is by our *lives as individuals*. Our *lives* should be different. Not by becoming members of any of these tinpot little churches, because as soon as we become a member of anything, we are identifying with all the distinctives of that particular church, many of which will still be wrong. No church is ever going to be perfect. Our *lives as individuals* are the only real witness we can possibly have.

Most true Christians, in every generation, will not be in any books on “church history” at all, they are totally unknown to us:

1 Corinthians 1:27-29

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.

Read this:

Mark 12:38-44

*And he said unto them in his doctrine, Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the marketplaces, And the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts: **Which devour widows' houses,** and for a pretence make long prayers: these shall receive greater damnation. And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much. And there came a certain **poor widow**, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. And he called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even **all her living.***

I have always found it quite remarkable that Christ commended a poor widow for throwing “*all her living*” into the treasury, yet it was the treasury of those who “*devour widows houses.*” Why did she do it?

Maybe she was simply unaware of all the evils going on in the Temple. To her, it was the visible church of her day. It had the name of the true God attached to it. She loved the Lord, so she gave generously to what she truly thought was His work.

When we first become a Christian, we don't fully comprehend how much wickedness there really is within the church either. Even though we clearly read in Scripture that Christ's worst enemies came from within the visible church of His day. We still instinctively join a church. We want to. We believe it is the right thing to do. We follow the church. We don't know any better. After all, we want to meet other Christians and make friends. It's good to meet together with other true Christians in fellowship if we can:

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.

Most Christians will be found in churches somewhere, and they will be blindly following what they are taught by the leadership, assuming it to be correct. That's not necessarily a complaint against such Christians. Yes, some will be worshipping the church. My church, right or wrong. The church being given the highest place, even above the Scriptures. Churches will be full of such folk. It is they who are the real problem. But there will also be others who are true believers. They really do know and love the Lord. They simply haven't come to realise the true situation about how bad churches can be yet. They are young Christians, without guile. And we love them.

Isaiah 42:3

A bruised reed shall he not break, and the smoking flax shall he not quench: he shall bring forth judgment unto truth.

But as we grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18), the truth is revealed to us slowly by the Lord, as we can bear it.

Every true believer will eventually and inevitably end up coming into difficulty, and indeed opposition, from inside the church. This is the

way the Lord has made it to be. We are not called to love a church and to blindly follow it. Neither are we called to come out and set up a new denomination. Christ never did. We are rather called to love Jesus Christ with all our heart, and to live like Him. And that will inevitably put us outside the camp:

Hebrews 13:13,14

Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

This is the Christian's calling.

II

Church Leadership

Nobody Listens to a Word I Have to Say

I was leading a Bible study group the other week, and it became obvious to me afterwards that, although they said to my face that they thought my talk was good, they had actually not listened to a word I had to say. And this was not the only occasion that I have experienced this phenomenon.

Firstly, I have to ask: Why should they listen to me? Who am I that people should drop everything and change their views to follow my way of thinking instead? I am nothing. I always will be nothing in this world. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean to say that I am therefore not worth listening to. Whenever I speak the truth from the Bible, the Holy Spirit can use it to change people and help me be useful to others. It is the Word of God that is living and powerful, not me:

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 lesson here is to realise that only the Holy Spirit can do this. I am totally incapable. And that is what everyone who is in a leadership position ought to realise about themselves. We are nothing. But if we do speak, we must make sure that we stay close to the Bible:

1 Peter 4:11

If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God.

And this has also led me to ask the question: How does leadership actually work? Let's take a random example. Let's suppose that the church leader firmly believes that the church should keep traditional worship, because he is convinced that it is Biblical. But a sizeable number of the congregation want to introduce a modern "worship band" into the service.

First of all, the leader can preach from the pulpit, using Scripture, why he believes the way he does. That's the first thing he should do. But it is not up to him with his persuasive arguments to win the day. After he has preached on the subject from the Bible, he then has to leave it to the Holy Spirit to convince his congregation, one at a time. He would pray of course, but he can do no more than preach and leave it to the Lord to change hearts. If the congregation still disagree with him after he has preached, he can continue to preach about it, but if he does that too often, he runs the risk of getting the sack. Or, put it this way, eventually either his congregation will leave or he will.

Many churches try to force people to fit in to a certain way, truly believing their way is the Biblical pattern. Take, for example, churches that insist the ladies cover their heads in the worship service. They genuinely believe this is the Biblical practice, but nobody can force ladies to do this. All we can do is preach from the Scripture (1 Corinthians 11:1-16) and leave it to the Lord to convince each of them individually. If we try to force all the ladies in our congregation to cover their heads, which some churches do, not only would most ladies probably end up going elsewhere to worship, but also, there would also be some who stay but who would be doing it against their own consciences. The Bible clearly states that such an attitude is wrong:

Romans 14:28

Whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

Many ladies, who are true believers, would never come to agree with a church on this matter until the day they die. Many young people are true believers, but they still love the excitement of modern music and won't be convinced not to have a "worship band." In fact, all of us, even though we're true believers, will die before the Holy Spirit leads us to the truth on many things. Should we be either forced out of a church because of our ignorance, or told to outwardly perform a practice that the Holy Spirit at the present time in our spiritual growth has not convinced us of yet?

I really don't understand how church leadership works at all. The Holy Spirit convicts and convinces individuals. Only then, when people understand Biblical principles in their hearts, will they change for the better. Surely, no leader ought to try to force people against their will to

do anything. Only the Holy Spirit can change hearts, and at the same time He make us willing to change:

Psalm 110:3

Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power.

Oh yes, there are plenty of forceful leadership types in high positions in the church who use their assertive behaviour to gather a following behind them. They have the power to get people to believe their every whim. The so-called “Christian” television channels are full of these arrogant individuals. But that dominating, aggressive attitude can’t possibly be right. True religion is far, far from this sort of attitude.

So, what is the answer? Every visible church in existence has a certain way of doing things, which may or may not be Biblical. Yes, we have instructions in the Bible as to how we should set up visible churches on this earth, so we do have a pattern to follow. But even with the right outward pattern – which we should indeed be striving for – we can only live in the light of what we have personally received from the Lord at any one time. Our conscience should never be violated by anything anyone says. But, if, through another person’s words, the Holy Spirit is speaking to us, our consciences will be changed to receive the truth that we could not see before.

This is the true Christian life. It is not about following eloquent preachers and forceful men. It is not about joining a certain church or other. It is not about outward, this-worldly persuasive powers telling us what to think at all. It is about the Holy Spirit convincing us in our hearts. That is Christian growth. And all of us, not just the church leaders, should be encouraging each other in the faith. Not that people should listen to us, but in order that the Holy Spirit may work in people’s hearts through our words.

Leadership: A Lust, Not a Gift

1. Introduction

If you have had even a small glimpse at the Christian press, you will see that Christian leadership conferences abound. Christian leadership seminars, forums, and all kinds of meetings are arranged especially for Christian “leaders,” or rather everyone who sees themselves as such.

It is also thought of amongst most Christians, that going into “the ministry” or at least into “full time Christian work” should be the goal of every Christian, and certainly a higher sphere of activity than the ordinary mortal in the church pews. I heard a sermon recently in which was mentioned a man who was a drunkard, a swearer and a blasphemer, who came to a knowledge of Christ and gave up all these things. Excellent! Let us hear more of such testimonies! But then the preacher relating this story went on to say that the man has now become a pastor to a large congregation – as though that was the ultimate position to be in – a higher, more noble calling than the riff-raff who just sit in the pews week by week and only have “secular” jobs. Why couldn’t the story have been about a man who was converted and then went on to be a great Christian toilet cleaner, cleaning toilets for Jesus? Because that doesn’t fit into our mindset of what a great Christian is all about. We are brainwashed into thinking that the Christian minister or pastor has the highest calling of all, and then there are the rest of us. This is totally wrong. Incidentally, I have never known of any conferences for Christian toilet cleaners. I suggest that they are too busy getting on with their work, than to spend all their time talking about how to be more effective in their calling, and consequently spending as little time as possible actually doing their job.

“Leadership,” far from being something great in the church, is a mark of worldliness, not a mark of grace. Nearly all church splits have been caused by leadership battles between men, and doctrine and righteousness are only used as excuses to split the church.

Leaders should be aware that there is an army of real, truly born-again Christians out there who are fed up with their church leaders, are “*without the camp*” (Hebrews 13:13), and are foraging for their spiritual food daily wherever they can find it, because the self-styled leaders in the churches have let them all down. Leaders in the church should not play their silly games, thinking themselves to be something, when they are nothing (Galatians 6:3). This is a serious business, and should be treated as such.

2. The Spiritual Gifts

Notice I have described leadership as a “lust.” Most people think of it as a gift (and they would say “from God”), but it is nowhere mentioned in the list of spiritual gifts in the Bible. The main New Testament passages where spiritual gifts are mentioned are as follows:

Romans 12:6-8

Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness.

Gifts here include: *prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhorting, giving, ruling, showing mercy.*

1 Corinthians 12:8-10

For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues.

Gifts here include: *word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, divers kinds of tongues, the interpretation of tongues.*

1 Corinthians 12:28

And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.

Gifts here include: *apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues.*

Ephesians 4:11

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers....

Gifts here include: *apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.*

These gifts are spiritual, and together with the offices of bishop (overseer) and deacon mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, they are given by God, as He pleases, to His people. Note leadership is not amongst them.

Let us look at these gifts in turn.

Firstly, let us take out “*giving, word of wisdom, word of knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, working of miracles, discerning of spirits, divers kinds of tongues, the interpretation of tongues, miracles, healings, diversities of tongues.*” These are irrelevant to our subject.

Apostles

This is an extraordinary office for the time before the New Testament canon was complete. Nobody is an apostle now. An apostle is defined as one who had:

Acts 1:21,22

....accompanied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that he was taken up from us, must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection.

Paul was later counted an apostle, but he was unique:

1 Corinthians 15:8

....as of one born out of due time.

And that is it. No apostles for today, despite some men claiming to be such. The apostles had real authority in the church, and still do so today through the Scriptures. So when we read of the apostles making authoritative decrees in Scripture, yes, they have authority, and we should follow them. But no man has this power today. So no man should emulate the apostles in trying to get followers to follow their every whim, pretending it is a message directly from the Lord.

In fact, look at how Paul's character changed. Before his conversion he was a frightening character, who:

Acts 8:3

....made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison.

After he had been converted, he was given the authority of an apostle (unlike men today), but the Corinthians complained that "*his bodily presence*" was "*weak, and his speech contemptible*":

2 Corinthians 10:8-10

For though I should boast somewhat more of our authority, which the Lord hath given us for edification, and not for your destruction, I should not be ashamed: that I may not seem as if I would terrify you by letters. For his letters, say they, are weighty and powerful; but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.

His letters were weighty and powerful because of the true apostolic authority given by God that was behind them, but this great leader, this...

Philippians 3:5,6

....Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless....

had now become in himself, thanks to the grace of God, a man whose "*bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible.*"

Conversion changes the soul, and cleanses us from our old, self-assertive, aggressive nature. We should never use Paul or any of the apostles as examples as to how we should behave with regards their authority, because their authority was real, and we do not have this today – we have the Scriptures instead. But we can use Paul as an example of how the new nature should change our hearts.

Prophets

If, by “*prophets*,” we mean people who can miraculously foretell the future, as indeed some of the Old Testament prophets could, then no-one should ever claim to have this gift in our days. We don’t need it. We have the Scriptures, and they are sufficient for all our needs. Anyone who claims to be a prophet in that sense today, is too highly regarding himself. Even Amos, who really did have a true gift of prophecy from God, did not claim to be anyone special. He was just an ordinary workman; not even a church leader:

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.

Having said that, if, by “*prophet*,” we simply mean someone who had the gift that the children of Issachar had, who...

1 Chronicles 12:32

.... had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do,

In this case, yes, some people do have more sense and insight into applying Biblical truths for our situation today, so in this sense it is a valid gift for today. But note, these were the children of Issachar, not the priests, Levites or church leaders.

Minister

This is not a man in charge, with “leadership skills,” who speaks “*ex cathedra*” from the pulpit and whom one is not allowed to question. In most verses in the New Testament it is the Greek word “*diakonos*,” which means “*servant*,” and is exactly the same word from which we get the word “*deacon*.” It is generally distinguished in the Authorised Version of the Bible from the word “*servant*” which is the Greek word “*doulos*,” really meaning “*slave*.” So “*diakonos*” implies a voluntary servitude. This is a far cry from those men who fancy themselves in the pulpit and love to have a following.

There are other words translated “*minister*” in the New Testament:

“*upbrethos*,” which means “*subordinate*.” i.e. not a leadership position at all, but the position of an assistant;

“*leitourgos*,” which means “*public servant*,” again, not implying leadership of any kind.

Evangelist

This, too, is seen by some as an extraordinary office, no longer in use today. If so, then it means some special gift for the propagation of the gospel in New Testament times, before churches were properly established. Once churches had been established it was not needed any more, so it was only a temporary office. But that view tends to exalt the role of the visible church today too highly, as the bishops and deacons of it are now exalted to become the only ordinary means of hearing and propagating the gospel.

A second view is just as bad. Today, people think of an “*evangelist*” as someone with a special gift of public speaking and persuasion, who holds special “*evangelistic*” meetings and gets all the glory when so many people come to “accept Jesus” into their lives. These are called “*converts*,” although how many of them are truly converted by the Spirit of God is another matter. This idea exalts the man far too highly.

A third, more balanced, view is to see this simply as a gift for missionary work. People who have the gift of going into a region of the world where the gospel is hardly known and trying to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to people who have never heard of it before. But even this has been corrupted in our day. “Missionaries” in the past went to the mission field for life, making great sacrifice and often coming to an early death – all for the sake of the gospel. Today they are mainly people who live quite comfortably, far above the level of those around them whom they are trying to evangelise. As long as they send a missionary newsletter back to their home church every so often, with lots of positive messages in it, and go back with a slide show once a year, with an upbeat message of how wonderfully the work is progressing, people will carry on giving them money to continue their comfortable lifestyle. And most of them don’t preach Christ at all, but all they do (inadvertently maybe) is bring Western culture (guitars and foot-tapping tunes) to a region of the world that doesn’t need or want it.

Teacher

This is not a position of leadership either. Teachers are those that can understand the truths of the Bible and have the ability to communicate them to others. This is not usually in the way of a man in the pulpit telling people what to believe. Although sometimes a lecture is a useful thing, the best teachers are those who can sit alongside the pupil on a one to one basis, all the time asking if they have understood things, and if not, to help them until they do. The best teachers really want the pupil to understand *for himself*, and this is the gift that some have, and it is good, and certainly not a leadership role.

Exhortation

What is the difference between “*teaching*” and “*exhorting*”? “*Exhortation*” is just a word of practical advice, i.e. practical application of the teaching. This is a separate gift to that of teaching, although closely linked.

Preacher

This is not actually mentioned as a gift in the above verses, but something needs to be said about it, because today people have such a wrong view of what a preacher is. It is not a separate office of any kind. The word “*preacher*” in the New Testament is the Greek word “*kebruch,*” meaning “*herald.*” Someone with a message to give. That is all. This is not a leadership position. Today we think of “*preachers*” as leaders of churches who give an authoritative message when they are in the pulpit. Oh no they don’t. Every message from every pulpit is a mixture of truth and error. We are to discern the truth, not to blindly follow and accept everything spoken.

There is in existence a very high view of “preaching” which believes that: “*The only divinely authorised public means for the instruction and conversion of sinners is the verbal proclamation of God’s holy Word*” (Affirmation 2010 document). I have a really, really big problem with this. It is as though preaching is some kind of magic.

The proof texts given (Luke 24:46-48; 1 Corinthians 1:21; 2 Corinthians 4:5) show the importance of preaching but not the exclusivity of it in the conversion of sinners. I was converted by picking up a Bible and reading it, the Holy Ghost opening my heart to receive its truth. Other people I know also had the same experience. Others I know were converted through talking with Christian friends. Very few people I know actually were converted through preaching. In the Reformation, there was a call, “The primacy of preaching.” But this was in opposition to the primacy of the Roman Catholic ritual. Today, this is different, and we shouldn’t use that phrase any more. We should instead change it to “The primacy of the Word of God.” The preaching may *contain* the Word of God (and where it does it can be used by God to be effectual), but the Bible actually IS the Word of God. Where what is preached coincides with the truths of the Word of God, then God may use it, but the primacy must surely be given to the Word of God, not preaching itself.

Nowadays too many preachers exalt themselves far too highly and love to have a following, thinking that an ordained minister preaching is the ultimate tool used by God to save sinners. They claim they have the only ordinary means of conversion in their hands. This is no different

from the Roman Catholic priest thinking that only he has the power to convert the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Both would agree the Holy Ghost actually converts souls, but they would believe that it was only ever (ordinarily) through the means of their actions or words.

To summarise: I fully appreciate that some men are set apart for the Word of God as “*teachers*,” who ordinarily leave their secular employment to teach the Word of God full time:

1 Timothy 5:18

For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward.

But they are one of us. They too, just like the rest of us, are growing “*in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour*” (2 Peter 3:18). They have no special function, no special powers. To think that they do, is to head firmly in the direction of Roman Catholicism, and is not Biblical Christianity.

Pastor

This word is only found here in Ephesians 4:11 and in Jeremiah. The Greek word here is “*poimin*,” and means “*shepherd*.” The Hebrew word in Jeremiah is “*reb*,” meaning “*to tend a flock*,” which we might consider as a leadership position, but the Hebrew definition also has the connotation “*to associate with as a friend or companion*.” Yes, there is a gift of befriending, some people are genuinely good at it, and they should use it properly, guiding gently, not guiding as a leader in a pulpit, forever at a distance from the recipient.

Deacon

As mentioned earlier, this is the Greek word “*diakonos*,” which means “*servant*,” and is the main word translated in the New Testament as “*minister*.” There is also such thing as “*the office of a deacon*” (1 Timothy 3:10,13), which is a special position in the visible church, looking after the practical aspects of a particular congregation. This is in no way a

leadership role, but a Biblical office for a specific purpose. A good candidate for this office is one who has the gifts of “*showing mercy*” (Romans 12:8) and “*helps*” (1 Corinthians 12:28) in order that things are done decently and in order in the church.

Bishop (Overseer)

Surely, finally we’ve come to a leadership position, along with the gifts of “*ruling*” (Romans 12:8) and “*governments*” (1 Corinthians 12:28)? Well, someone has got to do the work of making decisions in visible churches. God has ordained the office of bishop, or overseer, in order to do this. However, the last people who should be bishops are those who fancy themselves as such, and those with a lust for leadership that they cannot control.

The bishops should be taken from the elders, the older men, i.e. the more experienced Christians amongst the congregation:

Titus 1:5

....ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee....

1 Timothy 3:6

....not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.

The most experienced Christians, the elders, form the presbytery, where all the decisions are made about the visible church. Eldership is not an office. People grow, or mature, into it. It’s not a position to be elected to. Bishops, or overseers, are taken from among this number. Yet often we see people not much more than a year in the faith becoming a bishop, because they have worldly “management” skills. That is the wrong criteria to use. And in most churches, bishops are elected by voting in the congregations. That is the last thing that should happen, as most ordinary members of the congregation can’t discern true spirituality from false management techniques used in order to deceive.

If the bishops were limited only to those who were thirty years professing the true faith or more (assuming they fit all the other criteria

mentioned in the Bible, cf. 1 Timothy 3), then these people only should be the ones who have been humbled enough, sanctified enough, to be able to oversee properly (although that could still not be the case because we can't see the heart).

In fact the leadership positions in the church (no matter which denomination we are talking about) are always going to be filled with those who fancy themselves as leaders. Men are by nature self-assertive, and if they want a top position, and they are aggressive enough and have sufficient worldly management skills, they will get what they want. Those who, on the other hand, are nurturing their new nature in Christ, would not be self-assertive any more, they would begin to learn the Christian virtue of self-abasement, and they will not tend to get leadership positions as the worldly ones will walk all over them in their lust to get to the top.

Yes, some good men will be in high places, cf. Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus, and they should use their position as best they can, but they will always be marginalised by the majority in the leadership.

The fact is that no matter how good or pure a church tries to be, worldly men will fight for the positions of leadership. Their worldly nature does not teach them any other way. The brambles will always end up in control, because the true believers will have something far better to do than to play management games:

Judges 9:8-15

The trees went forth on a time to anoint a king over them; and they said unto the olive tree, Reign thou over us. But the olive tree said unto them, Should I leave my fatness, wherewith by me they honour God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? And the trees said to the fig tree, Come thou, and reign over us. But the fig tree said unto them, Should I forsake my sweetness, and my good fruit, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said the trees unto the vine, Come thou, and reign over us. And the vine said unto them, Should I leave my wine, which cheereth God and man, and go to be promoted over the trees? Then said all the trees unto the bramble, Come thou, and reign over us. And the bramble said unto the trees, If in truth ye anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow: and if not, let fire come out of the bramble, and devour the cedars of Lebanon.

Notice that in 1 Corinthians 12:28, where some spiritual gifts are ranked in order of importance, the gift of “*governments*” is ranked on the lowest level. So we should all know our place!

3. What Leadership Is

Leadership is a thoroughly worldly phenomenon, found in all walks of life, not just in the church. Some people are “born leaders,” and this is seen in the world as being something good. But it is nothing else but wickedness and evil.

“Born leaders” are those who have a dominating personality and an uncontrollable desire for control. We’ve all come across this sort of person – someone who, when he walks into the room, has to be the centre of attention. The conversation that had been going on suddenly stops on their entrance, and they lead the conversation until such time as they leave the room again. It is an uncanny real power that they have, and many people are completely taken in by it, and blindly follow, because they’re afraid not to. Where is any Christian virtue in this?

Such people have a great sense of their own importance, they are totally self-centred, self-assertive and self-confident. The world revolves around them. This is totally opposite from the self-abasement that the Christian ought to have. We should see ourselves as nothing, not as some great somebody who the world must listen to.

They know they have the power to attract a following, and will certainly use this phenomenon to their own advantage. They also have to have control over every situation. They can’t bear it when they are not in control any more, and many commit suicide when this happens, cf. Ahithophel (2 Samuel 17:23). They have a lust for a following and make sure that they get one.

This sort of personality usually ends up as a businessman or a sales representative. They are all around us. We come across many of them in our lives. And they are dangerous, easily persuading people to do or buy what they don’t really want.

Further, this worldly phenomenon is everywhere in the church as well. It is not a gift of leadership, but a lust, a craving from the evil one for control. Yet so many people in the churches think of it as a spiritual gift and that it is actually a good thing to have dominating personalities in the church. People only think this so that they can justify their blindly following such men anywhere they lead.

The apostle Paul was a “born leader.” He had just this kind of personality before conversion, so he knew what it was to have the power to persuade people to blindly follow him, and could exercise this power whenever he wanted. But after his conversion, look what he says:

1 Corinthians 2:1-5

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

He, amazingly, did NOT use the power of persuasion, which he naturally had, in order to win converts to Christ. This was a deliberate decision on his part. His preaching was “NOT *with enticing words of man's wisdom*,” because that would have ended up with some people following him, not Christ. He “*determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified*.” He subdued his carnal nature, and ability to persuade men with worldly wisdom, and determined only to present the truth in a straightforward, genuine manner, so that their “*faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God*,” i.e. so that their faith would be genuine. This is against all our natural instincts. Paul deliberately did NOT use the carnal ability of persuasion, which he knew he had, as he could so easily have done. How many preachers are like this today?

So, how do we propagate the Christian faith? Whatever we do, we should not use a worldly, persuasive power in order to promote the truth. This being against all our natural instincts, we must trust in the

Holy Spirit alone to give us the words to say, without being tempted by the devil into using human forms of persuasion.

The disciples had a lust to be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. This is recorded twice in Luke's gospel alone, so they must have thought about it more than once:

Luke 9:46

Then there arose a reasoning among them, which of them should be greatest. And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a child, and set him by him, and said unto them, Whosoever shall receive this child in my name receiveth me: and whosoever shall receive me receiveth him that sent me: for he that is least among you all, the same shall be great.

Luke 22:24-26

And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest. And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve.

Note, Christ did not say to the disciples, “God has given you the gift of leadership – a dominating personality that you should use for the building up of my kingdom.” No. He told them to get rid of all such thoughts from their minds. Leadership is not a “gift” from God to be used for the kingdom's sake. We are to put such worldly traits away from us. We all have lusts and desires in our carnal natures that, upon becoming a Christian, we need to subdue and mortify. The new nature, the new heart, the Holy Spirit is now within us, to help us to do this. A lust for leadership is one of these things we must mortify if we are to be sanctified thoroughly by the Holy Spirit.

The Christian life is one of constantly being humbled for our sins. God has shut us all up to decay and death in order that we subdue our lusts for power completely and utterly.

Nebuchadnezzar, an otherwise great despotic leader, was humbled by God and saw this:

Daniel 4:37

Those that walk in pride He is able to abase.

The psalmist saw this:

Psalm 138:6

Though the LORD be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off.

The whole Christian message is for us to abase self and exalt God in our lives – to be like little children, servants.

Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The poor in spirit are the only ones who will inherit the kingdom of heaven, not those who know they have a power of persuasion and use it.

So, should we have Christian businessmen and sales representatives? Well, these callings are not unlawful as such, but try selling your products without the wicked, humanistic, worldly powers of persuasion that our rivals will use. It will be difficult, and we might eventually have to change our job, and become, God forbid, a toilet cleaner. But our conscience would be clear.

Similarly, a call to all those who are thinking about going into leadership in the church. We should seriously reconsider what we think is a “calling from God.” The calling to work in a church as such is not unlawful, but we must be very careful we are not using worldly means to get what we want, namely a name in the church for ourselves.

Jeremiah said to Baruch:

Jeremiah 45:5

And seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not: for, behold, I will bring evil upon all flesh, saith the LORD.

This is a call to us all.

4. Conclusion

If anyone thinks he has the “gift” of leadership – get rid of it. It is a mark of the self-assertive world, not a mark of grace. Self-abasement is the Christian way. I know of a minister of a church who was suspended from the ministry after he was found to have committed adultery. After a few months he was banging on the door of his presbytery asking to be reinstated as minister because he said he had now repented. They did not let him back in, so he left and went to another denomination. He stayed there a few months, and he was not allowed into the pulpit there either, so, the last I heard, he had finally resumed preaching again in yet another denomination. Why didn't he just give up wanting to be in charge all the time? Why couldn't he just resign himself to sitting in the pews with everybody else? Because of a lust for leadership which drove him on.

The ultimate question we have to think upon is this: Let us suppose these leaders all get into heaven (let us be charitable for a moment). What would they do there? No Synods to attend, no committees to be on, no followers to control. They would just be bowing down and worshipping God for eternity, as servants to a holy master. They would hate it. Let that be a warning to us all to shun the lust for leadership and become as little children. That is the calling of every Christian in this world.

Who Controls Your Church?

Who is the head of the church? Jesus Christ of course!

Ephesians 5:23

Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body.

1 Corinthians 3:11

For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1:18

And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

And everyone who is a member of that invisible body, the true church, shall be saved by Christ, not one will be lost:

John 6:39

And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.

That's the comfort for the Christian. But what about each visible organisation that calls itself the church – every group of people in every place who profess Christianity as the true religion (whether they're truly born-again or not)? In theory, Jesus Christ should be the head of all of these visible churches too.

But invariably visible churches are instead led by controlling people. From the largest church controlled by the pope of Rome, to the smallest tinpot little church down your street, most of them have someone in charge who wants to control the whole show.

Now, someone is needed to lead the church. “*Governments*” is a spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 12:28). We can't have anarchy, someone's got to be there to lead and organise. But Peter teaches leaders how they ought to behave:

1 Peter 5:2,3

Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.

Today we have too few leaders who perform their duty “willingly,” “of a ready mind” and as “ensamples” to the flock, and too many leaders who perform their duty “by constraint,” “for filthy lucre” and as “lords over God's heritage.”

Notice that here the church is called “God's heritage.” That should make us tremble. We should all be taking our duties in the churches so very seriously. But too many people today want control, and take no care at all for the real needs of the flock.

There is nothing new in this. We find this situation throughout Scripture:

Jeremiah 10:21

For the pastors are become brutish, and have not sought the LORD: therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered.

Jeremiah 23:2

Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings, saith the LORD.

Ezekiel 34:5,6

And they were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them.

Matthew 9:36

But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd.

I know so many true Christian people, who have been hurt by one or more churches because they have been dealt with very poorly by the church leaders. And many of them end up not going anywhere to

church, or if they do, they either stay on the periphery of a church or wander around the churches never settling in one. Controlling leaders really don't know how to deal with other people, although they flatter themselves to think they do.

There are many different types of controlling leader:

Some talk so much that they just expect people to shut up and listen to them. Maybe they've found out that most of the time that works. I must admit, whenever I come across someone who just won't stop talking, I know that even if I did get a chance to say something, they wouldn't listen anyway, so what's the point saying anything?

And if anybody comes along that genuinely needed spiritual help, they would never go to that sort of person for help, but just bottle everything up and eventually leave the church. And these controlling people are totally oblivious to any problem, always thinking that whatever fault there may be, resides in the person who's left, and never themselves.

Then there are other controlling people who hide behind the organisation. An organisation always ends up larger than the sum of the individuals in it. If we ever find ourselves in an organisation that claims to be the one true church, we should GET OUT! I don't care how big it is or how "sound" in doctrine it claims to be. The fact is that one or two men are at the top controlling everything, and we're not allowed to disagree with anything they say. Examples are the Roman Catholic church, Eastern Orthodox churches, Jehovah's Witnesses and Exclusive Brethren.

Raymond Franz was a man who spent 40 years of his life being a zealous Jehovah's Witness, the last 15 years in the Watchtower headquarters in New York. He grew in the ranks until one day, to his delight, he was invited to become one of the "twelve apostles," the controlling rulers of the whole organisation. Once "inside," he found out that the organisation he had been working for for all those years, made all their decisions by a simple majority vote of the ruling board, with no recourse to prayer or the Bible. So he left, and was disfellowshipped.

Who is making the decisions in our church, and how? If we don't know, then it's time to find out. And if they don't like us snooping, then it may be time to leave.

Then there are others who know they have a silver tongue and the power of persuasion. They know they can attract a following for themselves, they know that they can get huge numbers of people to throw money at them and follow their every decree, so they go about this as a very successful business model, and as a result live very comfortable lives. The people who follow this sort of controlling person, are simple people, "yes-men" who can never think for themselves. And there are plenty of them. Real people with real problems who want real Christians to help them, can again see straight through all this, and realise there's no help for them there either.

And then there are others who aren't so talkative, they aren't at the top of a large organisation, neither are they persuasive personalities who can attract a following, but they are still just as controlling. They lead their little church, but everything down to the very last detail has to be the way they want it. They are totally closed to other people's suggestions. They invariably end up emptying the church, rather than attracting a following. But they still carry on, thinking they're doing God's work, and believing that God will bring people into the church in His own good time. They never even think for a moment that the problem of an empty church might at least be partly to do with themselves. Again, real people with real problems who want real Christians to help them, would walk away.

It's because of all of this control being exercised in the churches, by many different kinds of people in many different ways, that so many true Christians are desperately lonely, without any real fellowship at all.

Now let's talk about William Carey. William Carey (1761-1834) was a Baptist pastor and is best known in church history as the father of the modern missionary movement. He went to Bengal in 1793 and stayed there for the rest of his life. Carey's wife Dorothy had never travelled more than a few miles from her home in England in her life before, and never really wanted to go with him.

After arriving in India, and especially after their son died of dysentery, Dorothy went mad. She died in 1807. Within less than a year William Carey had remarried.

What do we think of that? Was William Carey right to go to India at all? Just to ask that question sends shock waves down most Christians' spines. "Of course he was right!" would be the usual reply, "God told him to go!" But really, I'm asking the question genuinely and seriously, was he right?

He deliberately carried on with the work he thought God had got him to do, while his wife went mad. Whatever happened to the injunction:

Ephesians 5:25

Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.

It's also recorded that his children weren't very well disciplined either. The Bible teaches that one of the criteria for being an overseer in the church is that he should be...

1 Timothy 3:4,5

One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?)

William Carey, rather than showing all the traits of a godly man, showed all the traits of being a very controlling person. Everything had to be done his way. "Oh! But he's a hero of the faith," we may say. Yes. That's what all the Christian books tell us. But before he even thought about going as a missionary to India, the Lord had, in His providence, given him a wife.

Proverbs 18:22

Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD.

And he had been blessed with a family.

Psalm 127:3

Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward.

Now, if he hadn't been given these things, or at least had been given a wife that shared his desire to go to India, then that would have been a positive indication for him to go. But that wasn't the case. When trying to understand the Lord's will for his life, he should have taken his family into consideration. But instead, as far as he was concerned, his wife's thoughts, wishes, and desires, all had to eventually be subsumed to his. That's the mark of a controlling person.

The Lord in His providence had given William Carey a family to look after and to keep. To cast their thoughts aside for his desire to be a missionary is no different from Buddha dumping his wife and family to seek "enlightenment." It's not right.

William Carey had also been given the spiritual gift of tongues – he was very good at languages. That was the gift the Lord had given him, not the gift of being a missionary. After he got to India, he never really made many converts. He ended up spending most of his time there translating the Bible. That was a good thing to do. That was his gift. But he could have done that in England.

We should make sure that we work with the situation the Lord has given us, not try to leave it, or worse still, drag the people we are involved with where they really, really, truly don't want to go.

But what about missionary work, and the spreading of the gospel? Esther had it right:

Esther 4:14

For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but thou and thy father's house shall be destroyed: and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Esther, in the Lord's providence, was in just the right place at just the right time, and she realised that she was exactly the one the Lord had put there to seek the king's help when it was needed. In William Carey's

situation however, the Lord, in his providence, had given him a family to be responsible for. Rather than Carey thinking to himself that God wanted him to go to India, he should have seen the situation the Lord had given to him, and realised that if the Lord wanted someone to convert the heathen in India, He would provide the right people, people who would be suitable equipped for the task. From home in England, as well as doing the work of Bible translation, he could have continued to pray for missionary work. He would have lived a perfectly useful, fulfilling life. But he should never have gone himself.

Is this us?? Are we a controller? Maybe we should ask our wife. Or maybe the wife is the controller? All of us are responsible before God for the actions we take in this life. And that includes controllers. Let's make sure that we really, truly understand exactly what the Lord want us to do, based on the situation He has put us in and the people we've been given in His providence to deal with. Let's stop pretending the Lord has got a great work for us to do. He's got a small work, in keeping with our situation. Let's get on with it.

James 3:1

My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.

III

Reformation Required

The Church Has Forgotten

The Christian church, whatever denomination, has forgotten what Jesus Christ came into the world to teach. The philosophies of men have taken over. We need to get back to teaching, believing and practising the truth.

The Source of Truth

The Bible is the only Source of Truth

Most people nowadays would say that there are elements of truth to be found everywhere – in all religions, in science and in philosophy. This would possibly be true, except for one thing. If God really exists, men are not at liberty to invent truth (as in all false religions), or to think that by their own efforts they can seek truth out (as in science and philosophy). God Himself is the one who must reveal truth to men. He created us, so He must be the one to teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man.

Men think that they have to prove the existence of God before they can believe. But that is impossible. All men's so-called philosophical "proofs" for God's existence commit the most basic logical fallacies (such as "begging the question"). Science cannot prove the existence of God either, because science, useful though it is, cannot actually prove anything – it too commits logical fallacies (such as "asserting the consequent" and the use of induction). On the other hand, men cannot prove the non-existence of God either.

All belief systems, whether that of the scientist, the philosopher or of any religion, begin with unprovable first principles. The first principle of the Christian is that God exists and that He has revealed Himself in the Bible. The Bible is our only source of authority. So, debating with atheists and people of other religions is useless, because they would have their own first principles, and wouldn't accept ours. And we wouldn't accept theirs.

Some people think that God speaks directly to them today, and it is very difficult to tell them otherwise. But this is not so:

Hebrews 1:1,2

God,at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son....

Now Scripture is complete, we need no more revelation:

2 Peter 1:19

We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.

God's Word is far greater than any vision or voice of God, even a genuine one, as Peter had when he wrote that. The Scripture is reliable, and the only source of truth.

Every Word of the Bible is Inspired

If the source of truth is in written form, we must conclude that every word of it, in the original languages, has been inspired by and given to us directly from God. So, when we translate the Bible into other languages, we must make sure we translate word for word as closely as possible. Because different languages have different word orders, syntax and grammatical constructions, we must realise that no translation is perfect. But what truth remains will be used by God to fulfil His purposes. This does not mean that we can therefore be sloppy in our translating. We must translate word for word as accurately as possible. Some Bibles helpfully put in additional words in italics to show that they have been added to make more sense in the target language. If we have a problem in any translation, we must always go back to the original languages.

Most modern translations do not translate word for word. Modern translators have the concept of translating "idea for idea." But this then becomes no longer a translation as such, but a commentary, an interpretation, which may or may not be correct. The work of a translator should be purely translation, as accurately as possible. He

should not try to impose his opinion into the text, to try and give credence to his particular views, right or wrong.

God Preserves His Bible

God makes sure, in His inscrutable providence, that His Word is preserved entire throughout every generation. Papyrus, parchment and paper all decay, so we no longer have the original documents available to us. But God has ensured perfect copies of His Word will always be made and be available to the church.

But we see some variations in manuscripts. How do we know which ones are correct? Well, we don't go by the age of the manuscript – maybe it still exists today because it lay unused, because it was erroneous. Neither do we go by what scholars tell us are the correct manuscripts, because scholars, like scientists, change their views frequently. Neither do we necessarily go by what the majority of manuscripts say, although we are coming nearer the truth now. In actual fact, 90% of all manuscripts in existence today agree with the correct text. But we cannot believe that this is the correct text *because* it is in the majority, as it could theoretically change as more manuscripts are discovered (although God in His providence has prevented this from happening). But the Word of God never changes. We believe in the doctrine of a Received Text, kept pure throughout all ages. This is found in the *Masoretic* text of the Hebrew Old Testament and the *Textus Receptus* of the Greek New Testament.

The Jews were the keepers of the Scriptures in Old Testament times:

Romans 3:2

Unto them [the Jews] were committed the oracles of God.

And the church is today:

1 Timothy 3:15

The church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

The Doctrines of Truth

Because the church has forgotten the source of truth, it has lost many of its basic doctrines. Thousands of churches today, all claim to be Bible-believing, but they teach many different things. No-one understands all truth, so no church is perfect, or ever will be. So we should put our trust in the Bible alone as our perfect source of truth, not in any church. Three truths especially lost are these:

Men are Vile

The church has forgotten about the total depravity of man, but rather clings to the philosophies of the world, claiming that men should have a sense of “self-worth” and “self-esteem.” But we all fell in our forefather Adam, and all mankind by their fall, lost communion with God, are under His wrath and curse, and so made liable to all miseries of this life, to death itself and to the pains of hell for ever. If we don’t believe this, then we have too high a view of ourselves. Men deserve eternal conscious torment in body and soul in hell fire forever. So we should not be asking why God should be so cruel as to send men to hell for ever, rather we should be wondering why God should save any of these wretches from hell at all.

But don’t men do good works? No, because the works they do are not to the glory of God. The only reason that the world is not worse than it is, is because it is not to most people’s advantage to thief, commit adultery or murder. Otherwise they would be doing it all the time. Only when society has broken down do we see men doing these things. In a rich society they refrain from their baser instincts because peace and order suit them very nicely.

Job, upon understanding the ways of God for himself, concluded:

Job 40:4
Behold I am vile.

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

Our view of ourselves should be no different.

God Does Not Love Everybody

To most people this is a shocking thing to say. But it is the truth. We don't know who God loves and who He doesn't, but we do know that God sent His Son into the world to...

Matthew 1:21

.....save **his people** from their sins.

Not everybody, but only “*His people*,” whoever they are. This doctrine becomes so obvious when we come to a realisation of the vileness of man, because we then see that there is no reason at all for God to save anybody. But in His mercy, God saves a certain number from the punishment they deserve, grants them faith and repentance, so they may escape the wrath to come, and brings them into heaven to be with Christ for ever. And none of it is of their own deserving. What grace! What mercy!

Man is so arrogant that he thinks he can strut into heaven by himself, but we see that only repentant sinners go there, and even then, repentance is a gift of God.

The Vanity of this World

Because of our sins, God has shut us up in bondage to decay and death. This is far from being a natural process, as most people think. Rather:

Romans 6:23

The wages of sin is death.

Because it is inevitable that we die, and have only a few short years on this earth, all we do or think here is vanity:

Ecclesiastes 1:14

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and, behold, all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

If we are living enslaved by our feelings, as we all are, we do nothing that is worth anything, and our lives are utterly pointless. No wonder the psychiatric hospitals are full! But, God has shown us a way out. He sent Christ into the world to save sinners. So we can have something eternal to live for, our true home being in the next world, and not in this one. We should spend our lives in the light of this, realising that we are just...

Hebrews 11:13

.....strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

We must think of this world as the passing, evanescent thing that it really is.

True Worship

How then is God to be worshipped? It is God who sets the rules, not man. True worship is not in outward rituals.

John 4:24

God is a spirit, and they that worship Him, must worship Him in spirit and in truth.

True worship is therefore of the heart. It is inward thoughts, beliefs and motives that God sees. Many in the church have all the right outward actions, but their hearts are far from God. But if we are right inwardly, our outward actions should consequently be affected.

We Should be Deadly Serious

The things of God, heaven and hell, are deadly serious subjects. Therefore we must treat them as such. So when we come to worship, we should come in a serious manner. The church has forgotten this, and most people today come to church in a casual, relaxed manner,

which reflects the world around them. But this leads to taking the things of God lightly, whereas they are the most serious things of all. If we are believers, we have been saved from hell fire, and should no longer fear God's wrath. That should make us even more serious when we come to worship God, to thank Him for His mercy to us.

Only God Ordains How We Should Worship Him

With this air of seriousness about us as we come to worship, we should not be wanting jolly, foot-tapping tunes, or a smiley, happy religion going on all around us. God alone has ordained the elements of true worship. These are psalm singing, prayer, Scripture reading and preaching. No other elements should be allowed to creep in. We need to sing the psalms seriously and without distraction. Prayer needs to be offered with the members of the congregation silently joining in and agreeing with what is being said. To this end, God has ordained the posture we should use in prayer. Standing, kneeling or falling prostrate are the only postures mentioned in the Bible. Sitting, or slouching, is not suitable. The scripture reading and preaching should be solemn, humble and in the fear of God.

The Primacy of the Word of God

At the time of the Reformation, the Reformers spoke very much about the "primacy of preaching." This was quite right, especially when confronted with the Roman Catholic superstitious worship, whereby the ritual took the prime place. True religion is not to be found in outward ritual, but in the understanding gained from the reading and expounding of the Word of God. However, today, we have another problem. Protestant churches are full of leaders who preach their own peculiar doctrines and think so highly of themselves for being right. Except that none of them are. But all of them get a following. As long as men follow men, especially if they are smooth talkers, easy to listen to and very persuasive, we must redefine what we mean by the "primacy of preaching." Instead we must now talk about the "primacy of the Word of God." This would entail scripture readings in worship, and preaching limited only to a direct explanation of the Scripture, and its practical implications.

Nehemiah 8:8

So they read in the book of the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.

Here are nine things needful, which are completely missing in our churches today. How far the church has strayed from the truth! Let us commit ourselves to become a living sacrifice to promote these truths, bring them to the fore, and to make the Christian church once more a light shining on a hill, where people may say again:

Psalm 122:1

I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the Lord.

The Train Now Leaving

Since the advent of the world-wide web, we have never before seen such an explosion of information battering our senses from all directions. Now everyone can publish their thoughts for all the world to see, and it costs next to nothing to be able to do so.

There used to be an old Dutch saying, “Every heretic has his text.” Now we can say, “Every nutter has his website.” All sorts of crazy ideas are now publicly available for anyone to read and embrace if they so wish. Of course, my website is no exception, it is just one of millions. Why should my site be so special? Why should anyone listen to me?

Well, for a start, we should always be aware that we are all responsible for our actions, and accountable to the one true living God, Lord of heaven and earth. So we should all be careful what we say and publish.

Ecclesiastes 5:2

God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.

Every last word of every individual is going to be judged by God. Especially those words which we put in the public domain, such as on a website, because many others can so easily be hurt or influenced by them.

Matthew 12:36

But I say unto you, That every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment.

Secondly, as individuals, whether we are writing material or reading it, we always need to pray earnestly for the Holy Spirit to guide us. He will keep us in the right path, so that we may discern right from wrong, true from false. He is an infallible guide, BUT we all make mistakes, because we have far too much of self remaining in our hearts. Only the Holy Spirit inspired Scriptures are free from error. Even so, our

responsibility is still to make sure as best we can that what we are writing or reading is the truth as the Holy Spirit guides us.

Isaiah 30:21

And thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.

1 John 2:27

But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.

Despite all the crackpots on it, the web is still very useful. Individual churches can use it to promote their brand of Christianity. Official church websites give us very handy information, not only of location and times of services and so on, but also details as to what the church actually believes. It is always good to read material straight from the horse's mouth as it were, rather than trusting in the opinions of other people who want to be critical, whether their criticism is justified or not. Next time a Jehovah's Witness comes knocking, ask them for a copy of their booklet "*What Does God Require of Us?*" It is about the same size as a Watchtower magazine, and it is an excellent resource, full of information as to what they actually believe, in their own words. Don't believe any of it though. It's rubbish! I'm just saying it is very useful for us to get to know where they are coming from, that's all.

In my recent trawling of the web, I have become very interested in the many testimonies that are up there from people who have left churches for whatever reason. Just Google "people who have left churches" or something similar, and see what I mean. Some testimonies will just be from those who never were Christians, maybe they were born and brought up in the church, found it irrelevant with regards their worldly lifestyle and so they left. These testimonies are easy to spot, and are not relevant here. Other testimonies are from people who have become bitter, and have some kind of hang up. These are not relevant either. But there are many, many other testimonies of those who seem to be truly born-again believers who have had problems and had no option but to leave a church at some time or other in their Christian walk. These are the interesting ones. They didn't go looking for trouble, but simply found themselves in the mess they were in, just by trying to be

honest, genuine and wanting to do the right thing. They have nowhere else to go, hence they publish their experiences on the web.

I met an elderly lady once, who told me that she used to play the piano in the ladies' meeting at church for many years, then one day she was told not to do it any more, they had got someone else. She was really upset at this happening, and still is (otherwise she wouldn't have bothered telling me about it). Now, maybe the church had a perfectly good reason for asking her not to play the piano any more, I don't know the details of the situation, maybe she was getting too old and missing notes or something. But she is still upset, several years later, rightly or wrongly. And the church just carries on regardless, and has never dealt with the situation.

Many times, to me, the church (whatever church) seems like an express train that will not (maybe cannot) stop for anything. Some people are telling it "Slow down!" Others are wanting the train to go to another destination. Others are jumping off, falling off, hanging off, getting thrown around and hurt – you name the metaphor. And the church just carries on at full speed regardless. What a condition to be in! What can be done?

I really feel for such genuine Christian people who have been hurt in some way by a church situation. All of them end up, without trying, "*outside the camp.*" Which is not a bad place to be actually, as that is exactly where Christ was.

Hebrews 13:13

Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.

Our Own Importance

I spend far, far, far too much time every day on the internet. Whether it is checking my (mainly junk) emails, checking my bank account, doing my shopping, searching for information about something or other, or writing this. The fact is that today we do nearly everything using a personal electronic device such as a tablet, smartphone or maybe just an old-fashioned computer. When I see so many young people on the bus, or on the train, or in the street, completely absorbed in their smartphones, I can't help thinking that they will all have eyesight problems by the time they are fifty.

I complain about myself spending too much time using these devices, but I am just a light user. I have never got involved with the inane practice of using social media. People today would rather text each other than speak face to face, or even by phone. And millions are engulfed in such a thing. This is all life is to them.

Everyone who does not know the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour is living an empty life:

Ephesians 2:12

Having no hope, and without God in the world.

1 Peter 1:18

Your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers.

Psalms 49:20

Man that is in honour, and understandeth not, is like the beasts that perish.

Living for self, living for this world only, living for pleasure, fame, fortune, whatever we live for, if it is not living for God, our life is meaningless:

Ecclesiastes 6:4

For he cometh in with vanity, and departeth in darkness, and his name shall be covered with darkness.

Isaiah tells us that God has indeed given all men over to meaninglessness deliberately to “sift” them with the “sieve of vanity”:

Isaiah 30:28

And his breath, as an overflowing stream, shall reach to the midst of the neck, to sift the nations with the sieve of vanity: and there shall be a bridle in the jaws of the people, causing them to err.

But there is a purpose behind this. God has done it in order to bring His people to Himself:

Romans 8:20

For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope.

Ecclesiastes 2:26

For God giveth to a man that is good in his sight wisdom, and knowledge, and joy: but to the sinner he giveth travail, to gather and to heap up, that he may give to him that is good before God. This also is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Ephesians 4:17

This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind.

People fill themselves with a sense of their own importance. They want to be somebody in this world. Yet, we only have to go to a graveyard, and we will find plenty of people who had that very same sense of their own importance, yet they are now totally forgotten. And that will be every one of us one day.

Psalms 90:10

The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

But does becoming a Christian change things at all? Well, we do know that whatsoever we, as Christians, do for the Lord, it is not a waste of time:

1 Corinthians 15:58

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord.

We now have a real purpose, namely to glorify God:

1 Corinthians 6:20

For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.

But there are still far too many Christians who have far too high a sense of their own importance as well. We now live in the days of the professional preacher.

I was on the internet (again) the other day and came across the details of a self-styled preacher. It was like a CV. Their qualifications and experience were all listed, and at the bottom it said “Speaking fees £300 per day.” And this person seemed to be quite a popular speaker.

I went to a church last week, at which the woman who preached was the daughter of the previous minister (who died last year). After the service, I met her uncle, who went on to tell me that he was one of eleven children, six of whom became ministers. I found this all very odd. I have no objections to a tradesman, like a butcher, passing his skills on to his children to carry on the family business, but the church should not operate like a family firm. Ordinary folk in the pew just cannot relate to whole families making their living from going into “full-time Christian work.”

The salaries of ministers are also very eye-opening. One in my area gets £30,000 per year (he was asked to take more but refused), and another gets £22,000 per year. And I know of one church that makes members tithe and insists that their minister gets the equivalent of a headmaster's salary. And what's more, in most cases, a minister usually also gets a house, a car, all his bills paid, and doesn't have to pay any council tax.

What do we think of all these examples? Frankly, I am appalled. “Preaching” has become just another profession.

Was Amos a professional preacher? No. He was a farmer:

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.

Was Paul a professional preacher? No. He was a tentmaker:

Acts 18:3

And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers.

But did not Paul say that we should pay full-time church leaders?

1 Corinthians 9:14

Even so hath the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.

1 Timothy 5:17,18

Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward.

No. These verses only show that reasonable expenses should be given to those who work for the church. They certainly do not allow a generous salary, nor do they allow a fully-fledged business to be made out of the church.

But this is what we have today. We have web sites dedicated to Christian job searching. We have the “Christian” music scene, the “Christian” bookshop scene, the “Christian Resources Exhibition.” Speakers who refuse to speak unless they get their £300 per day (or whatever they charge), certainly won't lower themselves to speak for free while making a living doing something else like sewing tents.

How much did Amos get paid for prophesying? Or Jeremiah? Or anyone in the Bible?? Nothing. The whole “Christian” scene today is utterly unbiblical and corrupt.

Let's not get involved with any of it. Let's no longer listen to silver-tongued smooth-talking professional speakers or go to great Christian conferences. Let's no longer follow the business models these people put forward. Remember that businessmen only ever become businessmen for the money. They don't do it for the joy they know you are using one of their products. Rather let us develop the spirit of discernment and listen to unpaid, ordinary people, who know their God and have real insight into the ways of the Lord. These will not be found at the Christian Resources Exhibition or at Spring Harvest. They will be found in the quiet corners of many of our churches. Some will not be found in churches at all. These are the ones to follow and listen to.

So how are we to number our days?

Psalm 90:11,12

Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath. So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 12:13,14

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.

The Reformation of Preaching

1. What is Preaching?

(a.) What Preaching Is Not.

– Preaching is NOT oratory. God condemns oratory, because it exalts men too highly:

Acts 12:21-23

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. 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.

– Preaching is NOT speaking infallibly, giving authoritative instructions, like the pope of Rome. The idea that one man must preach dogmatically and authoritatively when he is in the pulpit, results in many problems:

(a.) Members of the congregation become too afraid to talk about the sermon afterwards. They never disagree with the preacher, because they know that if they did they would be thought to be troublemakers and sidelined in the church.

(b.) People will think that the authority of the message comes from the preacher himself, whereas it actually comes from the Word of God alone. The preacher is merely a conduit for the Word. Where what the preacher says agrees with the Word of God, it is authoritative, and will be effectual. But where he strays from the Word, we can safely ignore him:

Isaiah 55:11

So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

(c.) This sort of preaching tends to idol worship. People will follow the most eloquent preachers.

(d.) Any outsider who hears a preacher speaking in an authoritative, forthright manner *as though he were ex cathedra* (in the pulpit) *infallible* will think to themselves, “The Protestants have just exchanged and infallible pope for an infallible preacher.” All men make mistakes in their logic and understanding, including preachers. Consequently, *preaching is only ever merely a suggestion*. It is the Bible that is authoritative, never the preacher.

– Preaching is NOT magic. Nobody would admit to this, but it’s the case if they agree with any of the following:

(a.) *That preaching is the only ordinary means of salvation*. This is not so. The Word of God is the only ordinary means of salvation. Only when the preaching coincides with the truth of the Word of God does God use it as a means to effectually call sinners to repentance and faith.

(b.) *Only fully ordained ministers “preach.”* Anyone else (who prepares the sermon in exactly the same way) merely “exhorts.” The difference between a minister and the rest of the congregation is that the minister has “ministerial grace,” or “unction,” *i.e.* a magic power to convert sinners through “preaching,” whereas nobody else has this magic power. This is no different from believing the superstition that a Roman Catholic priest can magically turn the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ.

(c.) *That recorded sermons are not the same as live preaching*. This sounds odd, but I’ve heard this. This view sees something magic in *live* preaching. Listening to a recorded sermon, we will have more things to distract us than we would do if we were listening to live preaching in a church. Apart from that however, the message remains exactly the same, whether we hear it live, hear it on tape, download it from the internet, or read it in a book. If the message is exactly the same, so God can use it to the same effect in the hearer or reader.

(d.) *Some people “feel a call” to the ministry*. These people just fancy themselves.

– Preaching is NOT putting oneself in a superior position to the rest of the congregation. It is interesting to note that Christ sat down when He explained Scripture, as though not wishing to lord it over the people:

Matthew 5:1,2

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: and he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying...

Luke 4:16,20,21

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read.... And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them.... [Note: Standing for the reading, sitting for the explanation].

Luke 2:46

And it came to pass, that after three days they found him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions.

Matthew 13:2,3

And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship, and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore. And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;

Matthew 26:55

I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me.

(b.) What Preaching Is.

Preaching is heralding the gospel of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Technically it is different from “teaching,” as preaching is bringing the good news to unbelievers, whereas “teaching” is expounding the Scriptures to build up believers in the faith. However, in any good church we should really be doing both at the same time.

Let’s look at a few Bible passages which can help us here:

– Acts 17:1-3

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where was a synagogue of the Jews: And Paul, as his manner was, went in unto them, and three sabbath days reasoned with them out of the scriptures, Opening and alleging, that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen again from the dead; and that this Jesus, whom I preach unto you, is Christ.

Here, preaching is defined as reasoning “*out of the Scriptures.*” Reasoning with people is a two-way thing, with members of the congregation asking questions, and a two-way discussion going on. We have a message to get across, so we need to concentrate on getting it across and, more importantly, *making sure people understand it.*

True preaching is:

- presenting the truth.
- persuading others to embrace the truth.
- reasoning with people in favour of the truth.
- making sure they understand the truth.

– Acts 17:17,18

Therefore disputed he in the synagogue with the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him. Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say? other some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.

Paul “disputes” with “*the Jews, and with the devout persons, and in the market daily with them that met with him,*” and this is called “*preaching*” in v.18.

– Acts 19:8

And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God.

Preaching is “*disputing*” and “*persuading.*”

– Acts 20:7

And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.

Could a one-man “*speech*” last several hours, until midnight, without some time for response? Note v.11 he talked “*until break of day.*”

– Acts 20:21,25

Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.... And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more.

“*Testifying*” is equivalent to “*preaching.*”

– Acts 28:23

And when they had appointed him a day, there came many to him into his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning till evening.

Here we have *expounding, testifying, persuading* from morning until evening. Also, *Reasoning* (v.29), *preaching* and *teaching* (v.31).

– 2 Timothy 4:2

Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.

Here preaching includes *reproving, rebuking, exhorting.*

– Titus 1:3

But hath in due times manifested his word through preaching, which is committed unto me according to the commandment of God our Saviour.

Preaching “*manifested His Word.*”

– 2 Peter 2:5

And spared not the old world, but saved Noah the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly.

Note Noah was a “*preacher of righteousness*”, but no sign of a pulpit or being an eloquent speaker.

The most important point to realise about preaching, and teaching, is that the aim is to make sure the recipients *understand* what is being said. This has to involve a two-way communication at some point. Preaching is usually given in the form of a lecture, so we need to make sure there is always a time set aside for anyone to ask questions and respond to what has been said.

2. Who Should be Allowed to Preach?

There are two extremes to avoid here:

- (a.) Only those licensed by the church should be allowed to preach.
- (b.) Anyone who fancies their hand at preaching can do so can preach.

Both of these extremes are wrong.

(a.) Only Licensed Ministers

It is understandable for churches to want to fence their pulpits to stop anyone stepping in and preaching heresy. But we don't need to have preachers or ministers “licensed by the church” to “keep the testimony,” because Christ said:

Matthew 16:18

I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Testimony to the truth is kept by the Holy Ghost.

Matthew 23:8-10

But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.

1 John 2:27

But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.

Luke 12:11,12

And when they bring you unto the synagogues, and unto magistrates, and powers, take ye no thought how or what thing ye shall answer, or what ye shall say: for the Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say.

Luke 21:12-15

But before all these, they shall lay their hands on you, and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues, and into prisons, being brought before kings and rulers for my name's sake. And it shall turn to you for a testimony. Settle it therefore in your hearts, not to meditate before what ye shall answer: For I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist.

And then we have the example of the apostle Paul:

Acts 9:19-30

And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus. And straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God. But all that heard him were amazed, and said; Is not this he that destroyed them which called on this name in Jerusalem, and came hither for that intent, that he might bring them bound unto the chief priests? But Saul increased the more in strength, and confounded the Jews which dwelt at Damascus, proving that this is very Christ. And after that many days were fulfilled, the Jews took counsel to kill him: But their laying await was known of Saul. And they watched the gates day and night to kill him. Then the disciples took him by night, and let him down by the wall in a basket. And when Saul was come to Jerusalem, he assayed to join himself to the disciples: but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took him, and brought him to the apostles, and declared unto them how he had seen the Lord in the way, and that he had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus. And he was with them coming in and going out at Jerusalem.

And he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus, and disputed against the Grecians: but they went about to slay him. Which when the brethren knew, they brought him down to Caesarea, and sent him forth to Tarsus.

Galatians 1:15-2:1

But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb, and called me by his grace, immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me; but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteen days. But other of the apostles saw I none, save James the Lord's brother. Now the things which I write unto you, behold, before God, I lie not. Afterwards I came into the regions of Syria and Cilicia; And was unknown by face unto the churches of Judaea which were in Christ: But they had heard only, That he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. And they glorified God in me. Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also.

Paul, upon conversion, did not approach the church for support because he felt he had a “call to the ministry.” Rather, “straightway” he started preaching that Christ was the Son of God (Acts 9:20), confounding the Jews, “proving that this is very Christ” (v.22). He was so convincing that the Jews “took counsel to kill him” (v.23), so “the disciples took him by night and let him down by the wall in a basket” (v.25). At this point, I suggest that he “conferred not with flesh and blood” (Galatians 1:16), but went into the desert of Arabia for up to three years. Presumably he had his Bible with him in the desert, and there spent the time re-educating himself from the Jewish interpretation he had learned from Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). After this, he went to Jerusalem and “assayed to join himself to the disciples; but they were all afraid of him, and believed not that he was a disciple” (Acts 9:26), but Barnabas “took him and brought him to the apostles” (v.27). We see from Galatians 1:18,19 that he was there fifteen days and only actually met Peter and James. During this time “he spake boldly in the name of the Lord Jesus and disputed against the Grecians; but they went about to slay him” (Acts 9:29). So the brethren sent him off to Tarsus (v.30). He then avoided the churches in Judea for fourteen more years, and dwelt in Syria and Cilicia (Galatians 1:21). Here, in Antioch of Syria, he was “separated” by the Holy Ghost “for the work” whereunto He had called him (Acts 13:2). This is not Paul’s “call to the ministry,” as he had been ministering for a long time before this. He remained away from the churches in Judea until circumstances in the Lord’s

providence took him to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders there about a particular problem regarding circumcision (Acts 15). There the apostles and elders immediately accepted him as a true believer. He was not compelled to get the Synod to licence him first before beginning to preach. He was not “sent” to preach by any church.

Romans 10:15

And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.

This verse is often interpreted as meaning preachers should be sent by the church, but it does not say that. It means sent by God.

A preacher who is licensed is not the only one who is a true ambassador of Christ, the only official source of truth. Such teaching elevates the preacher or minister far, far too highly. **All** true believers are ambassadors for Christ whenever what they say coincides with the truth of Scripture. Of course, preachers and ministers are not to be lightly disagreed with, because they ought to know the Bible better than most of the rest of us, as they are supposedly set apart for the teaching of the Word of God, and have more time to study it than the rest of us. But other than that, they are no different from any other believer. They are one of us.

A lot of preachers or ministers tend to be “people people” – *i.e.* worldly, wanting an enormous social life, and not necessarily as steeped in Scripture as they should be. Most ministers go into the job in the first place because they want a job as a glorified social worker dealing with people, not because they love the Word of God. Consequently, they only interpret Scripture in a man-exalting context, giving the people what their itching ears want to hear, to keep themselves in favour with them.

(b.) Anyone Allowed to Preach

A person two days in the faith can edify. He does know something, but not much. He is quite right in sharing what he knows in informal fellowship after church, and should be encouraged to do so, like a small

child should be encouraged when he says his first words. But for preaching in a worship service, he is not suitable. It seems popular these days to mistake a youthful zeal for a great gift in the church, and people very young in the faith are put into leadership positions in the church very, very quickly. This not only puffs them up with pride, but also will not satisfy the congregation because of the person's relative ignorance in spiritual things. A bishop (overseer) should be:

1 Timothy 3:6

Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.

The only men who should be allowed to teach in worship services are the spiritually mature Christians in the congregation. They should be educated in the Scriptures, but someone of that maturity in the faith should already have this qualification by experience. They don't have to have some kind of training under the auspices of a church. The problem with church training is that churches will always fill their students with the church's propaganda (after all, the church is probably paying for the training), which is *always* a mixture of truth and error.

And we must ask the question: should we pay our preachers? Well, we do have a Scriptural warrant for setting some people aside for the Word of God:

Acts 6:2,4

Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables.... But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.

And indeed we should pay them for their expenses:

1 Corinthians 9:9-11

For it is written in the law of Moses, Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresbeth in hope should be partaker of his hope. If we have sown unto you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?

1 Timothy 5:17,18

Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine. For the scripture saith, Thou shalt not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The labourer is worthy of his reward.

But Paul still “wrought,” earning a living by making tents:

Acts 18:3

And because he was of the same craft, he abode with them, and wrought: for by their occupation they were tentmakers.

Acts 20:33,34

I have coveted no man's silver, or gold, or apparel. Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities, and to them that were with me.

The problem we have with full-time preachers or ministers, is that, in church courts, they tend not to vote according to truth and righteousness, but rather, because their livelihoods are at stake, they vote in political blocks, making sure not to disturb the status quo in the church under any circumstances. The Scriptural way of paying preachers and ministers is to give them their expenses, but not to pay a full salary. Otherwise preaching and being a minister becomes nothing other than a secular job, and consequently people will tend to look after themselves, not the flock.

3. How Should We Preach?

Not everybody is called to preaching. But preaching isn't all that difficult if we follow a few simple rules:

(1.) Most importantly, we must acknowledge the absolute necessity of the Holy Spirit, and be led by Him in everything: the choice of text, the preparation, and the delivery. Whatever we do, we should never try to use human methods of oratory, because that will make the Spirit depart from us.

(2.) We're not putting on a show. We **MUST** be simple and genuine:

2 Corinthians 1:12

*For our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience, that **in simplicity and godly sincerity**, not with fleshly wisdom, but by the grace of God, we have had our conversation in the world, and more abundantly to you-ward.*

(3.) We must stick to expository preaching. It is the Bible that converts sinners, so we let the text do the work, and never insert any fancy embellishments or anecdotes.

(4.) We must use the Nehemiah 8:8 principle:

Nehemiah 8:8

So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.

(5.) We mustn't shout. We should preach to people as if they'd just had a bereavement. That should keep our minds on eternal things.

(6.) We must never use the word "You." It's always "We." WE are all sinners. WE are all in this together, preacher and congregation alike.

(7.) We should NEVER, NEVER, NEVER accept payment for preaching. As soon as we do that, we've sold out to mammon:

Matthew 6:24

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Matthew 10:8

Freely ye have received, freely give.

1 Corinthians 9:18

What is my reward then? Verily that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel.

If we understand anything at all in the Bible, any of us can do this. Some people will always be better than others at preaching, but if we stick closely to these principles, nobody will be so bad they aren't worth listening to.

Christian Community

Modern technology has advanced enormously over the last 100 years. Things are so much more convenient nowadays. We can travel halfway around the world in less than 24 hours and we can buy anything we want at the click of a mouse and it will be delivered to our doorstep. Man seems to have achieved such a lot.

But is this really an improvement? Where is God in all this? At the same time as these conveniences have come along, the churches have been closing down. Many people now have to travel huge distances to get to church, or at least a church where the Bible is still preached. We may argue that it is thanks to the motor car we can get to such churches, but the fact remains that once there was a church in every parish, and it is thanks to the motor car, and subsequent centralisation of everything, that they have now nearly all closed down.

It is not only distance that keeps people away from church. Thanks to the internet we can now download thousands of sermons from anywhere in the world, by our favourite preachers. With this technology we need not bother even going out of our own living rooms in order to get our spiritual food every week, we can just worship at home instead. Indeed we can listen to as many sermons as we like every day as we travel to and from work or do the washing. Surely, the country must be full of very spiritual people as a result of all this technology?

But it isn't. The lack of spirituality in the world today is staring us starkly in the face. Why is this? There is one vital thing that is missing – a sense of Christian community.

Because very few live within walking distance of their church, it is also very likely that they don't live within walking distance of each other either. Therefore the only time Christians ever meet is on the Lord's Day. As a result, conversation after church tends to be a superficial asking after each other's welfare during the week rather than upon spiritual things. No-one seems to be bothered by this weekly ritual –

that is until a major incident occurs such as a death or serious illness. Then we find out who our friends really are.

Is this what Christianity is all about? Just a glorified social club one day a week, and very little else? It is time to take stock. We need to radically change our lifestyle.

In our modern secular society the Christian is being more and more marginalised. Men cannot get work because most jobs available include compulsory work on the Lord's Day. Ladies cannot find modest clothing in high street shops. Children are being forced at school to believe lies. Christian groups are being denied government funding unless they agree to employ buggerers (to use a word from the Geneva Bible). Instead of having to put up with any of this, it is high time that the Christians all got together and worked for each other, creating a counter-culture, which would generate its own economy. Where are the Christian teachers? dressmakers? hatters? shoe-makers? printers? book-binders? leather-workers? carpenters? farmers? We have lost the skills needed for any of these trades in our pursuit of worldly gain.

But is this not advocating world flight? Well, we should indeed be salt and light in the world whilst it is possible, but there should also be that sense of belonging to a community, because when the currencies of the world collapse or persecution comes, both of which are inevitable (unless the Lord intervenes), the world will not help us then. Muslims and Jews have their own wealth stored away for such a time, but the Christian, like the world, thinks that things will carry on the way they are, and that there is no problem.

Romans 12:2

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.

But The Church Doesn't Like Me

I have just become incensed (again!) at an article I read in a middle-of-the-road evangelical church's newsletter. The whole article was about people who profess Christianity but don't go to church. It states that Christians should go to church. Here is a quote from it:

“As you read through the New Testament, it becomes apparent that the concept of an isolated, independent, free-lance Christian is completely foreign to the Scriptures. The early believers lived out their Christian lives within the context of a church and it was for their good and the good of their fellow-believers that they did so.”

Now there is a lot of truth in this statement. It is right that we should, if at all possible, be connected to a church. There are far too many people who are exactly “*isolated, independent, freelance*” Christians. They don't think that they need to have a church.

They think that they're God's gift to the world, and that they alone are right. If a church differs from what they believe, even if only slightly, they are off, doing it alone. They think that they are the only one carrying the banner for God. What a burden! Yet all churches differ from what we, as individuals, believe. Furthermore, we, as individuals, all differ from one another. There is no perfect church, neither is there a perfect individual. We have to accept that.

Some think that God has called them to a specific work, for example, to be a missionary somewhere. They have not been sent by a church, they just fancy themselves in that role. So, maybe at great hardship to themselves, they give up a proper job and go and work full-time, supposedly “preaching the gospel.” But no-one has sent them. They are doing it off their own backs. The whole concept of giving up a secular job to go into “full-time Christian work” is not a good witness at all. Thousands of Orthodox Jews don't go into secular work, but rather live in their ghettos claiming unemployment benefits from the state of Israel. In other words, they are scroungers. Being in “full-time Christian work” is actually a very poor witness to everyone around.

People will think, “He’s telling me what to do and believe, but he’s not actually doing anything himself.”

Yes, there are many people like this, and the article I read was quite rightly criticising such for not humbling themselves enough to join a church.

But there are an equally large group of Christians who are on their own, outside of any visible church, who can’t help being in that position. They just don’t fit.

All churches have a way of doing things – a way of speaking, a way of dealing with one another. The services are done in a certain manner, with a certain vocabulary. They have their “fellowship teas,” where everyone is supposed to chatter about anything and everything, and enjoy doing so. The church supports certain missionary organisations, which everyone is expected to contribute towards. It is difficult for me to get this across really, because if we are in the middle of one of these churches, we don’t realise this. We’re just part of it, and go along with everything, thinking that our church is the whole of what real Christianity is all about. But it isn’t. Only if we look in from the outside do we see what I mean. People, like myself, who have been converted from completely outside of any church, can see these things a lot more clearly than those who have been born and brought up in such an environment. Inside our “bubble” we can never see beyond it. There are many, many people who just can’t “fit” into the systems that the churches have, so they end up not going to church at all. The churches should be catering for these people.

Also, a lot of people have the sort of personality that means that they can’t join in social gatherings like other people can. They can’t have, and don’t particularly want to have, an enormous social life, like most of the rest of the membership of the church. Just a few real friends will do. They too will always be on the edge of the church as a result. Most church-goers spend all their time laughing and talking in their enormous church social scene, and they just don’t notice – or don’t want to notice – someone who doesn’t quite fit into it.

It is this latter group of Christians that I have sympathy for. They end up thinking that because they can’t fit into the church’s way of doing

things, for whatever reason, then the church doesn't like them. Churches run along in the way they go because they've always done it that way, and they don't stop to help such poor fellow believers. If we don't fit in and do things the way the church wants or expects us to do them, we're not really one of them. And this is why the article made me angry.

I have no sympathy for those who set themselves up in an independent, freelance way, and don't see their need of a church at all. But I have every sympathy with those who, for whatever reason, don't quite "fit" in to the way a church does things, and so are isolated, or at worst alienated as a result.

Churches, realise this is your problem, not the fault of such folk. We need to open up our bowels of mercy wider to encourage and accept these people. Oh yes, our cosy little social group may be disturbed by doing this. Our church might be affected and changed in some way if we embrace these people. But this is the Christian way. We follow the Lord, not men's ways.

Colossians 3:24-26

Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, longsuffering; forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye. And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness.

1 John 3:17

But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?

Philippians 2:1-4

If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

There's a Need Near You

On 26th January 2015 the first female bishop was ordained in the Anglican Church. Over a thousand people gathered at York Minster to witness this event. Upon the Archbishop asking the congregation, "Is it now your will that she should be ordained?" a thousand people shouted, "Yes!" and a single lone voice shouted, "No, not in the Bible." This sums up the state of the church in the UK today.

It is estimated that 5% of the population of the UK are regular church attenders. That would be approximately 3 million people. If only one in a thousand of those cared about the Bible and used it as their sole authority (as the above ordination ceremony suggests), we would have three thousand people in the whole of the UK who are truly Bible believing Christians. This is 0.00005% of the total population, or to put it another way, in a city of 100,000 people there would be five. And that number would include some who say they believe in the authority of the Bible but are still not born-again.

No wonder that we have become a nation of Elijahs. We think we are the only ones left. More and more people are giving up going to church altogether and worship on their own at home instead. They are not weird. They just love God and care about the things of God, and they find that the established churches (whatever denomination) are failing them. 3 million are attending church, but the vast majority don't really care about the things of God in their hearts. Church to them is just a glorified social club. Truly exercised believers in these churches are few and far between.

But it is not all bad news. In Elijah's day, there were still true believers in the land. It is just that Elijah never knew about them:

1 Kings 19:18

Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him.

Today, God is still working. If He wasn't, He would have wrapped up this world long ago. We simply have difficulty seeing what is really happening.

I used to live in China, and it never ceases to amaze me that there were newcomers at every single service. It is customary for the minister (embarrassingly) to ask new attendees to stand up, and there were always some. They were then all given a little booklet with a catechism and details about the church services. When was the last time a newcomer came to our church? And, more to the point, what did we do about it?

And why should people come to our church? As opposed to any other church in the area? Do we think that we are the only true church and the others are all wrong? And how do people decide which church they go to? It usually ends up being a matter of taste in music, or friendliness of the members, or some other worldly reason like that.

I have recently been reading reviews on the internet of people going to various churches as a "mystery worshipper." What is a very good "Reformed" church in London with excellent teaching, was let down by the welcome and insistence afterwards that the visitor be dragged down the corridor by his wrist, against his will, to meet the pastor. In contrast, another review was of someone going to the annual Jehovah's Witness convention in Liverpool, and the reviewer was overwhelmed by the friendliness of the people, and their knowledge of their Bible. That shames most of us. This all goes to prove that first impressions do end up being important in the decision-making of a lot of people as to which church they attend.

In the UK today, we've lost it. The churches have become ghettos. Everyone is stuck in their ruts. Evangelism, to most people, is simply the means whereby we get people to swell the numbers in our own particular little church.

Most visitors who come through the doors of our church to a service, never come again. But we don't get too bothered by this. We think that it must be their fault. It doesn't cross our minds that visitors may not like the way we do things, or the music, or the style of worship, or the unfriendliness of the people, or a million other things. We just think

that people who only come once, don't come again because they aren't true believers like we are. We can't see beyond our own group, our own church. Our own church has become God's kingdom on earth to us.

Humanly speaking, this church situation in the UK today can never change. Consequently there is no real witness for Jesus Christ anywhere in the land today. We need to pray for a change. We ourselves need to change. We can't change things, but with God, all things are possible.

Every Friday evening at the church where I lived in China there was an "English Fellowship" which I attend regularly, simply because it was the only English meeting I could get to. I had no choice, like I would have in the UK. The meeting was usually frequented by young Chinese wanting to learn English. I have to say that it left a lot to be desired. Every week they had a "worship band" playing modern "worship songs," followed by a talk in English by various speakers. Depending on the speaker, some messages were good whilst others were absolutely terrible. And they used the New International Version of the Bible, which I wouldn't recommend. If that was a church in the UK, would all of that put us off going? If it didn't quite match all our requirements? Most people I know in the UK would never go to a meeting like that and go elsewhere instead – somewhere where things were, to them, a lot better. And there would be no shortage of alternative churches to go to. But I went to this meeting because I had to. It was the only meeting in English anywhere near me. So I made the most of what I had. But the thing is, I could help. I could be there to gently lead these poor young people into the right way. Someone needed to teach them. Should I have just leave them there to imbibe all sorts of wrong teaching, just because I don't agree with the way they did things and would have preferred to have gone to a far better church if there had been one nearby?

There are too many churches in the UK. We are spoilt for choice. Praise the Lord He is closing a lot of them down these days. That's a good thing. Far too many people in the UK are so involved in their own church "ghetto" that they can't or won't help other Christians in other church situations, because their churches, well, they're not quite as good as ours.

There is such a need out there, both in other churches and also amongst those who have given up going to church altogether and are worshipping at home. Yes, I agree it is very difficult to find out where the need is, but it is there. God will lead us to it, if we pray to Him to show us where it is. And then, if we all do this, we can be the Lord's instruments to completely transform the church in this land.

The days of institutional, denominational, minister-controlled churches are over. But maybe we individual true believers have been put where we are for a purpose. We shouldn't think that we must move home because there is no church in our area to our exacting specifications. I was given that advice once, and it is wrong advice. Instead, start praying that the Lord may show us the spiritual needs in our community, where we are now. Wherever we are, there is a huge need right now. Let us make the most of our opportunities in our particular situation, and stop pursuing the perfect church. It doesn't exist.

Why The Church Isn't Growing

We go to church week by week, and we listen to the preaching. Hopefully, we will be going to the church in our area where the best preaching can be found, and by that I don't mean the church with the most eloquent orator, but a place where the preacher sticks to the Scripture, and always tries to apply it by answering the question, "How then shall we live?"

Now, I'm sure we understand that, however good the preacher is, we shouldn't worship him. He's a fallen man like we all are. So, I'm not suggesting for one moment that we should exalt preachers in any way, I'm just saying we ought to be going to where the preaching is the most useful for our spiritual growth.

But, let's suppose our regular preacher is away one Sunday and a visitor is in the pulpit instead. Well, we shouldn't judge him or compare him to our regular preacher, because if we did that, we would more than likely be disappointed. Rather, we must at least try to get something out of what he said, even if he falls short of the high standard we are used to. After all, he's only a visitor, and it was only for one week.

But then our regular preacher, God forbid, falls ill, and has to take an extended time away from the preaching. Or maybe he leaves altogether because he's had a "call" somewhere else (usually somewhere bigger and better than our tinpot little church). And we begin to get visiting preachers every week on a regular basis instead. Some are good, others are poor. But some are really, really poor, so much so, that, even though we know we should never judge anyone, the only word we can legitimately use about them is "bad." And we begin to wonder why on earth someone like that ever gets to preach in the first place.

As we investigate this, we soon discover that they are all on some kind of "list" of preachers held centrally. Every area and denomination has them. And the crazy thing is that, even though they're so bad, they have no shortage of preaching engagements. And they get paid – tax free, in cash – for every one of them.

Churches without a pastor often complain that there are so few people they can call on to preach for them. So they invariably resort to one of these “lists.” It doesn’t matter how bad they are, just as long as they can fill the pulpit. Hence, once someone is on the “list” the doors are open wide for them to use their “ministry” to its fullest extent. Even if they’re rubbish.

But how does anyone get onto one of these “lists” to start with? That’s a very good question, and I’m not sure any of us really know the answer to it. Maybe they’re people in the area known to have had some kind of formal theological education. Or maybe they’ve been born and brought up in the church and have managed to get themselves well-known in church circles. However, I would suggest that most of them are on the list simply because they fancy themselves in the pulpit, *and have put their own name forward.*

And that is absolutely the last thing any of us should ever do. That is the height of arrogance. Who are we to put ourselves forward for anything? We’re sinners. That’s all we are.

Now, onto another subject. What do we do when we decide as a church to hold an evangelistic campaign? Maybe the church always holds one once a year, or maybe it’s just a one-off special event. Either way, how do we go about organising it? Well, we never dream of doing it ourselves. Rather, we usually bring in a well-known evangelist from outside to do it for us. Of course, he will charge. And we’ll have to book him well in advance, because these well-known evangelists are booked up, sometimes years in advance. And then the event comes and goes and, well, the evangelist was OK, but not quite as good as we thought he’d be. He’s taken the money, but the church hasn’t actually received any new members as a result.

But, I would like to question whether any of this is the way we should be operating at all. Should we really have to put up with “bad” preachers? And is the only way to evangelise our community really to get a well-known evangelist at great expense from far away to do it for us? I really don’t think this is the way the Lord wants us to go about things. “Bad” preachers, far from encouraging people to come to church, turn them off. And the results of bringing a well-known evangelist in, is usually negligible.

Wherever we are in the world, this is the place where God has put us in His providence. We might not particularly like being here. We might want to be somewhere else, but circumstances in the Lord's providence have put us where we are. And until the Lord through circumstances moves us somewhere else, we must realise that this is exactly where we He wants us to be.

So, who are the people that God wants to evangelise our area? Someone from miles away? No! Who are the people that God has in mind to fill our pulpits every week, to build up the faith of the Christians in our area? People from a Bible college many miles away? No! Who are the people God has put in our area in His providence to perform both of these functions? US!

But, we may argue, "I'm not trained to evangelise, I've never been trained to preach, I've never been to Bible college." Well, that's probably a good thing.

Do we know the Lord? Do we love the Bible? Do we have the Holy Spirit within us to guide us and to lead us into the truth? If the answer to all these questions is YES, then we've got all the qualifications necessary for the job.

And what about evangelism? It's the same thing. We know the gospel, don't we? Then let's communicate it to others. Easy.

The "bad" preacher and the outside evangelist should not be preaching in our area – the "bad" preacher because he so obviously hasn't got the Holy Spirit, and the outside evangelist because it's not his patch. Tell him to go home, and stop exalting himself as some great thing.

We are all God's chosen vessels to do His work, no matter how inadequate we feel. So let's accept our responsibilities, and not take the easy way out and try to fob them off onto somebody else.

We need to start doing things in the way God wants us to do them, with the people God has placed in our area, and in the power of the Holy Spirit's guidance. Then we will see real, spiritual church growth (which is not necessarily the same as numerical growth), because God will be with us.

IV

Modern False Gospels

Appeal to Disillusionment

Take a look at the following Statement of Faith (it is not important where I got it from):

“We believe:

** 1. The Bible, consisting of the books of the Old and New Testaments but excluding the apocrypha, is the inspired Word of God and is the infallible, all sufficient authority for faith and practice.*

** 2. There is one True and Living God who is the eternally self-existent “I AM” and who has also revealed Himself to be One being in Three Persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

** 3. In the perfect deity and humanity of the Lord Jesus Christ, His virgin birth and bodily resurrection.*

** 4. The Biblical account of creation.*

** 5. Man, who was created in God’s image without sin and given dominion over creation, fell by voluntary transgression as a result of which all men are born with a sinful nature.*

** 6. Salvation is through faith alone in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born sinless of a virgin, lived a sinless life, was shown approved of God by His miraculous ministry, died once for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, raised from the dead in bodily form on the third day and triumphantly ascended to heaven. Through His blood we have redemption.*

** 7. The New Birth is an instantaneous operation of the Holy Spirit upon repentance toward God and the exercise of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.*

** 8. Baptism by immersion in water is enjoined upon all who have repented, believed with all their hearts and confessed that Jesus Christ is Saviour and Lord.*

** 9. In the person of the Holy Spirit, His work of regeneration, baptism following the new birth, empowering, indwelling, and sanctification of the believer.*

** 10. In The Holy Spirit’s enabling gifts (with fruit confirming) to the members of the Church individually as He chooses.*

** 11. In the true Christian Church, which is comprised exclusively of all who by virtue of repentance from sin and faith in Christ are born again of God’s Holy Spirit and have become part of Christ’s body. The identity of the Body of Christ on earth is primarily perceived through the local church.*

** 12. We strongly confess the local church to be sovereign and autonomous. At the same time we reject sectarianism and divisiveness as great evils.*

** 13. In the spiritual unity of all who are born of God as opposed to unbiblical "so called" interfaith/ ecumenical unity.*

** 14. In the pre-millennial personal and visible return of the Lord Jesus Christ and the prophetic purposes of God for Israel and the Jews.*

** 15. That the Breaking of Bread is enjoined on all believers until the Lord comes and is a representation only of his atoning body and blood.*

** 16. In the final judgement of the living and the dead by Christ.*

** 17. In the everlasting conscious punishment of the wicked and unrepentant.*

** 18. In the everlasting conscious bliss of the redeemed."*

What do we think of that? I, personally, agree wholeheartedly with 12 of the articles, but have problems with articles 7,8,10,11,12 and 14. It is the Confession of Faith of Arminian, antipaedobaptist, non-cessationist, congregationalist, premillennialist Zionists.

I suggest that this Statement of Faith would be agreed to by most Pentecostals, Charismatics, most churches of a Brethren persuasion, and most of the churches in the U.S.A. and China. That is a lot of people – in fact, the vast majority of Bible-believing, evangelical Christians today.

It is becoming obvious that the church is declining in our time, as either false doctrines are coming into the church, or worse, people are being taught that doctrine is no longer important at all. To counteract this decline, this statement has been produced to bring back these fundamental beliefs into the forefront of church life once more.

There are many people who are excellent at telling us about the decline in the church, and how we should stand up against it. They are very discerning – and correct – about this, but, as an alternative to the status quo, they also then promote their false views.

I have come across this before. I was attracted by the British Reformed Fellowship after its formation in 1990. They were excellent at alerting us to the decline in the Evangelical churches of today. They certainly attracted people like me. But then they offered the false doctrines of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America, with their denial of the "Covenant of Works," their peculiar view of divorce and remarriage

and so on, as an alternative, and expect us to imbibe it all in without thinking.

It all sounds so good at first, because the church IS declining generally, and things DO need to be done, disillusioned people in the church DO need to be catered for, rather than isolated on their own. But the whole way these renewal movements work is by a logical fallacy – the “appeal to disillusionment.”

Are we disillusioned with the state of the church today? Is this false doctrine creeping in? Is that false doctrine creeping in? YES!!! We say. Someone understands me at last!! It is not just me on my own against the church establishment!! And so people are groomed and led into an umbrella organisation for disillusioned souls. What wonderful fellowship they receive now!! Like-minded people to talk about these things freely with!!

Then, when they are fully caught in the net, they get fed the equally false doctrines of their captors. This is very sad.

Are these people leading others astray deliberately? Or are they true believers, but mistaken, and inadvertently dragging people along with them into false beliefs which they themselves genuinely consider to be the truth? I am quite happy, in charity, to believe the latter. But then we must ask ourselves, How should we behave? The Lord leads every individual one of His children into the truth down separate, unique paths. Some are led into the truth about certain things sooner than others, and as long as we are on this earth true Christians will always think and believe different things from each other, although if we are truly born-again of the Spirit of God we are all heading in the same direction. So again, I ask, How should we behave? Should we try to persuade people of our beliefs at all? We are convinced that our beliefs are true now, otherwise we wouldn't believe them; and we long for others to agree with us! But we could be wrong. We have all imbibed false teaching in the past, before we were corrected. Maybe the Lord is leading us through falsehood for a time, in order to teach us the truth in a more powerful way later on. He sometimes does that.

Of course we should live our lives in the light of what the Lord has revealed to us at any one time – i.e. in what we believe to be the truth

at the time. But this may well be different from what everybody else around us believes. Our own “Statement of Faith,” if you like, might be unique to us. But we should all be willing to be changeable as the Lord leads us into more of the truth through His Word. We have the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth, and He is the one we must be taught by. But what do we do when a movement appears such as I have described, which has so much truth in it, but also at the same time leads people astray on their own pet issues? Try to join these groups, and we will eventually be ostracised by them because we don’t embrace every last thing that they teach. Don’t join these groups and we will continue to be isolated.

1 John 2:27

But the anointing which ye have received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any man teach you: but as the same anointing teacheth you of all things, and is truth, and is no lie, and even as it hath taught you, ye shall abide in him.

Hypercalvinism

“*Hypercalvinism*” is a term of derision that is used in evangelical circles, but when people who use it are asked for a definition, they are not so forthcoming with anything distinct, and many different answers are given. Here, we hope to clarify the several different positions taken by evangelicals, to try to ascertain the correct position on each of the main issues involved, and to ask whether the term “*Hypercalvinism*” can truly be used, and if so, to whom it really refers.

There are several issues involved, the main ones being:

- [1.]** Whether it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ.
- [2.]** Whether the gospel ought to be freely offered to all men everywhere as a promise of salvation conditioned on faith and repentance.
- [3.]** Whether God loves or “desires to save” or “wills to save” all men everywhere.

There are at least five different church groupings within evangelicalism that take different positions on these issues. These can be summarised as follows:

- [A.]** denies [1.], [2.] and [3.] = position of the Gospel Standard Baptists
- [B.]** affirms [1.] but denies [2.] and [3.] = position of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America
- [C.]** affirms [1.] and [2.] but denies [3.] = the true position.
- [D.]** affirms [1.], [2.] and [3.] = position of John Murray, Banner of Truth.
- [E.]** affirms [1.], [2.] and [3.] = position of John Wesley, Arminianism.

Now let us look at these positions in turn:

[A.]

This position denies all the above points [1.], [2.] and [3.]. This is the position of the Gospel Standard Baptists and many Dutch Reformed churches. No less than six of the thirty-five Articles of the Gospel Standard Baptists are relevant here. Let's take a look at them:

“Article 24. We believe that the invitations of the gospel, being spirit and life (that is, under the influence of the Holy Spirit), are intended only for those who have been made by the blessed Spirit to feel their lost state as sinners and their need of Christ as their Saviour, and to repent of and forsake their sins.”

Here we are told that the “*invitations of the gospel*” are only to be preached to those who have already been regenerated by the Holy Ghost **before** they hear the gospel. This regeneration is manifested by the fact that they are “thirsting,” “hungering,” “heavy-laden” etc. These people are known as “sensible sinners” and will always respond to the gospel when they hear it because God has already regenerated them and therefore granted them the repentance and faith necessary to savingly embrace Christ. Therefore, in this system, no-one is ever condemned for rejecting the gospel.

Passages such as Isaiah 55:1 or Matthew 11:28 are thought of as only applying to those already regenerate and thirsting after spiritual things, i.e. only the elect:

Isaiah 55:1

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.

Matthew 11:28

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

However, these passages are referring to *unregenerate* people thirsting after *carnal* things, i.e. things that are not bread and that satisfy not (Isaiah 55:2). Indeed the call is to the wicked (v.7). The call is therefore to these people to thirst, buy and eat good things, spiritual things (which by nature they can't do).

How then are the elect saved from amongst this mass of people thirsting after all sorts of things but the truth? It is **through** the hearing of the gospel that they are saved. In the preaching of the gospel, the elect come to embrace the promises and the reprobate come to harden themselves against the promises. This is the true preaching of the gospel. It is the door to the house of salvation. The elect will enter, because God regenerates them and grants them the conditions required (i.e. faith and repentance) **at the time of hearing**. The reprobate may hang around for a while but will always end up walking away.

Only **in the way of** duty is salvation to be received. All men have the duty to repent and believe in Christ. Only **in the way of** doing this are they saved. Of course they could come to Christ many years **after** hearing the gospel, so we should never give up on anyone, but never is it possible to come to Christ **before** or **without** hearing it (the case of elect infants and imbeciles excluded, as these are a special case incapable of being outwardly called, and will be dealt with later).

The man with the withered hand is our example here:

Mark 3:5

And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other.

To stretch forth his hand was something physically impossible for him to do. Yet upon Christ's command, he does so and is healed **in the way of doing so**. Similarly, it is **in the way of repentance and faith** – something impossible for the natural man to do – that we are saved. i.e. only **in the way of** repentance and faith do the elect find that God gives them the repentance and faith necessary to fulfil the command, and not before. The reprobate are condemned by the same gospel because God displays their inability as they reject it accordingly.

The gospel **IS** the power of God unto salvation, not regeneration at an earlier point in time.

Romans 1:16

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.

People who believe that regeneration is *before* the preaching of the gospel would call any other position than their own “mediate regeneration,” i.e. regeneration through something other than a direct act of God on the soul (e.g. a response in the sinner to a gospel call), which they would repudiate. But so would we. This would be the position of [D.] and [E.] to be dealt with below, and is the opposite error. We agree that regeneration is immediate, performed directly by God alone, but, ordinarily, *only at the moment of hearing the gospel*, not *before* and not *after*.

“Article 26. We deny duty-faith and duty-repentance - these terms signifying that it is every man’s duty spiritually and savingly to repent and believe. We deny also that there is any capability in man by nature to any spiritual good whatever. So that we reject the doctrine that men in a state of nature should be exhorted to believe in or turn to God.”

This is the denial of what they term “duty-faith” and “duty-repentance” – that is the truth that it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ for salvation (i.e. point [1.] in the introduction above).

It is rightly pointed out that there is no “*capability in man by nature to any spiritual good whatever*,” but it is wrongly concluded from this that men in a state of nature should therefore *not* be exhorted to believe in or turn to God. Just like the Arminian (position [E.] below), they equate responsibility with ability. In this case, they say that natural man *is not* capable of responding to the gospel therefore he *is not* responsible for doing so, whereas the Arminian says that natural man *is* capable of responding therefore he *is* responsible.

However, the truth is that God *can* command men to do things they have not got the ability to perform. Just because the non-elect have no ability in themselves to repent and believe in Christ (and for that matter neither has God decreed that they should ever repent and believe in Christ), nevertheless they are still commanded to repent and believe in Christ *despite their inability*. It is argued that God would never command men to do something that they have not got the ability to perform as this would make God a mocker of men, but this does not follow because:

Ecclesiastes 7:29

God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.

When God created the world He made man upright, but man fell in Adam his federal head.

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.16

The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity; all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in his first transgression.

Just because man has made himself unable any longer to keep the law of God (let alone repent and believe in Christ), that does not change his duty towards God:

Acts 17:24-27

God that made the world and all things therein.... hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth.... That they should seek the Lord.

Acts 17:30

And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent....

Acts 20:21

And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house, Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

For example, if we were given some money by a rich landowner to build a house, and instead of building the house we spent it all on a luxurious holiday somewhere and had no money left afterwards to build the house, it would still be our duty to build it with what we had been given, even if we had squandered all those resources elsewhere.

All men are responsible for their not being able to repent and believe in Christ despite their current inability to do these things. It is not God that is at fault in any way for this, because He originally made man upright (even though Adam's fall was within God's eternal decree).

Unregenerate men will be punished by God justly for their unbelief and unrepentant ways.

“Article 29. While we believe the gospel is to be preached in or proclaimed to all the world, we deny offers of grace; that is to say, that the gospel is to be offered indiscriminately to all.”

Here we see that not only are **commands** to all men to repent and believe denied, but **offers** are as well.

They argue that:

- (1.) God only loves the elect (which is a true statement),
 - (2.) God has not provided salvation for the non-elect (which is also a true statement);
- therefore* (they falsely conclude) the non-elect can't be offered a salvation that is not available for them.

As we shall be talking more of the “offer” of the gospel when speaking about point [B.] below, we shall forego it here and pass on.

“Article 32. We believe that it would be unsafe, from the brief records we have of the way in which the apostles, under the immediate direction of the Lord, addressed their hearers in certain special cases and circumstances, to derive absolute and universal rules for ministerial addresses in the present day under widely different circumstances. And we further believe that an assumption that others have been inspired as the apostles were has led to the grossest errors among both Romanists and professed Protestants.

Article 33. Therefore, that for ministers in the present day to address unconverted persons, or indiscriminately all in a mixed congregation, calling upon them to savingly repent, believe, and receive Christ, or perform any other acts dependent upon the new creative power of the Holy Ghost, is, on the one hand, to imply creature power, and, on the other, to deny the doctrine of special redemption.

Article 34. We believe that any such expressions as convey to the hearers the belief that they possess a certain power to flee to the Saviour, to close in with Christ, to receive Christ, while in an unregenerate state, so that unless they do thus close with Christ, etc., they shall perish, are untrue, and must therefore be rejected. And we

further believe that we have no Scripture warrant to take the exhortations in the Old Testament intended for the Jews in national covenant with God, and apply them in a spiritual and saving sense to unregenerate men.”

All these three Articles hang together. Again we see a denial that the gospel is to be preached to unregenerate men (or indiscriminately to a mixed congregation) because, to holders of this position, it implies “creature-power,” i.e. it implies that it is within the power of the creature to respond, and would be dismissed by them as Arminianism. This implication is not true, as explained above.

The really worrying aspect seen here though, is the denial of the use of Scripture as a guide to how we should live our lives today. In this particular instance it is the preaching of the gospel which is in view, but the danger is that this argument could be used with regards almost anything, and so all the major truths of the Bible could be denied thereby. We would agree thoroughly that God doesn’t work in men any more by direct inspiration. Now we have a complete canon of Scripture, any direct way of God’s revealing His will to men is no longer necessary. However, it is very dangerous to then use this truth to say that vast areas of Scripture are not relevant to us any more. We can’t use the argument that all direct means of communication by God have now ceased to deny that Scripture is our guide and example in life, because, on the contrary, we have nothing else to guide us – because all other direct means have now ceased. To use this argument to conclude that we can no longer preach the gospel in the way the apostles did, is just an excuse to get rid of the clear passages in Scripture where the apostles command all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ for salvation.

[B.]

This position affirms point [1.] but denies points [2.] and [3.]. This is the position of the Protestant Reformed Churches of America (PRC). Seeing the error of position [A.] in denying “duty-faith” and “duty-repentance,” they would indeed preach that it is the duty of all men everywhere to repent and believe in Christ, and their gospel consists of the command that all men everywhere should do so. They see no problem with **commanding** men to do something they do not have the

ability to perform, for the reasons given above. However, they would not preach the gospel as a “*well-meant offer*” of salvation to all men, because they again believe that there is no salvation available for the non-elect, and therefore any offer would not be “well-meant” to them.

Consequently we see that, according to the holders of position [B.], an *offer* to repent and believe in Christ implies (to them) power in the creature to respond, which would immediately be classed by them as Arminianism and dismissed accordingly. A *command*, however, is seen by them to be quite orthodox.

This whole position actually sounds very plausible, as on the one hand the denial of “duty-faith” and “duty-repentance” is rejected, yet at the same time the awkward idea of “offering” salvation to men whom it is not for (i.e. the non-elect) is also solved by denying that the gospel is a “well-meant” offer to them, but rather a bare command instead. To make this argument more powerful, it is true that the Bible nowhere uses the word “offer” or “invitation” with regards the gospel. There are passages that may appear as such on first glance, but actually are bare commands:

Isaiah 45:22

Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.

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.

Ecclesiastes 12:13

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

Matthew 11:28

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Acts 2:38,39

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Acts 3:19

Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.

None of these are “invitations” or “offers” but commands. The words “offer” and “invitation” are not wrong if used properly, but it is best not to use them because they immediately produce wrong thoughts of God in people’s minds. When we *invite* people to a party, for example, we automatically assume without thinking that we *want* all those we invite to come. This is the usual use of the word “invite” in modern English. Similarly with the word *offer*. Therefore to use these words in relation to God is misleading, not because the words in and of themselves are wrong – the invitation of a king for example is a command: you had better attend or you get your head chopped off! – but because of the implication the use of them produces in people’s minds today. People will automatically think that all those God *invites* to salvation He *wants* to come, in line with the modern everyday use of the word. This is the mistake. We must not present God as an impotent being who either wants to save all men but doesn’t (which is position [D.] below) or, one who cannot or will not save them unless they respond, which is Arminianism (position [E.], below).

This position [B.] therefore is very convincing, and a breath of fresh air for anyone who has become disillusioned with mainstream Evangelicalism and its quasi-Arminianism. It is so close to the truth. But there is a problem with it.

The PRC suffered a split in 1953, when nearly two-thirds of the total membership left the church. In 1950, before the split, the PRC Synod provisionally adopted a “*Brief Declaration of Principles*,” which was fully adopted at the Synod of 1951. The relevant passages of interest are as follows:

“That the preaching of the gospel is not a gracious offer of salvation on the part of God to all men, nor a conditional offer to all that are born in the historical dispensation of the covenant, that is, to all that are baptised, but an oath of God that He will infallibly lead all the elect unto salvation and eternal glory through faith.”

“This preaching of the particular promise is promiscuous to all that hear the gospel, with the command, not a condition, to repent and believe.”

In April 1951 a PRC minister said from the pulpit to a mixed congregation of elect and non-elect alike: “God promises every one of you that if you believe, you will be saved.” This caused turmoil in the church and eventually in 1953 those who took the side of this minister were put out of the church, and those who remained kept the name “Protestant Reformed Churches.”

The result of all this is such that, for the PRC today to justify their separate position, they have to take a stand that denies that the gospel is a **general conditional promise of salvation** to all men. This would be their definition of an **offer**.

Therefore the PRC would be able to say to an indiscriminate audience “*Repent and believe the gospel*” (which would be a **command**), but they cannot say “*If you repent and believe, you will be saved*” (which is a **general conditional promise**, i.e. an **offer**), because, to them, this implies power in the creature to perform the conditions.

In truth, there is actually no difference between a command and a general conditional promise. Both are legitimate expressions of the same gospel message, because it is **in the way of** repenting and believing in Christ that God saves His elect by granting them the faith and repentance required **at the moment of hearing**. So the proclaiming of a general conditional promise to all men everywhere is not wrong as it doesn't imply that God has a salvation waiting for the non-elect if only they would respond, neither does it imply they have the ability to do so. It merely calls them to do their duty despite their inability.

So, we see again, like holders of position [A.], they make the mistake of believing that God grants regeneration (and therefore the faith and

repentance required) in the elect **before** giving them the gospel at a later date:

Herman Hoeksema, founder of the PRC, in Reformed Dogmatics, chapter on Regeneration explaining 1 Peter 1:23, says:

“And when the apostle teaches here that regeneration takes place through the living Word itself, that is, through Christ, it certainly is not proper to replace that living Word simply by the preaching of the gospel. It is true that the preaching of the Word stands in connection with regeneration in the broader sense of the word: for without the proclamation of the gospel it is impossible that regeneration will ever become conscious in the people of God.”

He also says in the same chapter:

“In that deepest sense, regeneration is not even as such a matter of his own experience, seeing that it does not take place within, but below the threshold of his consciousness. It is therefore independent of age and can take place in the smallest infants. We may even take for granted that in the sphere of the covenant of God He usually regenerates His elect children from infancy.”

Here we also see that the PRC believe that it is actually God's ordinary way of working to regenerate His elect from the womb or infancy, particularly those born in the line of the Covenant. However, in the Bible, the ordinary way of regeneration is rather through the preaching of the gospel, otherwise, why bother preaching it at all if most believers are saved before hearing it anyway? The particular cases of infants and imbeciles are mentioned by the Westminster Confession:

Westminster Confession of Faith 10:3

Elect infants, dying in infancy, are regenerated and saved by Christ through the Spirit, who worketh when, and where, and how he pleaseth. So also are all other elect persons, who are incapable of being outwardly called by the ministry of the word.

The special case is for those **incapable** of being called by the ministry of the Word, not the other way around, as the PRC would have us believe if most of the elect are actually regenerated in the womb or as infant children of believers. Ordinarily, gospel preaching is the usual means of salvation. We are saved as truth is revealed and comes home

to us as we embrace it. We can of course only embrace it by God's Spirit working in us.

Romans 10:14,15

How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things.

Another objection is that when such general conditional promises are used, it is very likely for the hearer to conclude that he has got the ability to fulfil the conditions required in and of himself, without grace. This is indeed the case and many people do think that they are saved when they are not. This is what the parable of the sower indicates will happen. The natural man in and of himself will never truly repent or truly believe, just as he will never keep the law of God, but he could well fool himself into thinking that he has done these things. The command to repent and believe is good, but if people believe they can do these things in their own strength they have got it wrong.

Gospel preaching will therefore manifest three types of persons:

- (1.) those who don't respond,
- (2.) those who seem to respond outwardly, but think they can do these things in their own strength,
- (3.) those who respond fully and properly, because God has given them the faith and repentance required to do so.

We need to distinguish those in group (2.) from those in group (3.). Hence it is always a very useful exercise to look for marks of grace to discern true believers from hypocrites, something the PRC seem very reluctant to do. Experimental religion is not practised in their circles.

So we see that there is no problem as such with proclaiming the gospel as a general conditional promise to all men, so long as we neither imply **ability** in man to respond by himself [E.], nor present a God **longing** or **desiring** salvation in any way without doing anything about it [D.]. The PRC believe that this is not possible using general conditional promises, but only possible using a command.

[C.]

This position is what I consider is the true position. It affirms [1.] and [2.] but denies [3.] above. This position sits firmly between the two “railway tracks” of, on the one hand denying general conditional promises and believing in a regeneration *before* hearing the gospel (i.e. [A.] and [B.]), and on the other hand believing that the only way we can preach a free offer of salvation to all men properly is to believe that God has some sort of desire for the salvation of all men (i.e. [D.] and [E.]). We must stay within these “railway tracks” or we will go astray.

God has His elect. They are a fixed number, and God knows who they are. We don't. We must preach commands or general conditional promises freely to all men indiscriminately, and all the elect (and no more and no less) will be saved *through* responding to this, by God's regenerating them and granting them faith and repentance, which is the only way they can respond. This is the true “free offer of the gospel,” and is the ordinary means of salvation. It is an offer free to all men. If they believe, they surely shall be saved. Indeed if they *could* and *would* believe of their own strength (which they can't and won't, because of their inability and unwillingness to do so due to their fallen nature in Adam) they would indeed be saved. So the gospel, in and of itself taken in isolation, is genuine good news to all men, if they would fulfil the conditions. The non-elect will never be willing or able to fulfil these conditions, and God knows that. The elect will fulfil them, because God will regenerate them and grant them the faith and repentance to do so. The PRC say that the gospel is a “*savour of death unto death*” to the reprobate (quoting 2 Corinthians 2:16), but that's not quite true as such. In and of itself the gospel is always a conditional promise of good news – however, the *effect* in the reprobate will always be of death unto death, because they can never fulfil the conditions, neither will God ever grant the conditions to them.

The important point to note here (to distinguish position [C.] from position [D.]), is that the true free offer of the gospel is not based in any way on a perceived *desire* of God for the salvation of all men, but it is rather based solely on the *command to preach* the gospel to every creature.

[D.]

This position, just like Arminianism [E.], affirms points [1.], [2.] and [3.], and is the predominant view in most general so-called “Calvinistic” evangelical churches today. People who hold to this position are Calvinists in name, but in reality their theology is wrong because they base it on a *desire*, or at the very least a “*delight*” within God for the salvation of all men. They can’t bear to believe the truth that God does not actually love all men or desire the salvation of all men, so they invent ways of trying to pretend that God does have some sort of love for them all, even though they are constrained by their lip service to Calvinism to believe in a limited atonement. They would have God pleading with sinners to come to him. They would say that God “is willing” and able to save sinners, the onus being on the sinner to come. They would invent a “love” in God that embraces the non-elect. These things cannot be. God is indeed *able* to save all men if He wants to. This fact is not in doubt. However, God has decreed that only a fixed number shall display His mercy by being saved, whereas the rest display His justice by going to hell, which is the perfect punishment for their sins – indeed we should all be in hell if justice was the only attribute God wished to display. If one sinner is kept from hell, it is a marvellous thing. But to say that God “wills” or “is willing” that all men are saved is not true, because we know that there is a fixed number only who are saved, a number which can neither be increased or decreased.

Westminster Confession of Faith 3:3,4

III. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death.

IV. These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite, that it cannot be either increased or diminished.

As God decrees all things in this world that come to pass to His greatest glory, so fixed is the number of the elect that if one more or one less than this number were saved, His glory would not be displayed as much in them as a total body as in the fixed number that He has decreed. The fact that not all men are saved means that God either is unable to save them (which cannot be as He is Almighty) or is unwilling. God therefore *must be unwilling* to save the ones He has

decreed not to save. That is the bottom line. To say that He “wills” all to be saved, but that His holy nature must (reluctantly) punish them in hell if they do not repent and believe makes God a schizophrenic (“*schizophrenia*” from the Greek “split mind”) with a will opposed to His nature.

A popular way of trying to get Calvinists to believe that God wants all men to be saved is to attribute two “wills” to God. Now there is a correct way of looking at this, although the use of the word “*will*” is rather misleading. Firstly it is said that God has a “*decretive will*” or “*secret will*,” which is what He decrees, one aspect of which is that there is a fixed number of elect and no more that will be saved (although this fact is not secret, because we know about it. Only the number and names of the elect are hidden from us). This we are all agreed upon. Secondly it is said that God has a “*preceptive will*” or “*revealed will*,” which is simply the rule of life for the believer, which is the moral law, which is summarily comprehended in the Ten Commandments. This also includes the commandment given to all men to repent and believe in Christ. Now it is argued that because God has given this rule to all men, He therefore “delights” when men keep this law, i.e. He “delights” that men repent and turn to him, i.e. He “wants” or “desires” all men to do so, hence it is said that God “wants” all men to be saved. This is not a logical train of thought, and takes what was originally the correct concept (although poor terminology) of a “*preceptive will*” in God too far. God indeed has given all men a rule of life, which is the moral law, and indeed all men are commanded to repent and turn to Christ. But God knows what He wants, and performs all His pleasure (“*desire*”), sometimes overruling “*right*” with “*wrong*.” For example, the crucifixion of Christ was truly a wicked act for which the perpetrators are fully responsible and will be punished accordingly; but God allowed it to come to pass because He ordained such an evil act to be the means of salvation for His people. In any case, to say that God “desires” or “delights in” anything is really a misnomer because He does not have like passions as we have (Acts 14:15, Westminster Confession of Faith 2:1), but it is possible to use the word when talking about the will of God in that God “desires” all that He wills. He cannot will anything that He does not “desire.”

Isaiah 46:9,10

Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

Job 23:13

But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth.

God wants some men to display His wrath, e.g. Pharaoh:

Romans 9:17,18

For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth. Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.

Romans 9:22-24

What if God, willing to shew his wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction: And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory, Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles?

Another twist that is attempted by proponents of position [D.] is to say that Christ has two wills, a divine and a human; in His divine nature He only wants the elect to be saved, but in His human nature He wants all men to be saved. However, that's not true either. Christ, being one Person, only has one will. It is a separate will from God the Father and from God the Holy Spirit, otherwise His sacrifice would not have been voluntary. However, in every point at all times (even in Gethsemane), all three wills of all three Persons of the Trinity work in complete harmony. Christ was no schizophrenic with two opposing wills struggling inside Him.

God cannot have a "desire" that He does not fulfil. This may be possible with men, but can't be so with God. God commands the reprobate to repent and turn to him (indeed genuinely offering them salvation if they should do so), knowing full well that they don't have

the ability to do so themselves, neither is He ever going to give them that ability (even though He could if He wanted to). Therefore the whole purpose of preaching the gospel to the reprobate is purely to show, display or magnify their guilt before God. This is the effect of what is otherwise a general conditional promise of good news for them. Similarly He says to them, “Keep the law and you will be saved,” knowing that they cannot keep the law and that He is not going to give them the ability to do that either.

Again, many people may object by saying that this is God “mocking” men by commanding them to do something knowing that they will never be able to do it. However nothing could be further from the truth. Man is fallen and no man deserves to be saved from:

Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 29

...most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell-fire for ever.

If God sent all of us into hell for ever it would be just and perfect and right for Him to do so, without demanding anything from us or doing anything unjust at all. By nature we are all fallen in Adam. So anyone who is saved from hell is saved by grace alone, they certainly don't deserve it. In fact it is the people who say that God desires the salvation of all men that are the ones who make God a mocker. If God does desire the salvation of all men then the reprobate are mocked by God because He supposedly “desires” their salvation, but knows they can't save themselves and neither is He going to save them. The truth is that those who refuse the gospel are not mocked by God at all because He has no “desire” to save them in the first place, neither have they any desire to be saved. They get exactly what they justly deserve.

Another argument used is that there are passages in the Bible that appear to have God longing for the repentance of sinners, e.g.

Psalms 81:13

Oh that my people had hearkened unto me, and Israel had walked in my ways.

However, we run into serious difficulties if we start to think that God “longs” for anything when He has the power to do something about it but doesn't use that power. God will perform all His pleasure. All

things work in His own providence to His greatest glory. Nothing happens in this world without it being decreed of God for His own glory. So He can't "long" for anything that He doesn't immediately bring to pass to fulfil that "longing." There are no unfulfilled longings in God.

Isaiah 46:10

My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure.

Also it is argued that there are passages in the Bible which state that God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, e.g.:

Ezekiel 33:11

Say unto them, As I live, saith the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked turn from his way and live: turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

It is commonly thought that the opposite of God's pleasure is His sadness. God can't be sad for the same reason that He can't have unfulfilled longings. The opposite of God's pleasure is His anger, not His sadness.

This position also effectively puts God's act of regeneration *after* the sinner's choice to repent and believe, which is really Arminianism (i.e. [E.]) in disguise. Holders of this position would deny this of course, and call themselves "Calvinists," trying to make us believe that their position is the same as [C.], i.e. that God regenerates *in the way of* faith and repentance. However, in practice, in their preaching of the gospel, they go too far in emphasising the sinner's required response in order to try to push the sinner into the kingdom of God; to urge him, plead with him and beseech him with earnest overtures to embrace Christ. In this, they aren't relying on the power of the Holy Ghost to regenerate at all, but, conversely, the more they urge and plead, the more they are persuading all who hear to believe that it is within their own power to embrace or reject Christ as they will. This view therefore tends towards filling the church with hypocrites who outwardly respond in their own power, without having inwardly responded through the power of the Holy Ghost working in them. The reprobate trying to please God in their own efforts is more abominable to God than if they hadn't bothered, even though it is always their duty to perform good works.

Understanding these simple principles shows clearly that position [D.] is wrong.

[E.]

This is Arminianism. It affirms points [1.], [2.] and [3.], but unlike [D.] it goes further in that it denies Calvinism completely, believing in a universal atonement, which “makes salvation possible” for everyone, now giving all men the “opportunity for salvation” if only they exercise their supposed free will to repent and believe in Christ. The idea is, that God deliberately restricts His power with regards the salvation of men, and leaves them completely free to choose or reject Him as they will. God really wants everyone to be saved (again an identical position to [D.]) but has left it up to them whether they choose him or not. So, in this case, regeneration is again only ever granted by God *after* the hearing of the gospel and responding to it. This is wrong, simply because if God had left us to our own supposed “free will,” no-one would ever be saved. Not one of us would choose God, we would always choose our sin. We are all slaves to sin. All we can do is sin. We are vile. God has not left us with “free will” to choose the good at all. Our own experience proves this to us if we are honest with ourselves. Salvation must be of the Lord, God must be the one who grants faith and repentance, there is no other way.

What is Hypercalvinism?

Now we have looked at all five views, we return to the question at the beginning: How do we define “*Hypercalvinism*”? Well, the fact is that:

1. Holders of position [E.] define [A.], [B.], [C.] and [D.] as all being Hypercalvinism.
2. Holders of position [D.] define [A.], [B.] and [C.] as Hypercalvinism and [E.] as Arminianism.
3. Holders of position [C.] define [A.] and [B.] as Hypercalvinism and [D.] and [E.] as Arminianism (This is the correct position).
4. Holders of position [B.] define [A.] as Hypercalvinism and [C.], [D.] and [E.] as Arminianism.

5. Holders of position [A.] define [B.], [C.], [D.] and [E.] as all being Arminianism.

So one's definition of "*Hypercalvinism*" (and "*Arminianism*" for that matter) is different depending on where one is on the above spectrum. So when one hears someone using either of these words, we must make sure we know where the person stands on these issues beforehand in order to know what they are talking about.

However, if we embrace the true position, i.e. [C.], we do have a marker that we can use, in that we can look for where regeneration logically comes (ordinarily) in each scheme of things. If regeneration is found to come *before* the preaching of the gospel (as in [A.] and [B.]) we can safely use the term "*Hypercalvinism*"; whereas if regeneration is found to come *after* the preaching of the gospel upon man's response to it (as in [D.] and [E.]), we can safely use the term "*Arminianism*". Only if regeneration ordinarily comes *upon* the preaching of the gospel, as a gift from God granting men faith and repentance to respond, do we begin to have a correct view of things.

Healing Ministries in the Church Today

On the church scene today are many, many so-called “healing ministries,” which claim to offer miraculous physical healing in the name of Jesus Christ to anyone who wants to avail themselves of it. Sadly, this would include many weak, vulnerable people for whom the usual channels, such as a doctor or hospital, have not worked for them.

The people who set up these “ministries” get their ideas mainly from personal experience, and they get what Biblical basis they have for their ministries from the following verses:

Isaiah 53:4,5

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

They believe, wrongly, that this talks about physical healing rather than spiritual healing from the burden of our sins.

I have a problem with all these so-called “healing ministries” in the church.

Firstly, it is important to note that every time we are healed, it is a miracle. I had a cold last week, but it cleared up. That in itself is a miracle, and we should be thankful.

Psalms 139:14

I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvellous are thy works; and that my soul knoweth right well.

However, when we talk about miracles in the context of a healing ministry, we are talking about extraordinary healing above and beyond the usual, natural means God normally uses. Of course, only God is free to do this:

Westminster Confession of Faith 5:3

God in His ordinary providence maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them at His pleasure.

Secondly, we must realise that no-one anywhere has miraculous powers to heal in this way, despite many churches claiming that people do. Jesus Christ had this power. Upon Christ healing a man born blind, the man said:

John 9:32

Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind.

Men having the power to physically heal miraculously was unheard of up to that point. Christ coming along and really having these powers was such a wonder. In fact, Christ called these abilities of His, “*signs and wonders,*” which were only there for one purpose, namely to point to Him as being the Messiah:

John 6:26

Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles [i.e. what the miracles were pointing to, namely, that He was the Messiah], but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled.

For most people who came to Christ, all they wanted was the physical healing. They couldn't care less about His teaching. Of ten lepers Christ cleansed, only one came back to give thanks:

Luke 17:15-18

And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at his feet, giving him thanks: and he was a Samaritan. And Jesus answering said, Were there not ten cleansed? but where are the nine? There are not found that returned to give glory to God, save this stranger.

In Matthew chapter 10, Christ delegates some of His miraculous powers to His disciples, but it was only for a short evangelistic campaign to the lost sheep of the house of Israel:

Matthew 10:1,5-8

And when he had called unto him his twelve disciples, he gave them power against unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to heal all manner of sickness and all manner of disease.... These twelve Jesus sent forth, and commanded them, saying, Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as ye go, preach, saying, The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out devils: freely ye have received, freely give.

Note their main task was to preach “*The kingdom of heaven is at hand,*” and the miracles were a sign that this was the case. Very many Christians today think this power to miraculously heal is for us today, but this is nowhere spoken of in Scripture, it was just given to the disciples for this short campaign. In fact in a later campaign, when Christ sent out seventy into all the villages where He Himself would later come, the disciples were again given some miraculous powers, but Christ rebuked them afterwards for boasting of them:

Luke 10:19-20

Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you. Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

After Christ’s ascension, some of the apostles were also given power to heal, but this was limited to the apostles only, as they were specifically called the “*signs of an apostle*”:

2 Corinthians 12:12

Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs, and wonders, and mighty deeds.

But in the last letter that Paul ever wrote, to Timothy, we see that even the miraculous powers that he had, had disappeared by that time, because he couldn’t even heal his friend:

2 Timothy 4:20

Trophimus have I left at Miletum sick.

After that, no more men performing miracles. Just enough around the time of Christ coming to this world to prove that He was the Messiah, and to point to the fact that it was His teachings that we need to follow.

So, no-one has magic powers to heal today, in fact no-one has ever had magic powers to heal at all, apart from Christ and some of His disciples for a short period of time. So Benny Hinn, Peter Popoff, Morris Cerullo and the like, not to mention all the African and South American so-called faith-healers conning vulnerable people out of lots of money, are all fake.

Having said all that, of course God can heal. So, if aunt Bessie is sick in bed, one thing we should not be doing is laying hands on her and saying “Be healed, in the name of Jesus.” Such action won’t work. However, we *can* sit beside her and pray. The Lord *can* heal. We are powerless to do anything, but the Lord can heal if He so wishes, and as Christians, we have access to His throne of grace:

Hebrews 4:16

Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.

But we must remember that we should never presume on the Lord to heal every time.

Many times, it is NOT God’s will for someone to be physically healed. This is a shocking thing to say to people in these “healing ministry” circles, but it is true. The man born blind was born blind....:

John 9:3

...that the works of God should be made manifest in him.

This doesn’t only refer to the moment Christ healed him, but to all of his life while he was blind.

Also, Paul prayed three times that a “*thorn in the flesh*” (what this was we don’t know exactly) should be removed from him, but God did not remove it, but rather said:

2 Corinthians 12:9

My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.

Paul acquiesced to God's will after the third time of praying, and did not bother the Lord about it any more after that.

The Psalmist too says that there was a very good reason for him to be afflicted:

Psalm 119:67

Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.

Many times the Lord is gracious and will heal us when we ask, but even then, there is only one thing certain about life:

Hebrews 9:27

....it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.

We must always be aware that maybe, in the Lord's will, it is aunt Bessie's time to die. We all die. Death is the only thing certain about life. Only Enoch, Elijah and all those who will be on the earth at Christ's second coming won't die. That is not most of us. We should all ordinarily expect one day to die. We should prepare for it. We need to embrace Christ as our only Saviour from the consequences of our sins, and make sure we are His, before it's too late. In other words, we shouldn't be obsessed with a "healing ministry," thinking that if only we have enough faith we can be healed every time and live for ever. That is stupidity at its greatest. Who wants to live in this awful, sad, depressing world, full of suffering and trials, for ever, anyway?

John 16:33

In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

The Christian's true home is in heaven. That is what we should be preparing for, not a long, comfortable life on this earth:

Colossians 3:1,2

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.

This is why I have no time for so-called “healing ministries” in the church. However, if a ministry is offering prayer for the sick, of course that is good and useful and should be encouraged. But when people presume on God to heal every time, we have crossed the line. We should be thankful for anything the Lord brings upon us, even death.

1 Thessalonians 5:18

In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.

Attracting Youth

This is not the case everywhere by any means, but certainly in the West we have a declining church. In fact here in the UK there are so many church buildings lying empty, converted into other uses (including being turned into mosques), and if there are still services continuing at all, we see the evening service being dropped, and those who attend being mostly of retirement age.

The question is often asked, “How can we attract younger people, so that the church will continue and not be forced inevitably to close down?” Modern ministers have their own ideas. Many use gimmicks to try to attract the youth, not realising that all they are doing is making themselves look silly, and the church irrelevant. Others try to introduce a youth group, where the youth of the church (where there are any) are given lively activities to do, like playing football or going ice skating, making the church no different from a glorified secular youth club. What about those young people who don’t want to play sport? What’s in it for them?

But we see that the main change that is usually made is in the music. If only we give the youth of today the music they like, they will come, goes the argument. And in some cases, with a vibrant leadership team and a go-getting young minister, this has been a success. They will come. But huge problems occur as a result. What about the old people who are still there? They will be sidelined. What about young people who don’t like modern music? Again, there will be nothing for them. Above all, what about the message preached? Sin is no longer mentioned (it will put people off coming), and only a positive thinking, simple message about Jesus healing our little hurts and giving us a meaning to our lives is proclaimed in the short time they have left between songs for a message of any kind.

In recent generations, a new form of church has emerged, whereby the grand idea has been to take away all the older, traditional ways of “doing church” and to introduce an interactive style (some of them even changing their churches into a “less threatening,” “cafe” type

environment – no pews, just coffee tables) where people can believe what they want to believe and have a jolly good discussion in the process. Absolute doctrine is no longer necessary. They “do” theology, just as they “do” life together in their little (no longer “Bible study groups”, but) “life groups.” These type of churches are booming today, especially among the youth.

But true religion has suddenly all gone. If there are no absolutes any more, then there’s no more need of atonement for sin, no need of repentance, no need of faith in Christ, instead they believe that the feeling they get from their prolonged worship sessions is the Holy Spirit moving in their hearts, and this, to them, is their religion.

Music is indeed an important part of true worship, along with the three other elements prescribed in the Bible, namely, prayer, the reading of Scripture and the exposition of it. But we have a situation today, in which music almost defines a church, and people choose which church they want to go to depending on the music on offer. This is all wrong. We need to get back to concentrating on the message, rather than the style of music. After all, in heaven, we will only be singing two songs – the Song of Moses and the Song of the Lamb:

Revelation 15:2-4

And I saw as it were a sea of glass mingled with fire: and them that had gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name, stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God. And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints. Who shall not fear thee, O Lord, and glorify thy name? for thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee; for thy judgments are made manifest.

So in eternity, all today’s modern Christian songwriters will be out of a job. What do you call works that believers do on this earth, but which have no bearing in eternity? Answer: “*Wood, hay and stubble*”:

1 Corinthians 3:11-15

For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man build upon this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble; every man’s work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it,

because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide which he hath built thereupon, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.

When we read:

Ephesians 5:18,19

Be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.

Colossians 3:16

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

Some take the phrase “*Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*” in the above passages to be a threefold description of the Psalter, in a similar way to “*The law the prophets and the psalms*” being a threefold description of what we today would call the Old Testament:

Luke 24:44

And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.

Others take the phrase “*Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs*” to mean the psalms of the Old Testament, plus other hymns and songs. We shouldn't split the church and form a new denomination because of a difference of opinion on this. I only wish to comment that we here have a New Testament injunction to sing psalms. In other words, the psalms were not just a Jewish, Old Testament thing, now no longer necessary. Yet where is psalm singing in the modern church today? Very, very occasionally Psalm 23 and Psalm 100 are sung, but only because they have made their way into modern hymn-books and are treated as hymns. It would be a great step for the better if we were to reintroduce the psalms into worship, even if only to get people's theology a bit more sorted out.

But, even then, what about the tunes? We have no Biblical precedent for what tunes to use, we have to make them up ourselves. This will not be the case in heaven, but only while we are down here. How do we go about composing God-honouring tunes? Well, the tunes, at the very least, need to be serious, and worthy of singing to Almighty God, who is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:29). We certainly should never sing frivolous, jolly tunes by any means. And this comment is not just aimed against modern worship bands either. I was once in a very conservative Brethren gospel service, and just before the service started, I closed my eyes, and I felt as though I was in a Victorian pub – there was a low volume of chatter, and someone playing the popular tunes of the day on the piano in the background. The pianist was actually playing hymns from the “*Sacred Songs and Solos*” hymn-book, but I don’t think we realise that Victorian hymn-writers often took the popular tunes of the day and wrote Christian words to them. The tunes that we sing should never be from “pop” songs in any generation. They should be far more grave and serious than that. Most psalms-only churches today are Scottish, but I have to admit that some of the peculiarly Scottish tunes are far too much toward the opposite extreme, and at the best of times, like wading through treacle when singing them. Not so much grave and serious, but dour, dirgy and too much like hard work, it being a relief to get through to the end of them. This should not be.

So, what do we do? Again, I have to argue for seriousness in the church. I look forward to the next world, where I will be praising God for evermore in the way that He has ordained, not in the fancy ways of sinful men. If we want to attract youth back to the church, we should not go for gimmicks, popular music and frivolous behaviour, because it might attract them for a while, but like the pop songs of the sixties and seventies which were popular then but which grate on us now, the attraction will not last, and I fear that (except the Lord intervenes) they will become more alienated and bitter against Christianity as a result.

1 Timothy 4:1,2

Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron.

2 Timothy 3:1-5

This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come. For men shall be lovers of their own selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, highminded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof: from such turn away.

The Do-it-Yourself Gospel

There is a false gospel being presented in many churches today, which we need to be aware of. It is not just a different way of preaching the gospel, but a completely different message altogether, and needs to be exposed as such, not least because it leads people into a false sense of security.

The way this “gospel” is presented is as follows: First of all, we are told that we need to “choose” or “decide” to follow Christ. Many Christians mistake this call for the true call of the gospel, which is to repent and believe in Christ for salvation, but the preachers of this message mean no such thing. Repentance and salvation in someone other than ourselves, are alien concepts to them. All the preacher means by “deciding to follow Jesus,” is that we choose to follow Christ’s teachings. That is it. It is just a decision we make ourselves to stop following other teachings any more and to follow the teachings of Christ instead, just as we may “decide” to follow the teachings of Buddha or Confucius or some other man. This “decision” involves no heart change, no repentance, and no salvation in a Saviour.

Once we have “chosen” to follow Christ, we are immediately told that now we are a Christian, so consequently all our sins past, present and future, are instantly forgiven and we can relax, because Christ has already dealt with them. We don’t need to think about sin any more, and should not let it ever bother us again. In fact it is a sin to think about sin at all from now on. We must instead think positively, and have a sense of self-worth, self-acceptance and confidence in ourselves.

This is nothing else but modern humanistic psychology dressed up in religious clothing, and it is the complete opposite of true Christianity, which should rather produce humility, meekness and self-abasement. It is no wonder that the preachers of such a message appear so proud and self-confident.

If we really should not let sin bother us any more, then we get further and further away from seeing our real need of a Saviour. This message leads people away from the true gospel, not closer to it.

But it doesn't stop there. Now we have "chosen" to follow Christ, we must in future make sure that we "choose" to live by every one of His precepts, taking each one in turn. So, we must "choose" to stop lying and "decide" to tell the truth. We must "choose" to stop cheating people and "decide" to live honestly. etc. etc. Notice that everything is done by ourselves, there is no concept of our need of a new heart and of the Holy Spirit to perform these things in us at all.

The whole point of real Christianity is that we *can't* do these things by ourselves, we need a Saviour to do it for us. The gospel is not that we should stop sinning and become righteous by our own effort, because we can't. The gospel is that we need the Lord to save us from our sins that we can't get rid of ourselves, and then for the Lord to work righteousness from within us by giving us a new heart. Only then can we truly serve the Lord, and not before. By nature, we can't "choose" anything, except sin. We must be born again:

John 3:3

Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

We need a new heart:

Ezekiel 18:31

Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?

This is something that we can't do ourselves, it is the gift of God:

Ezekiel 36:26,27

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. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.

The Biblical gospel is therefore completely different from this humanistic way of preaching.

Here are some examples from the Bible of how we should present the gospel:

Matthew 3:17

Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Matthew 16:24

If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.

Matthew 18:3

Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Luke 13:3 and 5

Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

Acts 2:38,39

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call.

Acts 3:19

Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.

Acts 16:31

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house.

Acts 17:30,31

God... now commandeth all men every where to repent: Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

Acts 20:21

Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.

Acts 26:20

But shewed.... that they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance.

The true gospel is primarily a call to repent and believe in Christ for our salvation. To repent, presupposes straight away that we are sinners who need to turn from their sin and cry to God for mercy:

Luke 18:13

God be merciful to me a sinner.

THIS is the gospel. It is a gospel of God's grace, not a gospel of self-help. With the true gospel, we need to see our own inability to respond and our need of a Saviour to save us from our sins. Once we understand this, we will never boast about ourselves ever again:

Romans 3:27

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

If this false gospel was true, then when we get to heaven, we can always say that the difference between us being in heaven and our neighbour being in hell is that we "chose" Christ and our neighbour didn't. That is boasting, and so can't be the true gospel.

This false gospel is leading people further away from the true gospel and from seeing their real need of a Saviour. We all ought to see our sin for what it is, and flee from the wrath to come by embracing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as the only Saviour from sin. Only then will boasting be excluded, when we realise that salvation is 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.

We are born in sins, and conceived in iniquity:

Ephesians 2:1

And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins.

Psalm 51:5

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

No matter what we do, we can't get free from our bondage to our sin. We certainly can't "choose" to stop sinning at all, it is impossible! But once the Lord changes the heart, we are free indeed!

John 8:36

If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

Freedom in Christ

There are many causes of division amongst Christian people, and always have been. But most of them can eventually be put down simply to the fact that some people understand the principles of the Bible a bit better than others.

We are all continually growing...

2 Peter 3:18

...in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

And so all of us are at different stages in the Christian life. The differences Christians have with one another can simply be attributed to this fact.

But I want to look in more detail now at a difference between professing evangelical Christians that goes a lot deeper.

I used to know an old lady, who knew her Bible very well and was a professing Christian. And I had no reason to doubt her profession, she exhibited many Christian graces such as kindness, patience and so on. She had been a Christian for a lot longer than I had, so I certainly respected her. But she had a problem with the church we were both in at the time. She didn't like the church going on all the time about ongoing sin in the believer.

To back herself up, she came up with this Bible quotation:

Hebrews 10:1,2

For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins.

In these verses we are told that the animal sacrifices of the Old Testament could never take away sin, but were only ever meant to be a picture of the true sacrifice that would come later in Christ. The argument then goes on to say that, if animal sacrifices could have taken away sin, then they would have ceased to have been offered and the worshippers “*should have had no more conscience of sins.*”

This lady and I totally agreed that the animal sacrifices could never take away sin, whereas Christ’s blood can. But she was quite adamant that this verse meant that if we continue to think about ongoing sin all the time, then we still have a conscience of it and therefore we can’t be true Christians, because we can’t have had our sins taken away by Christ yet. That’s what this verse, in her mind, was effectively saying.

But my Christian experience is very different. Now I have become a Christian, the Holy Spirit has come to reside in my heart, and it is as though a light has been switched on. I now see all the dark and dingy corners of my life I never saw before. In fact, the closer I get to Christ, the more sin I see in myself. Yes, of course, as a true believer, I know, praise God, it has all been forgiven. It has all been taken care of and put on Christ....

Galatians 2:20

....who loved me and gave Himself for me.

But as a Christian, I still have a struggle with ongoing sin. I don’t like my sin, I don’t want to do it, I hate it. I don’t do it deliberately or wilfully, but I fall into it. I never had this problem before I became a Christian. Sin never bothered me then. But it does now. And until our dying day, as far as my experience has taught me – and I also believe it to be what the Bible teaches – we Christians now have a battle going on within us. The old man of the world against the new man in Christ. The flesh against the Spirit. These are two of several ways the Bible has of describing it. The apostle Paul concluded about himself:

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.

I heard a terrible sermon on this passage once. The speaker, who would have agreed with the old lady I was telling you about, believed that this wasn't Paul describing himself at all, but some hypothetical person instead. We Christians, he said, shouldn't live "defeated" lives, and should certainly never call ourselves "*wretched*." We shouldn't dwell on our sins. We have the victory. That was the gist of the sermon. How awful! Not in line with the reality of things at all.

Of course this was Paul describing himself. And I'm a "*wretched*" man as well. But, thanks be to God, I have a Saviour who has saved me from this wretched condition, and has put a new heart within me so I can now to some extent begin to live the life He wants me to live. But I still have this indwelling sin within me that will not go away until I receive my new body when I go to be with Him, which is far better, a body that will finally no longer be able to sin.

2 Corinthians 9:15

Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift.

But this experience of a spiritual battle now going on in the Christian, which was never there before, seems to be totally foreign to the likes of this old lady and this preacher.

I tried to tell the old lady that after we become a Christian we still sin, and I quoted the Lord's Prayer:

Luke 11:4

Forgive us our sins.

We still have to ask forgiveness for our sins from God on a regular basis, even though we are truly born-again Christian people. But she simply told me, "Well, you've come out of Egypt, but you've not entered the Promised Land yet!"

And this idea of a Christian being someone who just doesn't see indwelling, ongoing sin any more, is quite common in the modern church.

The nearer I get to Christ, the more I see my sin. This, as far as I have experienced, is true Christianity. This is how it should be. But most

modern ministries believe that anyone who thinks the way I do, is still dwelling on their past sin. They insist that people like me must change our mindsets. Christ has taken all our sin away, so, they say, we should instead concentrate on “what we are in Christ” (that’s the phrase they use), and not on our sins any more. The thought of sin should now be gone from our lives forever. Not just past sins, but the whole concept of continuing, ongoing, indwelling sin as well. To dwell on our sin is negative. If we don’t look at things in this new light, they say, we’re not “living the victory life.”

“Are you a just a forgiven sinner or a saint?” is something they may ask. They think that we who still think of ongoing sin in our lives are only “forgiven sinners” and not “saints,” because, to them, we’re still wallowing in our past sins. But it’s not my past sins that are the problem. Praise God I have been forgiven them in Christ. It’s my continuing to fall into sin where I find a problem. These people don’t seem to see that they continue to sin at all. They seem to think that a truly born-again Christian should have no more conscience of sin whatsoever. Otherwise they don’t have real “freedom in Christ,” as they say.

But I know I continually let the Father down. And it bothers me, because I love the Father. Not that I think I won’t get to heaven because of my sins, past or ongoing. Praise God I will, despite my sin. But whenever I sin, I know I’m letting my Lord down yet again. That bothers me.

This whole division in the church between these two groups of people – those who believe in continuing sin and those who don’t – is a far more serious problem than any of the usual problems we come across, such as Calvinism versus Arminianism, or whether we believe the gifts are for today or not, or whether we believe in having women preachers, or infant baptism etc. etc. These are all just a matter of some people not understanding the Bible properly yet. In all these cases, people on both sides of the argument can be genuinely born-again Christians. So they can still share Christian experiences and have good Christian fellowship with one another. But this division I’m talking about here, is not to do with whether we understand a Biblical principle or not. It’s to do with that Christian experience itself.

I can't understand people who call themselves evangelical, born-again Christians and who live their lives quite happily with absolutely no concept whatsoever of ongoing, indwelling sin. It's just not real. I can't relate to them. I have a battle going on in my members, they don't. At least they don't seem to. They drift through their Christian lives full of confidence. And because of this fundamental difference in our Christian experience, I have become very tempted to conclude that they're not truly born-again at all. That's what's going through my mind, although I know I shouldn't judge people like that. But the fact remains that I seem to have absolutely nothing in common with their experience of the Christian life whatsoever.

But they do profess to have had a true born-again experience in the heart. They profess to be new creatures in Christ. They profess to be evangelical Bible believers. There is such a lot that we seem to have in common, far more than with many other people who call themselves Christian but are obviously not born-again in their hearts. Yet even so, I still can't relate to them and they can't relate to me. I'm sure most of them don't think I'm a born-again Christian either.

So, are these people just deluded into thinking they are truly born-again? I don't know. Only the Lord can judge that. All I can do is continue to live by what the Lord has revealed to me in my understanding and in my experience. If that means I can't relate to these people, then that's just the way it is, I must leave them to the Lord to deal with.

My "freedom in Christ" comes not from my being completely oblivious to my ongoing sins, but from my knowing that no matter what sins the Lord may uncover in my life (and there'll be many), I won't be condemned. This is a tremendous comfort to the Christian, especially the thousandth time he lets the Lord down yet again.

Psalm 51:17

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise.

Worshipping the Money God

I once visited a supposed Christian church that, it has to be said, worshipped money, not God. The Bible clearly states:

Matthew 6:24; Luke 16:13

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Not that it's wrong to be rich in and of itself, if that's what the Lord has given us. Abraham and Solomon were both very rich. It's the **love** of money that's the problem:

1 Timothy 6:10

For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

I was one of a group from the church I normally attended. We were persuaded to go to this church, about 100km from where we lived, so we went. We left on a Saturday afternoon, and returned Sunday evening. Delegations from two other churches were there as well. We were treated very well. The food was excellent, and we were given a bed for the night, which was very comfortable.

On the Saturday evening we were shown around all the church facilities, which were extensive. Not only did they have a church of about 1,600 people, but they also ran a nursery school, and planned to open a clinic as well at some point in the future. They had also just completed three blocks of flats, mainly for the hundred or so full-time workers they employed (that includes the school). Everything was very professionally run, which was good. We should always do the best for the Lord.

But.... Sunday morning came along. The main service of the day was at 8.30am, when 1,600 people from all over the area came into the main auditorium. The service itself was fairly familiar. There was half an

hour with the “worship band” playing loud, foot-tapping music (not my scene, but that’s what we get these days), followed by the Scripture reading, followed by an hour-long sermon, which it has to be said, was very good. Then the shock of the day.

After the sermon, several stewards brought out large boxes at set them up at the front of the auditorium. After a rousing speech by the “senior pastor,” the soft piano music started, and everybody came out of their seats to put their offering into the boxes. That was the highlight of the service.

If it was everyone coming forward to take the Communion, I could understand it, but the highlight wasn’t Communion, it wasn’t even the sermon, it was the collection. Then a final hymn was sung and the benediction and that was it.

We visiting delegates were then whisked off for an hour’s seminar (on the Lord’s day, remember) given by the “senior pastor,” which was on nothing else but business management skills, and how to use them in the running of a “successful” church.

We found out that this pattern had been imported from a church in Hong Kong, which had in turn got it from, guess where, the USA.

It works, in that the church grows. The basic unit is the “cell group” of 6-16 people, meeting in someone’s home every Friday evening. The idea is that people invite their neighbours into the group. Once the group reaches 16 people it divides into two, and so on. All the people connected with the church get together for the one service on the Sunday morning, where the collection is centre-stage.

On a Tuesday evening all the “cell-group” leaders meet to get instruction on how to run their “cell-groups.” Everything is run on a very professional business model. The guidance of the Holy Spirit is not even mentioned.

They use the “Million Leader Mandate” technique for developing their leaders. I’ve never heard of this before, so I looked it up on the internet. It’s American (of course), but it’s based on self-confidence, self-acceptance, “have pride in your achievements,” and so on. This is

not Christianity at all. It is humanistic psychology, and the exact opposite of the gospel. No humility.

And to cap it all, the “senior pastor” then told us, helpfully, that we can loan money to the church at any time, and they will guarantee to beat the interest rates of the banks. The idea being that we lend our money to them, and they in turn use it for their own business ends.

The point about this church is that everything is geared around worldly business management techniques and MONEY. No real, heartfelt prayer, no guidance by the Holy Spirit, just slick managers implementing techniques for getting people into the church and, more to the point, getting their money out of them.

We were also told that to get the best preachers, they must be paid the best salaries. Now, that might work in the banking industry. If we cap the bankers bonuses, they’ll all go abroad. But are true pastors motivated in any way by money? Really? No. The true pastors of the flock of God should be motivated by the salvation of souls, not what they get in their pay packet at the end of the month.

And another thing, which I thought was actually quite funny. The collection data was published every week, and we found out that the church we attended regularly, where there is no collection at all, just boxes at the back of the church, gets far more money in their collection than this church where the collection was the central part of the service. There is proof that the smooth presentation and soft music doesn’t work. We need to trust in the Lord instead.

Philippians 4:19

But my God shall supply all your need according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

And what about the good sermon? How do we explain that? Well, that’s easy. They used the golden rule of sermon preparation. Expository preaching through the text, letting the text do the work. That technique will work for anyone, no matter how bad, or how worldly they are. God speaks through the Bible, not through the preacher, so if anyone sticks to what the Bible says, we are guaranteed a good sermon.

And that was my experience of the money-god church. And it grows, it's outwardly successful. But is God in it? I leave that for the reader to work out for themselves.

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