

Reformation Required

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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.

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 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 you don’t believe this, then you have too high a view of yourself. 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 do 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:

Psalms 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 to your door, 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 don't know about you, but 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 you live for, if it is not living for God, your 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.

Now, what do you 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

Christ said:

Matthew 16:18

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

All those who are true members of this church, which consists of all those whose hearts the Lord has renewed and who have been adopted as His children into His family, will reach heavenly glory, are chosen by Christ and cannot be lost.

However, while we are on this earth, the Lord has ordained that this true church should be invisible to us, *i.e.* undetectable to our senses. We can’t see other people’s hearts. Only God knows who are truly His. Visible churches (ones we can see with our eyes) are groups of people made up of all those who *profess* to be Christian. That’s not the same as the true (invisible) church. Many people who are truly God’s children will be outside of a visible church, and on the other hand, many people who are not God’s children will be within a visible church. No visible manifestation of the church is perfect, they are all of varying degrees of purity.

The Protestant Reformation of the 16th Century was a good thing, because the old Roman Catholic church thought that it was perfect, not believing that the true church was

invisible, but believing that the *visible* church, i.e. itself, was the one true church of God. They taught that there was no salvation outside of itself, putting itself, the visible church, in place of God. It really thought that it had the power itself to open and close the gates of heaven and hell to people. And they bled people dry of all their money and frightened them to death with this evil, false doctrine. Because of this terribly wrong view of the church, a reformation was desperately needed in order to (a.) get rid of this wicked idea, and (b.) put the Word of God back in the primary, authoritative place that it ought to have in the church, and which the church leaders of the day (particularly the pope) had usurped.

The Roman Catholic church believed that the ritual had the prime place in worship. The Reformers, on the other hand, believed in what they called “the primacy of preaching” in worship. This was good, at the time, because true religion is not blind superstitious ritual, but true religion is the people learning and applying the Word of God to their souls for themselves. That is what the preaching was meant to do. However, we have a different problem today, in that we have exalted preaching so much that it has now overshadowed the Word of God, and exalted men too highly.

Today, preaching in every church involves someone standing in a pulpit giving an oration, usually with no formal recourse in the church for anyone to ever respond to the discourse, or ask questions. It is a one-way lecture that the congregation is supposed to blindly follow passively and agree with whatever is said. The preacher is taught to speak dogmatically, *as though* he was always right, even though no man can ever always be right. Consequently, the preacher is elevated to a level where nobody dare challenge him, or question him publicly on spiritual matters. The “primacy of preaching” has been replaced by the “primacy of the preacher.”

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.

So, far from us having true preaching in the church today, we rather have a false façade of preaching, which is not the Biblical pattern at all. Let’s firstly look at some of the problems involved, and then go on to see what true, Biblical preaching really is.

Authoritarian Manner

The idea that one man must preach dogmatically and authoritatively, when he is in the pulpit, results in many problems:

- 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.
- 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.

– This sort of preaching tends to idol worship. People will follow the most eloquent preachers. Preaching is not eloquence, persuasive, smooth talking, like selling a soap powder. Neither is it using emotional blackmail in trying to get the people to believe everything the preacher says.

Preachers today cannot be as forthright as the prophets and apostles, who could say, “*Thus saith the Lord*” and mean it. We no longer have direct revelation from God like the prophets and apostles had. A preacher (who is a fallible man, and can and will make mistakes) behaving in a similar manner to the prophets and apostles in his preaching, is too full of himself.

I have heard a lot of sermons where the preacher speaks in a very authoritarian manner, and yet he is absolutely wrong. It doesn't matter how hard he bangs on his pulpit or assertively shouts and stares, trying to make the congregation feel guilty for disagreeing with him; if he is wrong, he is wrong. But our modern idea is that a preacher **must** preach in an authoritative, forthright manner **as though he were ex cathedra** (in the pulpit) **infallible**. But any outsider who hears a preacher preaching in this manner, will think to themselves, “The Protestants have just exchanged an infallible pope for an infallible preacher.” This is very difficult for ordinary Christians to tolerate, who are all at different stages in their growing in grace and knowledge:

2 Peter 3:18

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

An authoritative attitude in preaching does not convert or help people grow in the faith at all. In fact it turns a lot of people away from Christianity altogether. They would come away from a sermon thinking to themselves “Who does that man think he is? He thinks he knows it all!” and consequently they would not be encouraged to read the Bible for themselves, but would just leave that particular church and never come back. Of course, if the Holy Spirit is working in their hearts, they will become true believers, despite any preacher.

In reality, all men make mistakes in their logic and understanding, including preachers. They do this because they are fallible men, and because we should all be changing our views as we receive more and more light from the Scriptures. Yet preachers are expected to preach dogmatically, authoritatively and forthrightly all the time, **as though** everything they say is right, when in actual fact this is not necessarily so. They might, for example, change their views at a later date (as they receive more light on the subject) and realise they made a mistake before. They might, for example, hold firm views on future events. So all preachers who insist on preaching in a forthright, dogmatic manner will **inevitably be propagating error** at least at some time in their lives. They may not mean to, but they do, and this misleads many people.

No matter how good the preaching is, and how right the doctrines presented are, preaching is only ever **merely a suggestion**, and should never be presented in an authoritarian manner. If the preacher has done his studying well, he will try to present truth in the best way he can, and then pray that the Holy Spirit might (a.) use the truth presented to convince people in their hearts, and (b.) forgive any errors that have been preached.

The Bible is where we get all our authority from, so preaching is only authoritative **in as much as** it sticks to the Bible. It is the Bible that is authoritative, never the preacher.

Nobody is right all the time, especially a smooth talker who can present something as though it was far better than it actually is. It is far better to have a genuine, honest and open speaker, than a smooth presenter.

We should teach people to look after themselves not just in physical things but in spiritual things as well. We are all responsible to God as individuals directly ourselves, not to the preacher.

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 26:55

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

Preaching as Magic

There is a view of preaching that actually regards it as some kind of 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.) That in times of spiritual dearth, we believe we should continue preaching as normal, and wait for a time when the Holy Spirit moves the preacher to wax so eloquent that many people are converted. *C.f.* the 1859 “revival” in Wales, when an ordinary, mediocre preacher was suddenly taken up with the “*hwyl*.” Many were supposedly converted in the next few months, then the preaching lost its “unction” just as suddenly, and the preacher “*became plain old Dafydd Morgan again.*”

(c.) *That there is a difference between preaching and exhorting.* 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. I know of a very strict Protestant church that believes this, but it’s 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.

(d.) *That recorded sermons are not the same as live preaching.* This view sees something magic in **live** preaching. Live preaching is considered to be ordinarily the only ordained means of salvation, because recordings are not mentioned in the Bible. This is nonsense. There is a major problem with listening to a recorded sermon, and that is that we have more things to distract us while listening to one than we would do if we were listening to live preaching in a church. Apart from this 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.

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

Who Should 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.

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 how strictly should it be fenced? Should everything be preached dogmatically as though the preacher was right in everything (even though he never can be)? No, because it immediately appears false to everyone.

In any case, 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). Then the apostles and elders immediately accepted him as a true believer, without any examination. 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 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. Scripture is our ultimate authority, we should not have to rely on an ambassador telling us what to believe before we can know and embrace truth. We can embrace truth wherever we find it. Of course, preachers and ministers are not to be lightly disagreed with, because they should 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.

Another problem I have found with a lot of preachers or ministers is that they 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 years 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. Now, the problem is, how do you find out who these are? Some people mature in the faith quicker than others. Even so, a good start would at least be to use men ideally 20 years in the faith minimum, or if this is not possible, at least the longest serving Christian you can find. Even in these cases, we should always be very aware that he could make mistakes. He should be educated in the Scriptures, but someone of that maturity in the faith should already have this qualification by experience. He should not have to have some kind of training under the auspices of a church. It is not wrong to have that as such, but 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. Of course all men are a mixture of truth and error too, but if we are trained by a church or external organisation, we are more likely to have engrained into us the church's teachings rather than the Bible's teachings, and our outlook for the rest of our lives becomes permanently stained by the errors imbibed from this (except, despite the training, the Holy Spirit corrects this, of course).

What is a True Preaching?

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.

All these include a two-way conversation between the preacher and the hearers. Not just a one-way lecture with nobody being allowed to say anything afterwards. Of course, it is off-putting to a lecturer for him to be interrupted all the time, so lecturing as such shouldn't be condemned. Any speaker should be allowed to continue uninterrupted until he has finished what he has to say. But afterwards, there should be a public facility to ask questions to aid understanding and learning for both parties, the speaker and the congregation alike. Once people **understand** the truth they can then begin to practise it in their lives, which should be the ultimate aim of all true believers.

We have a message to proclaim and get across to others, but we are not to do it in a dominating manner, with no facility of reply. Preaching is not a lecture or discourse that nobody is allowed to respond to, with no formal means of asking the preacher questions if you are unsure of anything. Under those circumstances, nobody is encouraged to learn or understand the Scriptures for themselves. That leads to an army of blind followers. Two-way communication is vital for understanding. If ever the two-way conversation gets out of hand for any reason, you can always simply take your leave and continue the conversation elsewhere (Acts 19).

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.

Joseph and His mother found the twelve-year-old Christ “*in the temple, sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions.*” Note He was not assertively telling them what to believe (even though He was actually right all the time, unlike any of us), neither was He sitting passively listening to them. Preaching is two-way communication, so we can make sure the other party has understood what we have said correctly, and so that both parties can learn from each other.

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.

Whereas we 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 that 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 thresheth 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.

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 today, 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, not wishing 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.

Primacy of the Word of God

You can never over-emphasise the Word of God. We are:

1 Peter 1:23

Born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the Word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever.

But preaching isn’t trying hard to convince people. We are to come to a knowledge of the truth, but never by emotional appeals or emotive language. Most preachers use emotion in their sermons simply to try to get the people to believe the Bible forcibly – a kind of emotional manipulation or blackmail if you like. I remember one minister saying about a passage in the Bible once, “I believe that; do you believe that?” As though, “well actually we don’t believe it, but we’re trying to whip each other up into thinking we all do believe it really”! I can’t help thinking that people who like that sort of preaching don’t really believe at all because they have to have this emotional crutch all the time to keep them going, whereas the true believer really does believe the truth, he simply would like it to be explained logically to him and opened up in the preaching. Proper preaching is not trying

to persuade people that the Bible is true, it begins at assuming the Bible to be true and explains the meaning from there.

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

(1.) Stick to expository preaching, letting the text do the work.

(2.) 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.

(3.) Don't shout. Preach to people as if they'd just had a bereavement. That should keep our minds on eternal things.

(4.) 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.

(5.) NEVER accept payment for preaching. As soon as we decide to accept payment, 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 too bad.

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 truth 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 Sabbath work. 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.

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, is 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.

Over the last 15 years or so, 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.

Well, 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.

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 off 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 is 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 you are in the middle of one of these churches, you don't realise this. You're just part of it, and go along with everything, thinking that your church is the whole of what real Christianity is all about. But it isn't. Only if you look in from the outside do you 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 your "bubble" you can't see beyond it. I put it to you that 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 you don't fit in and do things the way the church wants or expects you to do them, you're not really one of us. 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 theirs. Open up your bowels of mercy wider to encourage and accept these people. Oh yes, your cosy little social group may be disturbed by doing this. Your church might be affected and changed in some way if you 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 am currently living in China, and it never ceases to amaze me here that there are newcomers at every single service. The minister (embarrassingly) asks new attendees to stand up, and there are always some. They are all given a little booklet, which is a catechism and details about the church services. When was the last time a newcomer came to your church? And, more to the point, what did you do about it?

And why should people come to your church? As opposed to any other church in the area? Do you think that you 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 are not 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 nearest to where I live in China there is an "English Fellowship" which I attend regularly, simply because it is the only English meeting I can get to. I have no choice, like I would have in the UK. The meeting is usually frequented by young Chinese wanting to learn English. I have to say that it leaves a lot to be desired. Every week they have a "worship band" playing modern, loud "worship songs," followed by a talk in English by various speakers. Depending on the speaker, some messages are good whilst others are absolutely terrible. Oh yes, and they use the New International Version of the Bible. If that was a church near you, would all of that put you off going? If it does not quite match all your requirements? Most people I know in the UK would not go to a meeting like that and go elsewhere instead – somewhere where things were a lot better. And there would be no shortage of alternative churches to go to. But I go to this meeting because I have to. It is the only meeting in English anywhere near here. So I make the most of what I have got. But the thing is, I can help. I can be there to gently lead these poor young people into the right way. Someone needs to teach them. Should I just leave them there to imbibe all sorts of wrong teaching, just because I don't agree with their way of doing 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 cannot or will not 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 you to it, if you pray to Him to show you 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. Don't think

that you must move home because there is no church in your area to your exacting specifications. I was given that advice once, and it is wrong advice. Instead, start praying that the Lord may show you the spiritual needs in your community, where you are now. Wherever you are, there is a huge need right now. Make the most of your opportunities in your 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 you or me. 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 people on one of these "lists." It doesn't matter how bad they are, just as long as they can fill the pulpit. Hence, once you are on the "list" the doors are open wide for you to use your "ministry" to its fullest extent. Even if you'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 even 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 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 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.