

The Frustrations of Church

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Prepare to be Surprised

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

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

Acts 26:18

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

2 Corinthians 4:6

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

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

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

And it wasn't long before I discovered that many churches didn't even teach the Bible at all. Another surprise. I eventually learned that churches that call themselves "evangelical,"

were the ones that did. So I have migrated towards evangelical churches ever since. The Bible warms my heart. Every time I read it, I get the same experience as the two on the road to Emmaus:

Luke 24:32

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

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

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

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

Acts 17:11

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

Fine. So I've now moved to a Calvinistic evangelical church, and I'm not following the pastor blindly. Good. Praise the Lord. But I was then led astray, would you believe it, by my love for the truth. In my hunger for correct doctrine, which in itself is good, I sought out the church that seemed to have the most correct doctrine. I knew all along that no church was perfect, but at least I could attend the best I could find. And everything went well for a while. Even today I can recommend the preaching in that church.

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

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

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

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

1 Corinthians 8:1-2

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

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

And then, another surprise. I used to know an old lady, who knew her Bible very well and was a professing Christian. And I had no reason to doubt her profession, she seemed to exhibit many Christian graces such as kindness, patience and so on. She had been a Christian for a lot longer than I had, so I certainly respected her. But she had a problem with the church we were both attending at the time. She didn't like the church talking about indwelling sin in the believer.

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

Hebrews 10:1,2

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

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

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

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

Galatians 2:20

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

But as a Christian, I still have an ongoing struggle with indwelling sin. I don't like my sin, I don't want to do it, I hate it. I don't do it deliberately or wilfully, but I fall into it. I never had this problem before I became a Christian. Sin never bothered me then. But it does now. The apostle Paul concluded about himself:

Romans 7:24,25

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

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

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

Luke 11:4
Forgive us our sins.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 Peter 3:4

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

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

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

When the true Christian leaves this world for the next, he will have the second biggest surprise of his life, second only to his conversion, because I'm sure the next world won't be anything like what we think it's going to be. (The unbeliever will have by far the biggest surprise of his life at that point). But before then, while we're still in this world, there surely can't be any more surprises lurking just around the corner, can there?

The Great Dilemma

1. Introduction

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

Matthew 7:13,14

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

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

Ezekiel 36:26

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

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

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.31

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

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

2 Peter 3:18

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

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

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.38

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

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

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

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

Romans 3:2

....the keepers of the oracles of God,

and

1 Timothy 3:15

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

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

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

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

2. The Impossibility of a True Visible Church

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

No Visible Church has All Truth

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

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

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

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

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

2 Timothy 3:16,17

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

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

Daniel 9:24

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

Hebrews 1:1,2

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

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

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

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

Westminster Shorter Catechism Q.19

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

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

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

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

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

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

No Visible Church Contains All Believers

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

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

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

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

Romans 14:23

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

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

Church councils do not make truth. For example, it is common to believe that the church decreed what books should be in the canon of Scripture, and that this was supposedly eventually done at the Council of Carthage in AD 396. This idea is particularly used by the Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox to defend their false idea that the church comes before Scripture, and so is the higher authority. In fact, the Council of Carthage did not decree what Scripture was at all. Scripture was Scripture as it came off the pen of the writer, not when a church council decreed it to be so.

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

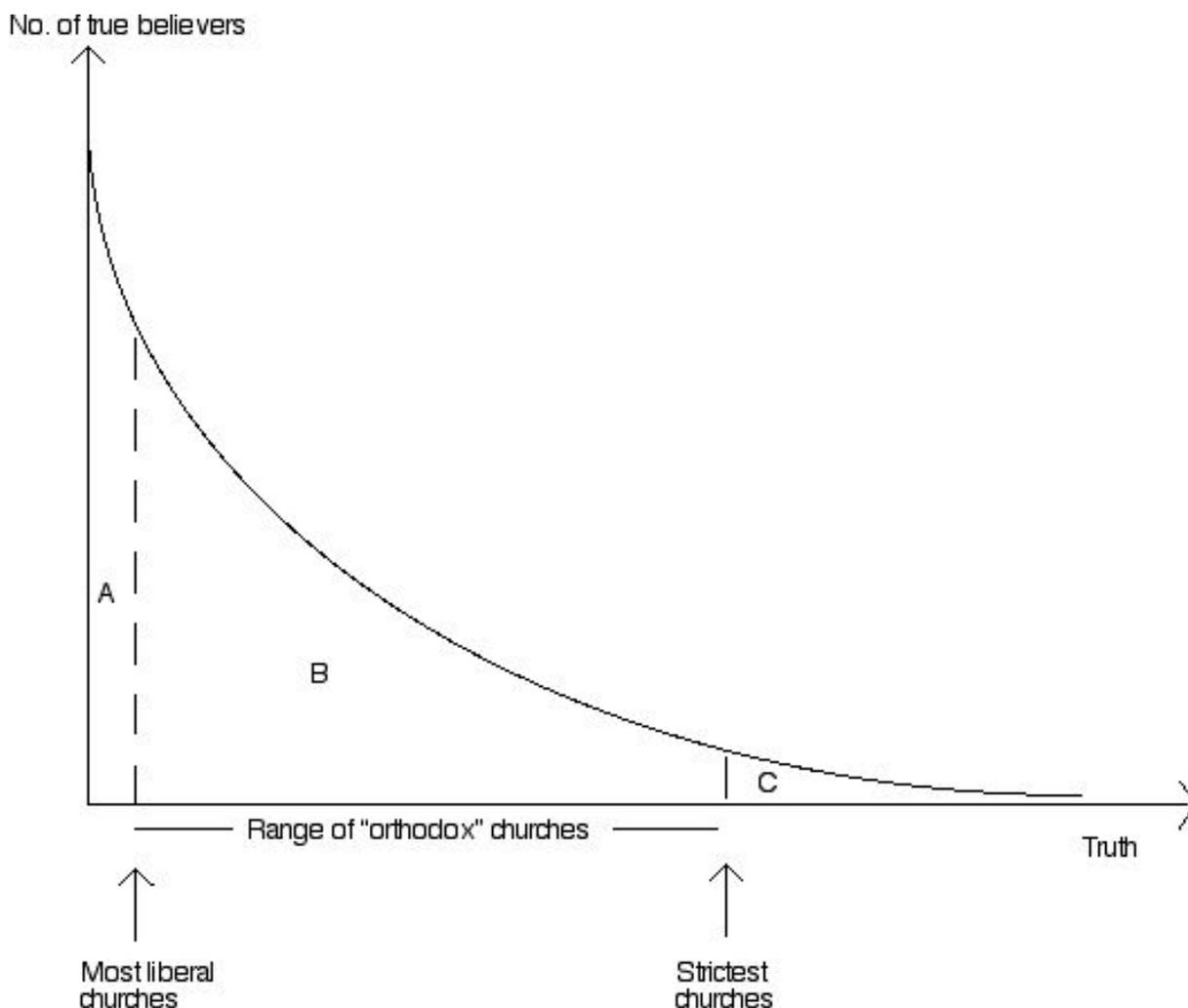
Similarly, the Council of Nicea in AD 325 decreed the doctrine of the Trinity. The film/book "*The DaVinci Code*" is not to be recommended, albeit it has been very popular. However, it has one scene in it that rightly ridicules the idea of a church council decreeing truth. It is argued that this would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

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

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

3. Diagrammatic Representations of the Church

Two diagrams may or may not help here.



A = infants, imbeciles, new converts

B = most believers, members of visible churches

C = mature believers, will not find a visible church to suit them

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

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

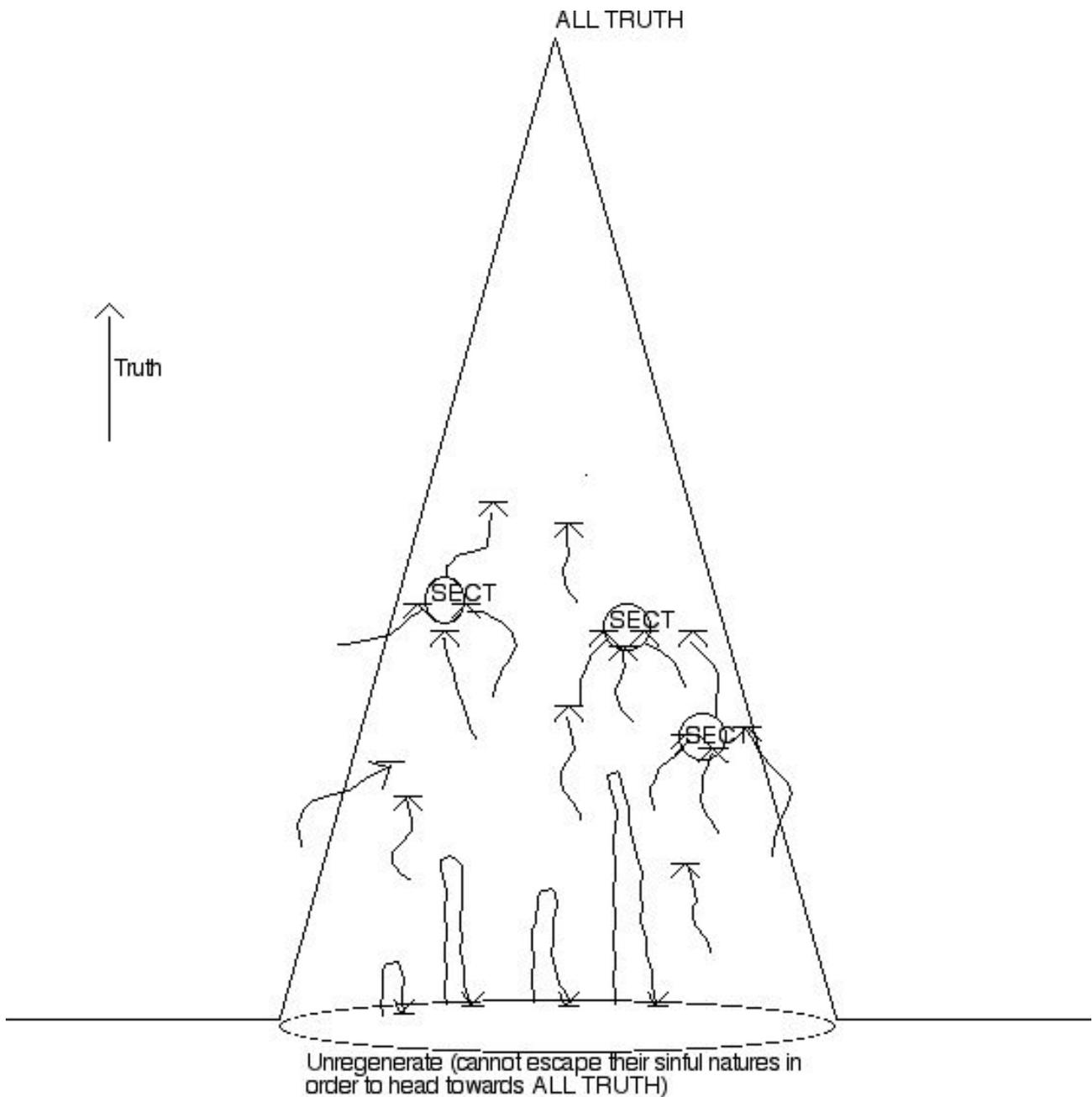
Visible churches range from being very liberal, where there would be little truth, to being very strict, which would dogmatise lots of truth (although there would always still be some error, because no church is perfect). The liberal churches would attract the ignorant and those with little knowledge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

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

Colossians 3:2,3

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

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



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

Ephesians 4:8

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. The Followed and the Followers

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

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

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

1 Peter 1:18

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

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

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

It is wrong to blindly follow men. We should be neither followed, nor blind followers. We should instead be people who want to know truth, and are prepared to change our beliefs

as soon as we receive more light as we become convinced by Scripture and guided by the Holy Spirit of the truth.

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

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

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

Matthew 23:2,3

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

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

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

Luke 6:39

the blind leading the blind into a ditch.

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

5. What Church Do I Join?

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

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

Matthew 16:18

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

Not one of His flock will be lost:

John 10:29

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

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

Revelation 7:9

....no man could number.

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

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

John 18:38

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

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

John 14:6

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

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

But there are so many different organisations, all claiming to be the true church of Jesus Christ. Which one is the true church? Well, as the Bible is God's Word, is all truth, and is God's final revelation to men; we could say that we should join ourselves to a Bible-believing church. But there are so many of them! Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentecostals, Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Brethren, all claim to be “Bible-believing” churches, but they all believe different things. They cannot all be right. They claim to follow the Bible, but they all differ in the way they interpret it. So who is right?

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

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

2 Corinthians 5:17

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

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

Matthew 7:1

Judge not, that ye be not judged.

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

Colossians 3:1-3

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

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

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

Hebrews 10:25

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

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

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

Philippians 2:5-8

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

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

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

Matthew 21:13

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

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

Matthew 23:33

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

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

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

Matthew 23:2,3

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

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

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

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

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

Ephesians 5:11

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

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

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

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

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

To him that overcometh...

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

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

3 John 9,10

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

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

Having said all this, in practice, in today's church scene, we have a completely different scenario. Now the can of beans has been spilt, as it were, and so many different separatist groups have already been formed in many lands, the concept of going back into the national church would be difficult, if not impossible. If some of us did so, it would mean practically that all our closest Christian companions would probably still be in the

separatist churches. This goes to show how evil separatism really is. Where is the witness for Christ, when so many different groups exist, all with absolutely no connection with each another?

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

Philippians 4:7

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

Appendix. Discussion Questions

Other questions we may wish to consider:

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

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

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

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

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

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

Am I a Heretic?

The nature of true religion is that true believers are all those who have been born-again of the Spirit of God at a certain point in their lifetime. We start off our Christian life knowing

nothing, and we come slowly, as we are being more and more sanctified, to a greater and greater knowledge of the truth:

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth.

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

So, what happens if we come in the process of time, through study of Scripture and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to no longer believe a creedal statement? I don't mean simply being ignorant of what it means, but wilfully believing something other than the stated creedal position?

For example, if I truly believe that Scripture teaches that the eternity of the begetting of the Son is wrong, that puts me out of line with the Westminster Confession, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed, to name but three. Does that make me a heretic?

I don't mind if I am wrong, if someone can come along and convince me from Scripture of the opposite. I will then willingly change my belief to conform to the new knowledge that has been given to me. We are all learning. But, what if I am right? What if the Westminster Confession, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed are all wrong, and I am the only one that holds the true Biblical position, which is surely at least possible, although maybe unlikely? According to all the churches that embrace these Creeds, I'm an heretic.

This means that all my life, from when I come to embrace the doctrine until my death (or until I change my mind again), I will be outside of the visible church. This begs the question, are there any truly born-again people outside of the visible church, treated as heretics, but really they are right? The answer must be, Yes!!

True believers are all those who have been born-again of the Spirit of God. They are NOT those who have come to know a minimum amount of doctrine. Knowing correct doctrine is important only as part of our sanctification. We are actually born-again knowing nothing. We all come to know true doctrines at various points of time AFTER our regeneration. Believers:

2 Peter 3:18

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

As soon as one doctrine is adopted by a church, that church automatically excludes all those truly born-again believers who either have not come to a knowledge of that truth yet (i.e. they are ignorant of it), or who (correctly or mistakenly) believe something different. So:

(1.) Creeds and confessions were only ever made to limit membership in visible churches. They will always exclude some true believers.

(2.) Creeds are always package deals. You are expected to embrace the lot. What if you don't embrace one small article? You are thrown out of the visible church. In past history, that meant being persecuted or even killed. How evil the church has been.

(3.) This goes to show how stupid trusting in a visible church really is.

Church Disputes

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

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

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

1 Corinthians 11:19

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

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

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

Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 31 Paragraph 4

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

Proof texts:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 Peter 2:8

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

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

Psalm 97:10

Ye that love the LORD, hate evil.

Psalm 139:21,22

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

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

Romans 12:19

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

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

Ezekiel 9:4

And the LORD said unto him, Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the men that sigh and that cry for all the abominations that be done in the midst thereof.

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

Psalm 37:1-3

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

Psalm 37:35,36

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

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

Hebrews 10:25

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

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

Colossians 3:1-3

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

And no man is going to split that church!

Hebrews 12:22-24

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

Matthew 6:19-21

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

John 14:1-3

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

Accepting the Lord's Providence

What is our opinion on women ministers?

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

1 Timothy 2:11,12

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

1 Corinthians 14:34,35

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

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

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

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

Deborah was a Judge in Israel:

Judges 4:4-9

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

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

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

situation. The Lord set up Deborah to shame the men because of their weakness. And God is doing the same today.

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

2 Kings 22:13,14

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

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

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

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

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

Has your church introduced loud, modern music into the worship? Don't just get up and leave. Pray for better days. Don't join in with it all. Sit at the back of the church during these "worship" times reading your Bible and praying about the situation. Then, at least some of the young people who introduced such "worship" in the first place might come to see the necessity of serious religion, and the awful inadequate lightness of their so-called "worship" songs.

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

Has your church stopped insisting on the ladies covering their heads in public worship, contrary to the pattern in 1 Corinthians 11:1-16? Don't let it bother you. Ladies, keep your hats on, and keep praying for better days.

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

Matthew 23:1-3

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

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

Matthew 16:18

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

John 6:39

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

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

John 18:36

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

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

Luke 21:28

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

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

Psalms 37:1,2

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

Psalms 37:35,36

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

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

1 Corinthians 7:29-31

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

James 4:14

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

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

Hebrews 12:28,29

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

2 Peter 3:11,12

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

Church Membership

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

John 6:39

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

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

Matthew 15:7-9

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

How do we deal with these visible organisations?

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

Hebrews 10:24-25

And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

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

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

1 Corinthians 11:28

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

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

Romans 14:4

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

But is "church membership" as such, in the Bible?

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

Ephesians 4:11-16

And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby

they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.

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

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

1 Corinthians 5:1-5

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

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

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

Galatians 2:9

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

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

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

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

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

Matthew 16:18

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

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

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

Our home is in heaven:

Colossians 3:1-3

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

Church politics is not for the Christian.

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

1 Corinthians 5:3

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

Matthew 18:17

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

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

If the former, it would frustrate the general congregation because they would have to follow every decision without knowing what has really gone on in the leaders' secret meetings, not having any say about things themselves. If the latter, which is sort of implied in 1 Corinthians 5:3 above, there would need to be some kind of "membership"

roll to stop irregular attenders having any say. That purely practical reason is the only argument there is for “*church membership*” as such.

The Church or Christ?

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

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

All this actual history is for us today a picture of the way God deals with us spiritually. We are all in spiritual bondage as slaves to sin. Christ leads us out of that bondage by miraculously changing our hearts and making us new creatures. We wander in the wilderness of this world just for a short while, before being translated into the real promised land, which is in the next world. That’s true religion, about which the history of the Israelites is merely a picture. We’re told this in 1 Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 10:1-4

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

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

1 Corinthians 10:11

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

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

1 Corinthians 10:5

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

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

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

Philippians 1:6

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

Romans 8:38-39

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

John 10:27,28

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

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

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

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

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

1 Samuel 15:22

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

Isaiah 1:11-17

To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. When ye come to appear before me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations; incense is an

abomination unto me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hateth: they are a trouble unto me; I am weary to bear them. And when ye spread forth your hands, I will hide mine eyes from you: yea, when ye make many prayers, I will not hear: your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Amos 5:21-24

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

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

Jeremiah 38:2-3

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

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

Jeremiah 29:4-14

Thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, unto all that are carried away captives, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem unto Babylon; Build ye houses, and dwell in them; and plant gardens, and eat the fruit of them; Take ye wives, and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; that ye may be increased there, and not diminished. And seek the peace of the city whither I have caused you to be carried away captives, and pray unto the Lord for it: for in the peace thereof shall ye have peace. For thus saith the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel; Let not your prophets and your diviners, that be in the midst of you, deceive you, neither hearken to your dreams which ye cause to be dreamed. For they prophesy falsely unto you in my name: I have not sent them, saith the Lord. For thus saith the Lord, That after seventy years be accomplished at Babylon I will visit you, and perform my good word toward you, in causing you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the Lord, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end. Then shall ye call upon me, and ye shall go and pray unto me, and I will hearken unto you. And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart. And I will be found of you, saith the Lord: and I will turn away your captivity, and I will gather you from all the nations, and from all the places whither I have driven you, saith the Lord; and I will bring you again into the place whence I caused you to be carried away captive.

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

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

Acts 7:38,39

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

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

Isaiah 10:21-23

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

And this phenomenon continues today.

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

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

John 8:12

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

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

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

Amos 1:1

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

Amos 7:14,15

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

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

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

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

Ezekiel 9:4-6

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

Luke 12:48

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

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

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

Hebrews 10:25

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

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

Joel 2:12-14

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

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