

Church History Re-evaluated

Contents

The Church: Altogether Different from Jesus Christ

The Change Begins

Apostolic Succession

Elevation of the Bishops

Elevation of the Lord's Supper

Becoming "gods"

Mental Assent

— Creeds

— Ecumenical Councils

Monasticism

Forced Religion

The True Church Throughout History

The Church: Altogether Different from Jesus Christ

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Do we know what any of these words mean? Anyone who has not been born and brought up in an environment where words such as these are regularly used, cannot possibly know what is going on. The churches are essentially speaking a foreign language to outsiders. But those entrenched in such organisations are quite happy there, knowing the vocabulary, and going along with it all.

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

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

The Change Begins

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

Revelation 22:18,19

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

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

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

Apostolic Succession

One of the earliest post-apostolic leaders we really know anything about was Clement of Rome. He died around 100AD, so he would have been contemporary with the apostles. He became the bishop of Rome for the last few years of his life.

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

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

— 1 Clement 25:2-4

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

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

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

— 1 Clement 44:1,2

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

Clement is now regarded as one of the first “popes” of Rome, supposedly in “apostolic succession” to Peter himself (of whom there is no actual Biblical evidence of ever having been in Rome). Consequently, in medieval art, Clement is anachronistically depicted in papal robes, but he obviously never wore such things. What we find generally depicted in “church history” today is quite often nothing like the reality. In every generation we change “history” to suit ourselves.

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

Psalm 50:21

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

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

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

Elevation of the Bishops

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

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

1 Timothy 3:1

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

1 Timothy 3:13

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

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

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

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

— Letter to the Ephesians 5

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

— Letter to the Ephesians 6

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

— Letter to the Magnesians 2

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

— Letter to the Magnesians 6

“As therefore the Lord did nothing without the Father, being united to Him, neither by Himself nor by the apostles, so neither do ye anything without the bishop and presbyters....”

— Letter to the Magnesians 7

“...there is one bishop, along with the presbytery and deacons, my fellow-servants: that so, whatsoever ye do, ye may do it according to [the will of] God....”

— Letter to the Philadelphians 4

“...But the Spirit proclaimed these words: Do nothing without the bishop....”

— Letter to the Philadelphians 7

“Remember in your prayers the Church in Syria, which now has God for its shepherd, instead of me.” [as he was about to be martyred]

— Letter to the Romans 9

“For, since ye are subject to the bishop as to Jesus Christ, ye appear to me to live not after the manner of men, but according to Jesus Christ, who died for us, in order, by believing in His death, ye may escape from death. It is therefore necessary that, as ye indeed do, so without the bishop ye should do nothing, but should also be subject

to the presbytery, as to the apostle of Jesus Christ, who is our hope, in whom, if we live, we shall [at last] be found.”

— Letter to the Trallians 2

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

— Letter to the Trallians 3

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

— Letter to the Smyrnaeans 8

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

— Letter to the Smyrnaeans 9

Elevation of the Lord's Supper

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

1 Corinthians 11:24-26

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

But Ignatius elevated the Lord's Supper into a superstitious, mystical ceremony, which only the bishop and his cronies could rightly administer, being the only ones who

supposedly had the awesome power to magically turn the bread and wine into the true body and blood of Christ:

“...if any one be not within the altar, he is deprived of the bread of God...”

— Letter to the Ephesians 5

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

— Letter to the Ephesians 20

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

— Letter to the Trallians 5

“Take ye heed, then, to have but one Eucharist. For there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup to [show forth] the unity of His blood...”

— Letter to the Philadelphians 4

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

— Letter to the Smyrnaeans 7

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

Becoming “gods”

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

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

1 John 3:2

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

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

2 Peter 3:18

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

That growth in knowledge is what sanctifies us:

John 17:17

Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.

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

Romans 7:24,25

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

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

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

1 John 3:6

***Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not:** whosoever sinneth hath not seen him, neither known him.*

1 John 3:9

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

1 John 5:18

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

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

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

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

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

Genesis 3:22

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

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

Genesis 3:5

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

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

The second Scripture that is misused, is:

Psalms 82:6

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

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

Genesis 1:27,28

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

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

Psalms 82:7

But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.

We all die, which is the wages of sin:

Romans 6:23

For the wages of sin is death....

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

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

John 10:34-36

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

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

The third Scripture that is misused, is:

2 Peter 1:4

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

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

This idea of us becoming “gods” began very early on in “church history,” and is far more widespread in Christendom than we think.

Many of the early so-called “church fathers” taught it. It was they who developed this false idea. A few examples will suffice:

“The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”

— **Irenaeus** (c. 130-200) *Against Heresies* Book 5, Preface

“For we cast blame upon [God], because we have not been made gods from the beginning, but at first merely men, then at length gods; although God has adopted this course out of His pure benevolence, that no one may impute to Him invidiousness or grudgingness he declares, “I have said, Ye are gods; and all of you are sons of the Most High.”

— **Irenaeus** (c. 130-200) *Against Heresies* Book 4, Chapter 38

“For it was necessary, at first, that nature should be exhibited; then, after that, that what was mortal should be conquered and swallowed up by immortality, and the corruptible by incorruptibility, and that man should be made after the image and likeness of God.”

— **Irenaeus** (c. 130-200) *Against Heresies* Book 4, Chapter 38

“The Word of God became man, that thou mayest learn from man how man may become God.”

— **Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150-215) *Exhortation to the Heathen*, Chapter 1

*“For if one knows himself, he will know God; and knowing God, he will be made like God”
“His is beauty, the true beauty, for it is God; and that man becomes God, since God so wills. Heraclitus, then, rightly said, ‘Men are gods, and gods are men.’ For the Word Himself is the manifest mystery: God in man, and man God”*

— **Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150-215) *The Instructor*, Book 3, Chapter 1

“He who listens to the Lord, and follows the prophecy given by Him, will be formed perfectly in the likeness of the teacher — made a god going about in flesh.”

— **Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150-215) *Miscellanies*, Book 7, Chapter 16

“And to be incorruptible is to participate in divinity...”

— **Clement of Alexandria** (c. 150-215) *Miscellanies*, Book 5, Chapter 10

“Men were made like God, free from suffering and death, provided that they kept His commandments, and were deemed deserving of the name of His sons, and yet they, becoming like Adam and Eve, work out death for themselves; let the interpretation of the Psalm be held just as you wish, yet thereby it is demonstrated that all men are deemed worthy of becoming ‘gods,’ and of having power to become sons of the Highest.”

— **Justin Martyr** (c. 100-165) *Dialogue with Trypho*, Chapter 124

“For if He had made him immortal from the beginning, He would have made him God. Again, if He had made him mortal, God would seem to be the cause of his death. Neither, then, immortal nor yet mortal did He make him, but, as we have said above, capable of both; so that if he should incline to the things of immortality, keeping the commandment of God, he should receive as reward from Him immortality, and should become God...”

— **Theophilus of Antioch** (c. 120-190) *To Autolycus*, Book 2, Chapter 27

“And you shall be a companion of the Deity, and a co-heir with Christ, no longer enslaved by lusts or passions, and never again wasted by disease. For you have become God: for whatever sufferings you underwent while being a man, these He gave to you, because you were of mortal mould, but whatever it is consistent with God to impart, these God has promised to bestow upon you, because you have been deified, and begotten unto immortality.”

— **Hippolytus of Rome** (c. 170-235) *Refutation of All Heresies*, Book 10, Chapter 30

“If, therefore, man has become immortal, he will also be God. And if he is made God by water and the Holy Spirit after the regeneration of the laver he is found to be also joint-heir with Christ after the resurrection from the dead.”

— **Hippolytus of Rome** (c. 170-235) *The Discourse on the Holy Theophany*

“Therefore He was not man, and then became God, but He was God, and then became man, and that to deify us”

— **Athanasius of Alexandria** (c. 296-373) *Against the Arians*, Discourse 1, Para. 39

“...for as the Lord, putting on the body, became man, so we men are deified by the Word as being taken to Him through His flesh.”

— **Athanasius of Alexandria** (c. 296-373) *Against the Arians*, Discourse 3, Para. 34

“For He was made man that we might be made God.”

— **Athanasius of Alexandria** (c. 296-373) *On the Incarnation*, Section 54

“Since the God who was manifested infused Himself into perishable humanity for this purpose, viz. that by this communion with Deity mankind might at the same time be deified, for this end it is that, by dispensation of His grace, He disseminated Himself in every believer.”

— **Gregory of Nyssa** (c. 335-395) *The Great Catechism* 37

“For just as He in Himself assimilated His own human nature to the power of the Godhead, being a part of the common nature, but not being subject to the inclination to sin which is in that nature (for it says: ‘He did no sin, nor was deceit found in his mouth’), so, also, will He lead each person to union with the Godhead if they do nothing unworthy of union with the Divine.”

— **Gregory of Nyssa** (c. 335-395) *On Christian Perfection*

“‘For He hath given them power to become the sons of God.’ (John 1:12) If we have been made sons of God, we have also been made gods.”

— **Augustine of Hippo** (c. 354-430) *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, Psalm 50

“He came down into our condition solely in order to lead us to his own divine state.”

— **Cyril of Alexandria**

“He continues to wear the Body which He assumed, until He make me God by the power of His Incarnation.”

— **Gregory of Nazianzus** *Orations* 30:14

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

— **Gregory of Nazianzus** *Orations* 29:19

“becoming a god is the highest goal of all”

— **Basil of Caesarea** *On the Spirit* 9:23

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

And all the various Eastern Orthodox churches go one step further than this. They don’t even believe that men are born with sinful, selfish natures at all. They believe that we are all born “neutral,” with merely a propensity to sin. Consequently, there is no obstacle to our getting better and better, and becoming “gods” in the end. They call this process “*theosis*.” To them, this is the main purpose of every believer.

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

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

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

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

— **Catechism of the Catholic Church**

“Now the gift of grace surpasses every capability of created nature, since it is nothing short of a partaking of the Divine Nature, which exceeds every other nature. And thus it is impossible that any creature should cause grace. For it is as necessary that God alone should deify, bestowing a partaking of the Divine Nature by a participated likeness, as it is impossible that anything save fire should enkindle.”

— **Thomas Aquinas**

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

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

Mental Assent

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

– Creeds

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

The Bible says:

John 3:3, 5-7

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Luke 23:43

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

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

James 2:19

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

Matthew 25:41

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

– Ecumenical Councils

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

But, if one didn’t assent, then one was thrown out of the church as an heretic and persecuted. So, every controversy that came along, split the church further and further. Some of these council decisions were dubious, some were mere semantics, some were even reversed by later council decisions. Yet, every time a decision was made, the majority vote in the council always became the “orthodox” dogma, and the minorities who disagreed were cast out and persecuted. They could no longer be church members.

Those cast out formed new churches based on their own beliefs, and they too became just as intolerant with anyone who opposed them in their church councils.

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

Monasticism

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

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

Matthew 19:21

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Philippians 3:4-11

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

The sixteenth century German monk Martin Luther, too, strained himself. He wanted to be a far better monk than all other monks around him, until in his privileged position of having access to the Scriptures, he came across a verse originally written by the prophet Habakkuk:

Habakkuk 2:4

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

But it kept on being repeated throughout the New Testament:

Romans 1:17

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

Galatians 3:11

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

Hebrews 10:38

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Forced Religion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Romans 8:7

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

Isaiah 26:10

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

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

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

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

Revelation 22:11

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

Today, we have the exact opposite situation from most of past history. Nobody is forced to go to church any more. So many don't. And those who do, have such a variety to choose from. But is this really healthy?

Unbelievers, seeing such a variety, are even more put off the church. If they ever did have a desire to go to church, which is unlikely but possible, which one do they go to? All there is around us is confusion.

True believers also have a problem. No church is perfect. None has all truth. If we think one does, we're deluded. We may be free to choose which church to go to, but, wherever we go, we're never going to be fully satisfied.

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

And then there are a third group of people. It is difficult to ascertain whether they are true believers or not. They go to church. But they didn't "choose" a church. They go to church out of habit. They've always gone there. Their family have always gone there. Many were born and brought up in the church. They don't know anything else. They think they are true Christians, and I have no wish to judge whether they are or not. But they will stay in "their" church no matter what, right or wrong. Because it is their "family" church, they wouldn't dream of going anywhere else. They could be "born again," and be true Christians, but this would probably be despite the church rather than because of it.

Whatever our position in church life today, the exhortation is the same: We need to be close to God and His Word in the Bible to be really set free:

John 8:36

If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.

The True Church Throughout History

Despite all this "church history," the Lord still had His people in every generation.

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

1 Corinthians 1:26-29

*For ye see your calling, brethren, how that **not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:** That no flesh should glory in his presence.*

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

Matthew 5:5

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

So, by definition, from a study of "church history," we are not going to know who most of the true Christians have been at all.

Comparatively speaking, we have only had the complete Bible available in our own language for a few years. We should think of this as a tremendous privilege. This is our primary source of information about our sinful natures and the way of salvation. But, although it is now widely available in many languages, sadly, in the West at least, nobody reads it.

Before the Protestant Reformation, hardly anybody even saw a Bible at all. We read of certain writers who had privileged access in their monasteries and universities, such as Thomas A Kempis and Martin Luther. They became true Christians as a result of their reading of Scripture, and we have their writings today for our benefit.

But most believers in past history didn't have that privilege of having the Bible or any part of it available to them. Maybe they couldn't even read. And they couldn't find the truth in their local church, because the churches had abandoned their duty of propagating the truth and started teaching different things instead. So, where could anyone find the truth?

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

John 6:37

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

And the Lord usually uses means. We don't need a whole Bible. All we need to do, is to come into contact with *some* of it. This contact could be in written form, but, as most couldn't read in olden days, it was more likely to come through personal witness of the truth. One person telling another the truth from generation to generation. This is the real "apostolic succession," but we can't see or measure it in any way.

This is why it is so important for us to know the truth for ourselves. Not only does it bring salvation to us personally, but also, just as in the past, we could be the main means by which the Lord propagates the truth to others. The church should be these means, but it has failed miserably, so we have to do it ourselves.

The Lord has used monasteries, for example, to copy the Scriptures accurately through the ages, until the invention of moveable type and the printing press automated that process. The Lord has even used the churches for some useful purposes too. But this is the Lord's providence at work. He uses all sorts of means, even evil people, to perform His purposes. That does not mean that these sources are right, or vital means of true religion. History clearly tells us otherwise.

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

Luke 12:32

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

John 6:37

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

James 1:26,27

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

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