

Personal Testimony by Paul Hayden

Introduction

Hello. My name is Paul Hayden. I am nothing in this world, and the sooner that all of us realise this about ourselves the better.

“For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.” James 4:14.

“If a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.” Galatians 6:3.

“God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few.” Ecclesiastes 5:2.

But the Lord has been good to me. I will be dead soon, praise the Lord, and I will no longer be in this sinful body, nor indeed in this present evil world, but be transformed to become like Christ. Indeed I will be with Him, which is far, far better. What a glorious, sure hope the true Christian has!

“For we must needs die, and are as water spilt on the ground, which cannot be gathered up again.” 2 Samuel 14:14.

“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.” 1 John 3:2.

“...having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.” Philippians 1:23.

How about you, reader? Do you think that the Lord will just let things carry on as they are in this world for ever? Can you not see how evil this world really is?

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

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

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

Praise the Lord there is going to be a judgment, and because the Lord is the only one who can see into the hearts of men, that judgment is going to be made in perfect righteousness.

"It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." Hebrews 9:27.

"He hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead." Acts 17:31.

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad." 2 Corinthians 5:10.

If the Lord was perfectly fair and just, all of us would be condemned to be punished for ever for our sins.

"The day of the LORD is great and very terrible; and who can abide it?" Joel 2:11.

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

"For the great day of his wrath is come; and who shall be able to stand?" Revelation 6:17.

Modern psychology, which has crept into the church in a big way, teaches that we should have a good view of ourselves, but this is terribly wrong. We all deserve hell fire for ever, because we all really are that bad.

"Then Job answered the LORD, and said, Behold, I am vile." Job 40:5,6.

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

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." Romans 3:23.

So, what can we do? The only thing we can do is to recognise our inability and repent.

"I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Job 42:5,6.

"From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Matthew 4:17.

"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord." Acts 3:19.

Maybe the Lord will answer us. He doesn't have to. The prerogative in salvation is always with the Lord. But our great hope is that He is a merciful God.

"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.” Joel 2:12,13.

“Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD’S anger.” Zephaniah 2:3.

“And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.” Luke 18:13.

Now, while we are waiting to be translated to glory, we have to live in this world. This testimony is how the Lord has dealt with me, and kept me through the vanity that we call life in this world.

“Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun.” Ecclesiastes 2:11.

Chapter 1: Before going to Church

I am not from a church-going family. My first notion that there was something wrong in the world was around 1963 at the age of seven, when I saw people in the street not using zebra crossings correctly. They were not pressing the button and waiting for the little man to turn green, but cutting corners, crossing away from the black and white stripes and/or when the man was on red. I couldn’t bear it. I remember screaming once, to an unknown deity, “Take me away!”

Another incident was when I was about thirteen. I hated sport because I couldn’t see the point of it. I remember being forced to play football at school, and in one match I was the only person apart from the goalkeeper between a rapidly advancing member of the opposite team and the goal. I just stood there and made no attempt to stop him. My fellow team-mates were screaming at me, “Why didn’t you try to stop him?” To which I replied, “Why?” They all looked at me as though I was completely mad. Yet, nobody actually answered my simple, straight-forward question. It was not a difficult question to understand. Neither did I mumble, I spoke clearly so that they could all hear. I really, genuinely wanted to know the answer. I am still looking for an answer to that question today.

About this time, I started a club (as most children do at that age). It was called “HARUS,” which stood for “Hayden’s Anti-Religion Society” (sorry, I can’t remember what the U stood for). I couldn’t see the point in any religion. I thought they were all a waste of time. None of them seemed logical. Nobody joined my society, but I got opposition from some children from church-going families. None of them, however, said anything to convince me to change my mind on these things. They just showed disapproval, without telling me why. Again, I found that so frustrating. Just answer my question, “Why?” and I might reconsider. But nobody did.

My grandfather, who died when I was nine, gave me a Bible for Christmas shortly before his death. I liked the colour photographs and charts, but never read it, and it was left on

my shelf for years. I remember asking my parents later for a Koran, simply so I could “have the set,” because I didn’t believe any of these religions.

At the age of eighteen (1974), I went to university. Immediately I left school, I lost all my friends; none of the few people who put up with me at school was in the slightest bit interested in continuing a friendship after leaving. I went to the University of East Anglia in Norwich, to study Chemistry, which was my favourite subject at school. I spent three years at university, but didn’t do any work at all in the final year, because I had come to the conclusion that even studying Chemistry, my favourite subject at school, was pointless. Why learn all these things? Why? So I didn’t get my degree.

In 1977, with three other friends who had also “dropped out” of university, we all decided to start a new life in Bristol. One of them professed to be a Christian, and took me along once to his church, a Charismatic Anglican church. To anyone who knew Bristol in those days, I only need mention the name “Pip’n’Jay” and you will know exactly which church I mean. The (Anglican) church of St Philip and St Jacob was a great success story (at least numerically) as lots of young people flocked there for its lively Charismatic gatherings. But I saw that it was all an outward show, and again began to question the whole thing. At this point I did try to read the Bible, and started, logically I thought, at the beginning in Genesis. By the time I got to Exodus, I had given in. What was the point of all these animal sacrifices, and seemingly pointless rules and regulations? My friend who invited me to church in the first place, turned out not to be a true Christian after all, and left the church, becoming a member of a gay club for a while, before moving in with a woman elsewhere in the city and claiming to be a white witch.

On December 25th 1977, one of the four having left Bristol by then, the three of us who remained had “Christmas” lunch together. Unbeknown to each other, both of the other two had arranged other things in the evening. They did feel genuinely sorry for leaving me on my own that evening, but it was obviously not deliberate on either part, so it didn’t bother me unduly. I went back to my small bed-sit. Having nothing else to do, I picked up the Bible my grandfather had given me all those years ago, and started reading it, this time from the beginning of the New Testament. I had never read anything like it before. I just knew that this Jesus that I was reading about had all the right answers. Even though I did not know any theology, and had no background whatsoever in any church matters, I could see that He:

“...taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” Matthew 7:29.

I prayed to God at that moment (something I had never done or thought about before) that if He existed He should let me know. This indeed He did. I suddenly realised that, not only did He exist, but also that everything He had said in this book I was reading was true, good and right. Many years later, I told someone about my conversion, and they were amazed that I had never come across the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12) before. They assumed everyone had heard of them, as they had been brought up in a church-going family. But that isn’t true. I hadn’t come across them before, for a start! And I thought they were wonderful, whereas they weren’t such a great deal to them.

Now I was a “Christian” I started to read my Bible every day, because I loved it. I copied out the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew chapters 5-7) by hand and put it on my wall. I loved it. I had not wanted to do any of these things before, such as read my Bible or pray, but the new life given by God to the believer really changes his behaviour to stop doing things he enjoyed before, and to start doing things he would never have otherwise

thought about. This is the life of the truly converted Christian, when God grants him faith and repentance to cease from wanting to sin and to rather seek righteousness and to love the very law that otherwise would have condemned him if God had not granted these gifts to him.

Chapter 2: Early Churches

Unitarian Church, Oaklands Road, Bristol (March 1978)

One of the things I now wanted to do was go to church. Oh dear, the problems began here! I had never before been to a church meeting except for a handful of weddings and funerals, so I had no idea about all the different denominations, what they taught, why they existed or how they operated. I assumed that everyone in the churches had had exactly the same experience as me, and been brought to love their Bibles too! So I simply went to the church six doors down the road from where I was living at the time in Bristol (now closed). Being the nearest church, this was the logical place to go. It was a Unitarian church. There were only six people at the service, including the minister, the organist and myself. I remember the sermon being about the difference between the “supernatural” and the “supranatural,” but that is all I can remember about it. I didn’t know at the time, but Unitarians deny the deity of Christ, a fundamental doctrine of the faith. If Christ is not God he is not to be worshipped and adored, which is clearly a wrong teaching. However, not knowing any of these things at the time, I moved from that church straightaway to an Anglican church nearby for no other reason than that I wanted to go to a church with a few more people in it. God even uses our carnal reasoning in His providence to His own ends, to the praise of His glory.

Christ Church, Clifton (Anglican) (1978-1982)

I went to this Anglican church, Christ Church, Clifton, for nearly four years. It called itself “evangelical” in that the Bible was used and studied to some degree, so I received some teaching, if only on, what I would describe now as a very superficial level. The church was very well organised. New people in the church were encouraged to go to a “Christian Basics” class in midweek, of which there were two, each lasting one term (ten weeks). After going through “Christian Basics I” and “Christian Basics II,” I was then put into the nearest weekly Bible study group to my home. There was also a meeting on a Tuesday night for “young people” like me. However, I didn’t like going to these, because they were just large social meetings, which I found miserable, because they seemed to be solely for people who wanted huge social lives. I would just have been grateful for one or two friends. So I soon gave up going to these meetings.

The church was so big that after three and a half years in it, people were still coming up to me after the service and asking if I was a visitor. In any case, shortly afterwards I moved to Bangor, North Wales, with my work, where I lived for the next twenty years.

English Methodist Church, High Street, Bangor (Methodist) (1983)

For some reason unbeknown to me, I seemed to know that all of the Anglican churches in the Bangor area didn't use the Bible, or at least didn't believe a word of it, so, I went to the English Methodists. Again, as a "young person," I was encouraged to go to the Sunday evening "fellowship" at the manse. I only went twice and couldn't stand any more of it. Unless one loves huge social events, which I didn't, it was a complete waste of time. The people who regularly attended these meetings live for an enormous social life, and love to be seen to be happy and full of life by as many people as possible. I really find all this false, and rather longed for one person to be a real friend. So, again, no success.

One day, I was listening to a sermon in the church, and the speaker told us that the book of Daniel was written in the time of the Maccabees, long after most of the prophecies in it had been fulfilled. He also told us that it wasn't a real history, but just a book of fables written to spur the Jews on in their faith during the difficulties they had in those days. I thus found out that the Methodists in Bangor didn't believe a word of the Bible either, so after a few months in this church, I moved on again.

Penrallt English Baptist Church, Bangor (Baptist Union) (1983-1988)

I decided to go to Penrallt English Baptist Church, which was then in a building just off Glanrafon Hill (I understand that they have since moved to Holyhead Road, and the Welsh Evangelical church now occupies their old building). These people seemed to use their Bibles, even more so than in Christ Church, Clifton, and certainly more than in the Methodist church. So I started going there, and indeed became a member, and was there for nearly five years.

Again, church people just seemed to want their enormous social life. Nobody seemed to want to befriend anyone properly, despite everyone talking about how we should love one another. I went to the social events, and indeed made a few acquaintances there, but it always seemed like they just tolerated me, rather than really wanted me around. I didn't complain though, but was grateful for any fellowship.

At Penrallt, I had noticed a distinct decline in the worship of God in the five years I was there. When I first went there it was all traditional hymns, with maybe one of the more modern "choruses" introduced during the morning service as a sort of innovation. By the time I left, there was a twenty-minute slot led by the "worship band" which was all choruses. After I left, they introduced a new Baptist hymn-book which incorporated some of the more popular "choruses" of the day into its very pages. Some of these were popular for a time while the book was being compiled, but upon publication they were already going well out of fashion (who sings Graham Kendrick's "Make Way" these days). The hymns have at least lasted over 100 years, whereas the modern songs don't seem to last 100 days before people are bored with them and have to invent new ones. Nowadays, people just want their sixty minutes of getting a "high" (like being on heroin) and that will be enough to keep them going for the rest of the week. This is not true religion.

Towards the end of my time in Penrallt, I went to a weekend "houseparty" organised by the church at Living Waters Christian Conference centre in Dolwen, near Colwyn Bay. (I understand that this has since closed down). I went with everybody else on the coach. The Friday night was awful, as we all had to play silly games supposedly to get to know each other (we knew each other anyway, because we were all from the same church!). I nearly went home then. Saturday afternoon was all right, we simply went for a walk in the

hills, which was very enjoyable. But as they were preparing for the Sunday morning service, I could see that I wasn't going to like it. They had put animal masks beneath every seat, and I could tell that we were going to have to dress up as animals out of Noah's Ark, and jump around the room. That was it. I remember trying to leave on Saturday, but I changed my mind, and came back after going half a mile. But on the Sunday morning, I said to myself, "I'm really not going to do this." So I left, walked the four miles into Colwyn Bay and got a bus home.

The reason I finally left Penrallt was that I got to know some students from Ebenezer Evangelical Church, St Paul's Terrace, Bangor and they started telling me about the difference between "Arminianism" and "Calvinism." I had not heard these words before (they are hidden from public view in Arminian churches, making one believe that Arminianism is the only form of Christianity there is), but I found that the difference all boiled down to whether one believed that man had free will or not. If he did, then Arminianism was the correct system of doctrine (all the "points" of each doctrinal system hang together, if one doctrine is right all the others in the system are right, and if one is wrong all the others in the system are too); whereas if man did not have free will, then Calvinism was the correct system of doctrine. Now a lot of people say that doctrine doesn't matter, it is love that counts. However, if that were to be so, then people who call themselves "Christian" but don't go to any church would be just as right as the church-going Christian, as the Muslim and as the Satanist. One has to believe some doctrine to have any kind of faith or belief system at all. Objectively, in the end, there is only one absolute truth. Taking a ridiculous example to prove the point, if the moon is really made of green cheese, we can believe that it is made of rock and dust all we like. We can even believe that men have been there and brought some of this rock and dust back to prove it, but if that is not the truth, then no matter how much we say we believe it, and indeed can convince ourselves of any "evidence" we believe exists to prove our position, we are still believing a lie if, absolutely, it is not so. In the case of the moon, it is not particularly important whether we know the truth about its constituency or not, but in the case of eternal matters such as heaven and hell, the final judgment and the things of God, it really is pretty important.

Now, nobody on this earth knows all things. We are all growing:

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

Also, we all come from different backgrounds. So there are always going to be differences between individual believers if we look hard enough. However, there is finally only one objective truth, and major doctrines such as heaven and hell, the deity of Christ etc. are very important to come to a knowledge of, if we are to understand what salvation to eternal life is all about. Coming to a knowledge of the truth is vital:

"...who will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth." 1 Timothy 2:4.

Anyway, back to the doctrinal difference I mentioned earlier. Because I had been in an Arminian Baptist church for nearly five years (and other Arminian churches before that) I had been indoctrinated into their system of belief. So when these students from Ebenezer came along and told me I hadn't got free will, I was rather annoyed at them! Of course I have free will, I can freely choose to do something or not to do something, that's easy! Anyway, these discussions at least got my mind thinking around these issues, and after six months of this, I woke up one morning and realised that for five years at Penrallt, and

several years before that in the Methodists and Anglicans, I had been taught a lie. It was like having my legs kicked from under me. Man has not got free will at all. All he can do is sin. The depth of my depravity really came home to me and I realised that in all conscience I must leave Penrallt and go to Ebenezer Evangelical Church, as this was the church in town that had the reputation of being “Calvinistic.” So I moved churches.

Several years later, I came across some people from Penrallt, and they invited me to a weekend of “Fun and Fellowship” at a conference centre in Rhyd Ddu that they had organised. I wasn’t interested in going for the whole weekend, but I went for the walk on the Saturday. I am glad I didn’t go for the whole weekend. I made the mistake of asking who their guest speaker for the weekend was. There was an embarrassed silence. That’s how I found out that the “fun and fellowship” weekend was just that – fun and fellowship. Nothing else. No teaching, just fun and fellowship. What’s the point? All the churches are going this way. They only see “church” as being “fun and fellowship” with each other, and God is completely ignored.

Chapter 3: Ebenezer Evangelical Church

Ebenezer Evangelical Church, St. Paul’s Terrace, Bangor (Independent Evangelical) (1988-1996)

In Ebenezer, they had a weekly Bible study and a weekly prayer meeting. However, just before I started going there, the Bible study was stopped. I should have noticed this as a warning sign then. Any church that drops an opportunity to study the Bible and thinks that the prayer meeting is “the most important meeting of the week,” as they say, is a church which has a low view of God’s Word and thinks too highly of themselves. Prayer meetings in these churches are more for people who like telling God what to do. In any case, despite these things, I stayed in Ebenezer for seven years.

There was regular expository Bible teaching in the pulpit every Lord's Day, which was reasonable, and some of the people there could at least talk about Biblical things, although certainly not all of them by any means. But as the months went by, I found out that, after my student friends (who had introduced me to “Calvinism”) had left, having all finished their university courses, the church was not as “Calvinistic” as its reputation had led me to believe it would be. Indeed I remember finding out that one of the most well-respected ministers amongst the Evangelicals in North Wales, whom everybody loved, showed himself to be a gross Arminian. And he was not the only one.

By the time I left Ebenezer, a decline in the worship, remarkably similar to Penrallt, was beginning to happen, with the introduction of just one chorus in the morning service to start with.... That wasn’t the reason I left Ebenezer though. No, I left because I exposed impropriety in the eldership, and they did not like me doing that.

I must mention what happened, but I have to say here that most so-called “Christians” today would not agree with me on this. Most of them would consider it to be the unforgivable sin to complain about the church in any way. It will be “rocking the boat” and a “bad witness” to unbelievers. However, in my defence, I must say first of all, look at John’s letters to the seven churches of Asia (Revelation chapters 2 & 3). John is most of all concerned with truth and righteousness rather than whether he is “rocking the boat” or

not. Secondly, the whole reason that Christianity exists is that it is primarily concerned with morality. It is all about right and wrong. God defines what is right and what is wrong. The true believer must love righteousness and hate wickedness. I hasten to add of course that justification is by grace through faith alone. We do not get to heaven by our works, because none of us can be perfect.

We are called to be holy for God is holy. Believers are justified by Christ's righteousness being imputed to them and their sin to Christ. However, this does not mean that they can then do what they like, far from it:

"Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy. And if ye call on the Father, who without respect of persons judgeth according to every man's work, pass the time of your sojourning here in fear: Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." 1 Peter 1:13-19.

We are to love righteousness and hate wickedness. That is the calling of the true believer. Even though he still sins a thousand times a day in thought and word and deed whilst he is in this wretched earthly body, he is still called to have a heart that hates sin and that hungers and thirsts after righteousness:

"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled." Matthew 5:6.

To love one another is of course a good, right and proper thing to do as well, after all God commands us to do this, but what is love?

"Love worketh no ill to his neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law." Romans 13:10.

Loving one's neighbour involves the law, i.e. righteousness, i.e. keeping the Ten Commandments.

"By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments..." 1 John 5:2,3.

Only when our relationship with God is right, which is expressed by loving God and keeping his commandments, is our relationship with each other then right also. So many "Christians" spend all their time working at their relationships with one another, not seeing that this is futile. They should be "working at" their relationship with God. If this is right, the rest falls into place easily. Charity (i.e. love):

"...rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth." 1 Corinthians 13:6.

That is my defence for the position I took when I stood up against impropriety in the eldership of Ebenezer Evangelical Church in the face of the vast majority who simply thought I was a troublemaker "rocking the boat."

The situation was that the church had a permanent minister and an associate minister who was just on a three year contract. During this three years, the associate minister had access into the upper echelons of the “Officers Meetings” as they are called, where all the decision-making took place. He discovered several places where the “Church Officers” were not doing their duty properly as elders and deacons, one of which was not visiting the flock. The point here is that because he put his finger on a few inconsistencies in the eldership, the elders were not really very keen on him.

Well now then, the permanent minister announced his retirement many months in advance. Because an associate minister was already in place in the church, the elders could not easily pass him by when looking for a replacement for the permanent minister. So, reluctantly it seemed to me, they asked the members' meeting if they would vote on whether the associate minister's name should be put forward to be considered for the job as the next permanent minister of the church (notice that it wasn't a straight-forward vote for him to be the next minister, rather a vote as to merely whether his name was to be put forward – which made it so plain that the elders didn't really want him). A two-thirds majority in favour was needed, and as the number of members in the church was somewhere in the thirties, each vote counted for about three percent of the total, so every vote was very important. As God is my witness I distinctly remember the permanent minister saying just before the vote that any abstentions would have to be counted in the total number of votes cast. This is important, because depending on whether one counts the abstentions in the total number of votes cast or not, it becomes slightly easier or harder to get the two-thirds majority required. If we do count the abstentions as part of the total, it makes it slightly harder to get the two-thirds majority, as the total is still the total number there eligible to vote. If we don't count the abstentions as part of the total, the total goes down to the total number eligible to vote minus the number of abstentions, hence it is easier to get a two-thirds majority because the total number decreases and each vote counts as more of a percentage of the total. By the permanent minister announcing that the abstentions would count in the total number of votes, he was making it slightly harder for a two-thirds majority to be achieved – which would have suited the elders very nicely as they did not want the associate minister to win the vote.

However, there is still no real problem as yet, because at least they announced how the voting was going to take place, and exactly what the status of abstentions was going to be, before the actual vote, so the rules were crystal clear. In fact, the vote fell just short of the two-thirds majority required whichever way the abstentions were counted, so the vote was clearly against the associate minister and there was no problem.

A couple of months later, another potential minister came along. He was interviewed in the members' meeting and came for a couple of trial sermons as usual. (Incidentally, just in passing, in the members' meeting I asked what qualifications he had for the ministry, and the answer was that he had a PhD in Geography – i.e. no theological training at all!). Anyway, the time came for the vote to take place on whether to call him to be the new minister. I assumed that the abstentions would be counted in the total number of votes cast as before, so I did not say anything about it beforehand, as I saw no need to. When one of the elders came in to announce the result, he said that there were so many votes in favour, so many against and three abstentions. Now I had quickly worked out that if one *did* count the number of abstentions in the total number then the candidate would not have got the two-thirds majority, whereas if one *didn't* count the abstentions in the total number he would have got the two-thirds majority. So when the elder announced that result and then said that the church will therefore be extending a call to the man, I had to

speak up and say that they had changed the rules since the last occasion. An acrimonious exchange took place between various members, and it was eventually decided to have a re-ballot.

I had to point out that they had changed the rules. I wouldn't mind which set of rules they stuck to, whether one counted the abstentions in the total number or not, as long as they were consistent throughout, which they were obviously not prepared to be (to their own ends). The funny thing was that in the re-ballot, one of those who abstained changed their vote to a "No" vote and the two-thirds majority was never reached whichever way the votes were counted, so this candidate never came!

People's attitudes to me were very interesting after this incident. To the vast majority, I was the troublemaker, "rocking the boat" and therefore bringing the name of Christ into disrepute in most people's eyes. To five others, they saw exactly my point, and it was a privilege to know these people. The majority were worshipping the "church." Their beloved "church," which they had either grown up in or at least been in a long time, could do no wrong and the unity of their tinpot little church in the back of beyond became their all-consuming passion. "We must love one another and not divide at all costs" was their cry. Whereas the five who agreed with me and myself would rather say:

"We ought to obey God rather than men." Acts 5:29.

Doing what is right is a million times more important than visible unity in any organisation. I stand firm on this, and if I am misunderstood by being thought of as a troublemaker, there is nothing I can do about it. I would rather be in my shoes on the Day of Judgment than the shoes of those who worship the great god "church."

After the incident of the meeting described above, I wrote a letter of complaint to the elders, most of the contents of which I have forgotten (I wish I had kept a copy now, so I could have reproduced it here), but one phrase sticks in my mind and that is I stated that "this political manoeuvring stinks." This was true, it does. I do not regret writing a word of it, because it was the truth. However, the elders did not like it at all. The following Lord's Day, after the evening service, one of them took me into the church library on my own and harangued me for half an hour, giving his take on things. I can't remember much of what was said now, so I don't want to put words into his, or my, mouth, but I remember afterwards almost feeling like I had been dragged along the carpet backwards and dumped in a heap. It was an interesting experience actually, because it showed me the power the more dominating sorts of people can exert over other people. If I had taken him seriously, as many people could so easily have done, I would have been a quivering heap of jelly on the floor afterwards, believing that everything I had done, the unrest in the church etc. etc., was my fault. That indeed was his intention, but despite it all, I just knew that what he said was just a psychological ploy to get me to shut up and stop rocking the boat in his cosy little church.

Consequently, I was summoned to appear before the elders to explain my letter. At this meeting, the other elder also used modern psychological techniques with the intention of breaking me. This is a warning to anyone reading this who may cross the path of someone with management or psychology "skills" (so-called), so I carefully enumerate them here:

(1.) He began by letting me say whatever I wanted, so I did. He wasn't really listening beyond maybe trying to catch me in something overtly obvious I might have said, but this

was a classic attempt to try to make me believe that I was being listened to and given a fair “trial” (which of course I wasn't).

(2.) Then, he said that he was really hurt by what I had written. This was using emotional blackmail in trying to make me feel guilty.

(3.) He then came out with the statement, “I am not capable of political manoeuvring” (a denial of my basic criticism). This was in my mind an amazing statement because he had worked as a Consultant at the local hospital for many years and had a reputation amongst all the staff there of being just that – a political manoeuvrer! Now, one can never accuse anyone of anything just because people say it, I have no evidence to back up this claim, so I can't accuse him of this at all, but it seems more than coincidence that nearly everyone who knew him at the hospital thought the same way about him, and here he is telling me he is not capable of it! Anyway, after this,

(4.) Looking me straight in the eye as if to hypnotise me, he ended his performance by coming out with the statement, “The problem is not with me, it's with you!” These were his exact words.

All of this is a classic piece of management/psychology technique. Let them have their say, make them feel guilty, deny everything, then harangue them until they are squirming on the floor. If I had not known he was using a technique on me, I would have believed everything he had said and really would have ended up in a psychiatric hospital. But God is good to His people and keeps them in the truth and in righteousness, and I walked away from that meeting unscathed, knowing that the only way forward, with such elders in the church, was to resign.

Over the next few months all six of us who saw through the sham left the church. We didn't do it in a great show of protest all at once. We did it individually, in some cases without any of the other five knowing we had done it. I can only vouch for my case, but I know it was the right thing to do. I sent a letter of resignation to the Secretary of the church, stating that my having come to a position of embracing Presbyterianism and Paedobaptism makes my membership in an Independent Baptist church not in keeping with my beliefs. I also stated that I had nothing against the ordinary members as individuals there. Maybe I was wrong in writing the letter like this and not mentioning the problem with the elders. The reasons were true, and indeed legitimate reasons for leaving when my beliefs no longer tallied with the Confession of Faith of the church, but I still wonder whether I should have also stated that I could no longer tolerate being in the same church as these elders. Maybe I should have done.

Some people have since suggested that I should just forget the differences I have with these elders and return to the church. The thing is that my Christian faith teaches me that I should not do that. Many people think that Christianity is all about forgiving everybody, everything, unconditionally. But this is just not true because God does not do that. God only forgives repentant sinners. In the case of salvation, of course, God gives to the elect the faith and repentance necessary, which otherwise they would not have. But the point is that there is never any forgiveness in God without repentance in man, and therefore there should never be any forgiveness in us without repentance from the other party either.

Many people quote the following to back up their claim that we should forgive unconditionally:

“Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.” Luke 17:3,4.

However, the three little words *“if he repent”* are usually glossed over without being noticed. We must only forgive someone *“if he repent.”* Of course we must then accept a simple verbal statement of repentance. We can't tell if they really have truly repented from the heart, and we are not called to discern such a thing. In the case of the elders of Ebenezer and myself, I have done nothing wrong in this matter, so I can't repent because I have nothing to repent of. The elders refuse to even give a verbal statement of wrong. They don't believe they have anything to repent of either, so I must in all conscience not forgive them. To ask me to bury the hatchet and come back to the church, assumes that the church has done no wrong, i.e. the church is elevated above truth and righteousness.

Also, as I found out in my case, the vast majority of ordinary members in a church will always blindly side with the elders because they are terrified of “rocking the boat,” or at least being seen to do so.

After these events someone wrote in Evangelical Times extolling the virtues of Congregationalism, so I felt I had to respond. This was published in September 1996:

“After having read Bill Clark’s article “Church discipline – a case for independency” in the August issue of your paper, I feel I must point out that the Presbyterian church government is clearly the biblical approach, as witnessed by the early church in Acts 15 forming a synod to discuss an important matter affecting the church as a whole.

In the independent church system, if anyone has a complaint against someone, especially against the leadership, and if the leaders either will not listen or fail to deal with the problem properly, then there is no other court of appeal to go to. Elders can therefore behave like little Hitlers in their own patch and there is nothing anyone can do to stop them as they are answerable to no-one. A complaint against the leadership could be taken to the congregational church meeting, but usually the bulk of the congregation will back the elders and regard anyone who criticises them as being a troublemaker. These people are worshipping a church rather than God. In any case, congregations are not qualified to judge matters of church discipline and should never be allowed to do so.

Some of the more dominating personalities, men who can attract a following behind them, end up solving the problem by ‘splitting’ the church and starting their own little empire down the road. England and Wales especially have a plethora of tinpot little evangelical churches of all shapes and forms, which have sprung up everywhere, each one having no or very little relationship with its neighbour. This anarchy cannot be a good witness for the gospel to the people outside of the church, and is surely grievous to the Saviour.”

Two responses came, one saying I wasn't being very gracious, and the other (also from Gwynedd, as it happened) again in praise of Congregationalism. Neither response refuted any of my arguments; they just ignored them.

Chapter 4: Without a Church

Protestant Reformed Churches of America (PRC) (1995-1998)

During the latter part of my time at Ebenezer, finding out things were not right, I got involved with the Protestant Reformed Churches of America for a while. This was due to the fact that the British Reformed Fellowship had been started, and they were beginning to hold occasional meetings in Wrexham. So I went along. This seemed to be far better than going to Ebenezer. So I started inviting other people from Ebenezer to come along to the meetings in Wrexham. The elders in Ebenezer did not like this at all. In fact the situation arose such that more of us from Bangor were attending the meetings in Wrexham than people from the Wrexham area itself, so the PRC minister who was speaking at the Wrexham meetings suggested starting meetings in Bangor. So we started them, all the time still being members of Ebenezer. We held about eight or nine meetings in Bangor altogether, culminating with the visit of the minister's father, who was a professor in the church's seminary, who came over one summer. Whilst the minister we had dealings with was fairly easy-going with us, his father certainly was not. He did not like the fact that we used the Westminster Confession (he preferred the "Three Forms of Unity"), and he particularly did not like the fact that we would not blindly follow him but insisted in thinking through things first. We therefore did not blindly take on board some of the peculiarities of the PRC such as their denial of a "Covenant of Works" with Adam, or their view on Divorce and Remarriage, or their view on musical instruments in worship and so on, as he would have liked us to.

It soon became evident that the PRC, particularly the professor, wanted us to blindly follow, and nothing short of that would do. We couldn't do that, so after that summer was over, we did not organise any more meetings.

One of the PRC's peculiar views seemed to be their believing that all single men (such as myself) should be aggressively hunting for a wife. I absolutely loathe this attitude; it makes men's behaviour no better than the animals. After an editorial appeared in the British Reformed Journal that said that single people like myself were not "normal," I felt I had to write a letter in response, which was published in issue 39, Autumn/Winter 2003/4, and which stated my beliefs on the subject:

"It seems to me that the editorial, together with all the literature from the Protestant Reformed Churches I have ever read, definitely give the strong impression that single people are second class Christians. Of course this would be denied, but the fact remains that single people are regarded as not being, to use a word in the editorial, "normal." I must object to this in the strongest terms. The attitude seems to be that if single people (especially men) are not aggressively hunting for marriage partners, then they are sinning against God. This is at least the impression given. I would say that exactly the opposite is true. It is animals and godless men who aggressively hunt for mates, and I am thoroughly convinced that such activity is truly and properly sin. Christians should have no part in that sort of thing. It is the Lord in His providence that either provides or does not provide a life partner, not we who should go hunting of our own accord. There are plenty of people, both male and female, who have never met anyone of the opposite sex who would be in the slightest bit interested in even the thought of having them as a marriage partner. There are plenty more who have had someone interested in them for a time but have been let down or rejected. None of these are sinning against God for not

hunting enough. Rather, they understand it as being God's providence that he has put them in the position of being single. We should all praise the Lord for whatever position he chooses to put his people in, whether married with a large family, married with no children, single, widowed, etc. etc. Whatever position the Lord puts us in we should learn therewith to be content, knowing that it is for our good (Romans 8:28). It is against the tenth commandment to be discontent with our own estate. Paul said that "I would that all men were even as I myself" (1 Corinthians 7:7). This is not to mean that singleness is a better state than marriage, otherwise we should all become monks and nuns! Rather this verse must be used as a counterbalance to the verses mentioned in the editorial regarding marriage as honourable. Neither estate is better than the other now we have a fallen world. Both have their own peculiar miseries. Articles stating singleness as not being "normal" and that "normality" is all about getting married and procreating as much as possible, are unhelpful to say the least."

The only response I got to this letter was that in the same issue, straight after my letter, an excerpt from Prof. David Engelsma's book "Better to Marry" was printed which mentioned that the PRC did not believe single people were second-class Christians. I never said in my letter that the PRC did, but that they gave the strong impression that that was so. In any case, it was not the main point of my letter at all, which they completely ignored. Again, another frustrating lack of response.

I was treated as an oddity by the PRC and BRF for writing this letter forever afterwards. I still today can't see what I said that was wrong in it. Someone, please enlighten me!

Worshipping at Home (1998-2003)

After leaving Ebenezer, I then spent the next six years worshipping on my own at home, outside a visible manifestation of the church of Christ. Labelled with all the oddballs who call themselves "Christian" but believe all sorts of whacky ideas, and also don't go anywhere to church. Yet I would rather have been in my position despite what people think of me.

"...The Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be slain, and be raised the third day." Luke 9:22.

I don't think there is any virtue in not joining with other believers just for the sake of it. That is not why I didn't go to church. When I come across someone who is truly one of God's people it is an excellent thing,

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." Psalm 133.

I worshipped God on His Holy Day by holding services on my own, listening to tapes of sermons, reading Christian books and joining with a few others later on in the day for a Catechism class, using the Westminster Shorter Catechism. This was purely an informal meeting, designed by one family to catechise their children, to which they invited visitors such as myself. We did not try to make it any more formal than this for fear of falling into

the trap of becoming just another tinpot independent group.

Why didn't I join another church, you may ask? Well, show me a church where God is feared, and truth and righteousness loved and cherished. If one existed within striking distance of my home I would have been there like a shot every week. Sadly this was not the case. We see again the problem I was mentioning earlier with regards decline in the worship. Nearly all churches nowadays have not only declined in the worship, but they seem to be worshipping a completely different god from the God they worshipped 40 years ago. Their god nowadays is a big daddy in the sky who loves all men, wants to give all men a gooey feeling in their heart if only they would let him (which they think they all have the ability to do), and exists solely for the worshipper's sake (cf. Santa Claus). In contrast, a true church exists solely for the glory of God, not the worshipper.

No church I knew of in North Wales then wanted to take God seriously. Where was there anywhere where the people feared God? Fear today is thought of as a negative thing, but in the Bible the true believer was known as the God-fearer:

"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil." Job 1:1.

"Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man." Ecclesiastes 12:13.

In fact he who does not fear God is the unbeliever:

"The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes." Psalm 36:1.

And where is humility? And the doctrine of Total Depravity, which keeps one humble all the time?

"Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD'S anger." Zephaniah 2:3.

"He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?" Micah 6:8.

And, where is trembling?

"...to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word." Isaiah 66:2.

"Hear the word of the LORD, ye that tremble at his word; Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my name's sake, said, Let the LORD be glorified: but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed." Isaiah 66:5.

"Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." Philippians 2:12.

All of these things are now missing in today's church in favour of a "think positive" self-

assertive, laid-back religion, which is not true religion at all, but merely mimics the philosophies of this vain empty world that is passing away. Self-abasement is the Christian way, not having a high “self-esteem”:

“Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all whose works are truth, and his ways judgment: and those that walk in pride he is able to abase.” Daniel 4:37.

In Ebenezer Evangelical Church, after I had left, I heard that on one occasion, a visiting preacher asked the children a question. The question was “Who can tell me what the first two words of the Lord’s Prayer are?” Nobody knew. Most of those children had been going to the church ever since they were born, and none of them knew the answer to one of the simplest questions that could ever be asked. Most unbelievers could have answered that question! What are they teaching their children in the “Sunday school” these days? [By the way, the answer is “*Our Father*”].

In 2003, after twenty years in North Wales, the Lord miraculously opened the door for me to move away from that area and gave me a job in Burnley, Lancashire. This was, in the Lord’s providence, in order for me to become a member in the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland congregation in Barnoldswick.

Chapter 5: Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland

Presbyterian Church, Kelbrook Road, Barnoldswick (Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland) (2003-2010)

Now, surely, I had arrived in a perfect church! Yes, purity of worship, the Westminster Confession, a correct view on Sabbath transport, seriousness in worship. What more could I want!

Yes, here I can go to church every week, and worship God in at least an outwardly acceptable manner. This was far more than I could do in Bangor or anywhere else I had ever been. But....

Like every other visible church in existence, one has to fit in with a certain way of saying and doing things. We never really have fellowship in the church unless we are “one of them,” i.e. all the airs and graces, putting on the show that is required. I can’t put on a show; I just can’t do it. I could be in the church (any church) for a million years, and would never become like one of them. I want one person to be genuine with me in a church, and I still haven’t found one.

After a few years of being there, one minister in the denomination, rightly or wrongly, dared to put his head above the parapet and criticise the church. Oh dear! Whereas some good men tried to pacify the whole situation by seeking to find a common solution, it became quite obvious that there was a small group of men, who were the power base in the church – those who had been born and brought up in the church, who bowed down and worshipped their great god “church” above all else – who were not going to give up until this minister was put out of the church altogether. They eventually got sufficient majority to get their wish in a series of secret sessions of Synod over the space of a

couple of years. And we, the laity, who are not party to anything that goes on in the secret society called "Synod," are honestly expected to blindly follow the powers that be in the church and carry on as though they were wonderful and that nothing had happened.

In the few years before a split in the Free Church of Scotland in 2000, allegations of adultery were made against one of its professors. Without going into the details, those making the accusations all eventually decided to leave and form the Free Church (Continuing), separating from the rest of the Free Church. Now, within the depleted Free Church, no-one is making any allegations any more, those making them have all left. And that church is continuing on its own sweet way assuming the completely false logic that now those making the allegations have gone, the allegations are therefore false. No. It is very convenient for the professor that there are no more people in his cosy little church making allegations any more, but unless the allegations themselves are fairly, thoroughly and completely investigated, we will never know whether he is innocent or guilty. The allegations still stand until this happens. Similarly in the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the minister who was deposed had made allegations against a fellow minister, accusing him of lying. Again, look what happened. Rather than actually investigating the allegations directly, they sacked the minister making the allegations on a completely different, spurious charge. Now, conveniently, no-one is making allegations any more from within the church, so it is assumed throughout the church that the allegations were false. But the truth is that they have still not been investigated. If anyone made allegations against me and I was innocent of them, I would want the actual allegations to be investigated until I had been thoroughly vindicated. If the church threw out the person making the allegations, it would be nicely convenient for me, but I would still insist on the allegations being investigated, otherwise I could never actually ever be vindicated.

Church courts behave in this manner all the time. How can the ordinary church member cope when this sort of thing is happening everywhere?

Whereas I agree with a vast majority of all the tenets of the F.P. church in doctrine and worship (which is why I joined it in the first place), their practice left an awful lot to be desired.

This has made me not only reject the idea of Presbyterianism (rule by elders) altogether, but also to begin thinking about the very concept of "church membership," and wondering if it is actually in the Bible at all. We have examples of people being excommunicated in the Bible, but that just means being banned from the sacraments, which should be the case for all open profligates anyway. The F.P. church say that the only criterion needed for membership is a "credible profession of Christ," which is true, but in practice, to get in, you have to take on board all the other tenets as well. I do take these on board, so I get in. But, take for example just two issues: exclusive psalm-singing and Sabbath transport. On these two issues alone, 99.99999% of all truly born-again Christians would be excluded from membership, simply because they have not come to a knowledge of the truth on these particular issues yet, and probably never will before they die. There is something fundamentally wrong here.

All true Christians are growing in knowledge, and nobody will ever come to a perfect knowledge of everything whilst they are on this earth. We all begin the Christian life just as ignorant as I was in my years at Penrallt and before. I remember in those days travelling home from the morning service once and popping into a shop on the way home for a pint of milk. An unbeliever with me was horrified, and told me that "Christians shouldn't go to a shop on a Sunday!" I was thoroughly told off, and never did it again, but I did it in my

ignorance of the fourth commandment, just as most people today would be ignorant of the issues of psalm-singing and Sabbath transport, yet they would still be truly born again of the Spirit of God. As it stands in the F.P. church, because of their exclusivity, members are not meeting anyone from any of the other churches who are truly born-again at all, and when they do, it is often with an air of superiority. They would never admit this, but that is certainly how it comes across. Most of my true brothers and sisters in Christ I simply was not meeting. And in the F.P.'s, unless we fit in with the way things are done, the show that has to be put on, and the blind obedience to Holy Synod that is required, we are sidelined. So it looks like time to move on again.

While I was at this church I was receiving the English Churchman newspaper. After a letter appeared from someone who stated that he had been a Christian for a very long time, but never made any friends in the many years he had been in church, I felt I needed to reply to agree with him:

“What a breath of fresh air it was to read the letter published in EC7683 from “Nobody's Friend”. It blew away all the cobwebs that so easily beset us in the Christian life, and shewed forth the true human condition as it really is. “For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ's” (Philippians 2:21). The doctrine of total depravity has been the one thing that has proved to me beyond doubt that Christianity is the only true religion.

Put it this way. When God chose his elect from before the foundation of the world, what did he see in any one of them that caused him to choose them? The answer of course, to the true Calvinist, is: Nothing. Yet when it comes to human relationships, we are so prone to thinking that someone, somewhere will have something worth loving about them, whereas, in reality, this is just not the case. If we think that there is something lovable in anyone (including ourselves), we are seeing something in them that God simply does not see. This is, at best, delusion, and at worst, idolatry.

The sooner we cease from man, whose breath is in his nostrils (Isaiah 2:22), the sooner we will see the utter wretchedness of this fallen world, and the more it will make us pant after heaven, wherein dwelleth righteousness, which is our true spiritual home anyway. We can never be too heavenly-minded.”

This letter was published in EC 7684 March 2006, but, extremely annoyingly (although of course in the Lord's providence), when the letter appeared in the paper, it had been (probably mistakenly) edited. The end of the last sentence of the first paragraph and the beginning of the first sentence of the second paragraph had been cut out, thus rendering the first half of the letter absolutely meaningless. So anyone who read it would think that I was more stupid than I actually am. There was one letter on the subject published after mine, mainly responding to the original letter from the man who had never made friends in the church, but in passing they said that my letter was “sad.” The person who wrote it mentioned that they made teddy bears in their spare time. I wondered which one of us was the sad one.

Chapter 6: China

Yes, you've guessed it. I felt a call to be a missionary to China, I packed my bags,

renounced my worldly life, and now I am winning souls for the Lord in an exotic country far away. Well, if this was a standard paperback from my local Christian bookshop, then that is what would be written. But it is not. The truth is a little different.

In 2008 I met a lady on the internet. That is where people meet each other these days. Anyway, she was from China, and to cut a long story short, we got married in May 2009. She is a Christian, and we both know it was the Lord's doing that brought us together. She came to the UK in August 2009, after getting her visa, and quite quickly she could see very clearly the problems with the Presbyterian Church in Barnoldswick, which I was going to at the time. Between us, we therefore tried to look for other churches in the area that we could go to instead. That was easier said than done.

I had been in a "Reformed" ghetto for 20 years, and now I was being forced out of that, as there were not really any other "Reformed" churches in the area to go to. We went to a series of churches and could not settle anywhere. We maybe stayed a few months, then my wife just as much as myself decided to move on. It seemed that all the churches had become worse in the twenty years I had been out of non-Reformed circles, but maybe that was my imagination. Maybe it was me who had changed. Actually, it was probably both.

It would be wrong to give a list of churches we have been to, as that would not be fair on the churches, needless to say, they were all found wanting. My wife, with her experience of the church in China, saw the worldliness in the churches here almost straight away. No-one really wants to be serious or to read and study their Bibles properly at all in any of the churches in the UK.

Compare this to the church in China. I have been over there many times now. Most of the the time I attended the registered Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) churches. They were like the Anglican church in a way, as they were the "established" church and they were all very similar, although far more evangelical than Anglicans – the sermon would be the centrepiece of the service, and would last for at least 45 minutes. The preaching was variable, depending on who was preaching. Some were very good, others were really awful. I also went to one registered independent church, which turned out to be one man giving a two-hour sermon every week, who a lot of people went to hear. He was good, but they were all following the man. I also went once to an unregistered house church in the back of a hairdressing salon, which was also led by one man preaching, every Monday night, and he was excellent, and stuck close to the text of the Bible passage. Good preaching, worth going to, but again, we should learn not to follow men.

Anyway, this is the sort of church scene my wife had been used to, and so coming over here to the UK, not surprisingly, she could not settle into any of the churches here, because they were of two types: Most of the churches we went to were too worldly, none of them preaching plainly from the Scriptures, or sticking close to the text at all. And none of the people in these churches were taking God seriously, but being far too light-hearted about such serious matters. Two of the churches we went to were serious (Brethren and Free Presbyterians), which was a breath of fresh air compared to the other churches around, but the problem was that they were too particular. For example, in the Brethren, one didn't have to believe in Dispensationalism, but if one didn't one would definitely find oneself on the edge of things in all the fellowships. The Brethren have got rid of the concept of having a minister to lead the services. The Free Presbyterians, on the other hand, are exactly the opposite and think far too highly of their ministers almost

worshipping them. So, again, what do we do? We trust in the Lord for our spiritual food and life, which is what we should have been doing all along anyway.

Bao'an Christian Church, Liutang Road, Bao'an, Shenzhen, Guangdong, China (TSPM) (2013-2018)

As we could not settle into any church in the UK, we thought that maybe spending some time in China would be the right thing to do, so in 2013 we moved to China for a while. However, of course, as we found out, the grass is not always greener elsewhere, but nothing is a waste of time in the Lord's eyes, and I did learn some very important lessons whilst I was there. I knew these lessons already really, but my time in China confirmed and clarified my belief in the truths of them more completely. These lessons were:

(1.) A belief in the total depravity of man.

As a good Calvinist, I had learned from the Bible that:

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

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

But when we live in a Western nation, it doesn't feel like that. There are plenty of people who will be, at least outwardly, kind, even though they are not Christian. They are just as totally depraved underneath their façade as anyone else, but at least several centuries of Christian influence has affected society in the West outwardly to some degree. People will help. They will queue. They will give way in a busy place. Most of this influence is fast disappearing in the West, as true religion disappears, but we should still be thankful for it, because this is not the case in China. 4000 years ago, the Chinese walked away from the tower of Babel, turned their backs on any kind of godly influence, and set up their own society and religion in the east. True godly religion has had absolutely no influence on them at all during that time, even though their writing system contains pictures which come directly from the truth of God. Only recently has this situation begun to change, after European missionaries penetrated China in the nineteenth century. I remember once, on one of my trips, I was so fed up with people pushing in front of me, drivers not knowing the meaning of the phrase “give way,” people routinely lying and cheating to do their business and just being generally disgusting and selfish in their behaviour, that it was really getting me down. On the last Sunday there, I was walking up the steps into church when a lady in front of me shook her wet umbrella all over me. I thought this was typical Chinese, and had got used to such behaviour by then, but she turned around and said “sorry” and was profusely apologetic about what she had done. THIS is what Christianity does to people. It changes them from the inside out.

(2.) A belief that our true home is in heaven.

We rented a flat within walking distance of a TSPM church, which had an “English Fellowship” every Friday night. We thought that at least I could get some English fellowship there, whereas my wife would have to do all the translating for me in all the other meetings. After a couple of months, we found out that there had been a huge

problem in the church. Coming from the outside into the problem meant that we didn't have a clue as to which side was right and which was wrong (if any) at all. This taught us that church disputes are so stupid. Even if one side was right and the other wrong, we should not get so worked up about the situation, realise our true home is in heaven, and rather suffer ourselves to be defrauded if necessary:

"Now therefore there is utterly a fault among you, because ye go to law one with another. Why do ye not rather take wrong? why do ye not rather suffer yourselves to be defrauded?" 1 Corinthians 6:7.

I wrote an article about the whole concept of church disputes, which I reproduce here:

"I was in a church last week, and after the service one of the elders started shouting and screaming at the minister for some reason. 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 got outside the church 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:

'For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.' 1 Corinthians 11:19.

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.

Of course, 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:

'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.’

– Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 31, Paragraph 3.

Needless to say that 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. 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:

‘For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds.’ 2 Peter 2:8

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

‘Ye that love the LORD, hate evil.’ Psalm 97:10

‘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.’ Psalm 139:21,22.

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:

‘Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.’ Romans 12:19.

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 thinks is Christianity (although we know it is not real Christianity at all):

‘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.’ Ezekiel 9:4.

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

‘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 37:1-3.

‘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.’ Psalm 37:35,36.

Rather, we should realise that our true home is not in any visible organisation which 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:

‘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.’ Hebrews 10:25.

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

‘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.’ Colossians 3:1-3.

And no man is going to split that church!

‘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.’ Hebrews 12:22-24.

‘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.’ Matthew 6:19-21.

‘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.’ John 14:1-3. ”

(3.) The greatest threat to the truth today is not Arminianism nor Charismaticism, but Humanistic Psychology.

The “English Fellowship” on a Friday night, was supposed to be the highlight of my week, where I could mix with other English speaking believers. Most people there were young Chinese who wanted to learn English. The format was that someone would come to

preach, then we would split into groups and discuss the sermon. The groups were a bit too large, but apart from that, this is a good pattern to follow, where people can think through things for themselves and discuss with one another. However, most of the speakers they had were American. Now, I must make it clear that I know several truly Christian Americans, and they are excellent people to know, they are humble, self-effacing, and a delight to know as my fellow believers in Christ. Now, having said that.....

After hearing their preaching for a while, it soon became obvious that it wasn't an "English" fellowship at all, in fact it wasn't even Christian. It was an "American" fellowship. The Americans taught what they considered to be Christianity, but they weren't teaching the truth. There was no mention of repentance, sin or salvation in Christ, but rather only teaching on American values, albeit dressed up in religious clothing. I expected Arminianism, but we didn't even get that. Arminians would at least teach about sin and repentance, but these subjects were totally missing here.

It occurs to me that this is happening all over the world. The Americans come into a country and try to impose their American values on the local population. We have seen this in the world, in Iraq and Afganistan for example, but it is also happening in a big way in the church. Huge "international" churches are everywhere, which, when you look into them more closely, are being run by rich Americans, not preaching the true gospel, but preaching American values (the most notable of which are "Democracy" and "Self-Confidence") under the guise of Christianity. We were invited to one of these "international" churches in Shekou, Shenzhen, and we saw this for ourselves. It is all very smooth and well-presented, but one thing is missing – the gospel of saving grace. Anyway, I wrote another article on this subject, which I reproduce here:

"What do you think if a preacher comes along and tells you something like, you need to "decide for Christ" or you need to "choose" Christ? Many of us think that, well, it is not exactly the way we would put it, but it is still preaching the gospel, so it is all right.

I have been thinking about this a lot recently, especially because over the last few months, I have been regularly attending such preaching. The more I have heard what these people have to say, and the more I think upon these things, the more I come to the conclusion that it is not just a different way of preaching the gospel at all, but it is a completely different message altogether, and needs to be exposed as such, not least because it leads people into a false sense of security.

The way it works is as follows: First of all, they say, we need to "choose" or "decide" to follow Christ. Many Christians mistake this call for the true call of the gospel, which is to repent and believe in Christ for salvation, but the preachers of this message mean no such thing. Repentance and salvation in someone other than ourselves, are alien concepts to them. All the preacher means by "deciding to follow Jesus," is that we choose to follow Christ's teachings. That is it. It is just a decision we make ourselves to stop following the teachings of the world any more and to follow the teachings of Christ instead, just as we may "decide" to follow the teachings of Buddha or Confucius or some other man. This "decision" involves no heart change, no repentance, no salvation in a Saviour.

Once we have "chosen" to follow Christ, we are immediately told that now we are a Christian, so consequently all our sins past, present and future, are instantly forgiven and we can relax. We do not need to think about sin any more, and should

not let it bother us again. In fact it is a sin to think about sin at all from now on. We can now instead think positively, have a sense of self-worth and self-acceptance, and be confident about ourselves. This is nothing else but modern humanistic psychology dressed up in religious clothing, and it is the complete opposite of true Christianity, which should rather produce humility, meekness and self-abasement. No wonder the preachers of such a message appear so proud and self-confident.

If we really should not let sin bother us any more, then we get further and further away from seeing our real need of a Saviour. This message leads people away from the true gospel, not closer to it.

But it doesn't stop there. Now we have "chosen" to follow Christ, we must in future make sure that we "choose" to live by every one of His precepts, taking each one in turn. So, we must "choose" to stop lying and "decide" to tell the truth. We must "choose" to stop cheating people and "decide" to live honestly. etc. etc. Notice that everything is done by ourselves, there is no concept of our need of the Holy Spirit to perform these things in us at all. If the Holy Spirit is even mentioned by these preachers, it is merely as a sideline to give us some secondary gifts, such as joy in the heart, or maybe in some cases, exciting abilities to perform miracles. The primary function of the Holy Spirit, namely, to change us and make us able to keep the commandments in the first place, is completely ignored.

I have heard this message spoken of in this way: In the parable of the sower, some of the seed falls on stony ground. We therefore need to remove the stones to make good soil so the seed can grow good roots. The stones are described in the following passage:

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

We, according to this message, need to remove these "stones" ourselves first, then we can grow in Christ properly.

Apart from the fact that this was not Christ's explanation of the parable, have you spotted the huge error in this false message yet? WE CAN'T DO IT!!!!

We can't remove these "stones," they are too heavy for us. Only God can. The whole point of Christianity is that we can't do these things by ourselves, we need a Saviour to do it for us. The gospel is not that we should stop sinning by our own effort, because we can't. The gospel is that we need the Lord to save us from our sins which we can't get rid of ourselves, and then to work righteousness from within us by giving us a new heart. Only then can we serve the Lord, and not before.

By nature, we can't "choose" anything, except sin. We must be born again:

'Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' John 3:3.

We need a new heart:

'Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel?' Ezekiel 18:31.

This is something that we can't do ourselves, it is the gift of God:

'A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.' Ezekiel 36:26,27.

So we need to repent and cry to God for mercy:

'Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord.' Acts 3:19.

'God be merciful to me a sinner.' Luke 18:13.

THIS is the gospel. It is a gospel of God's grace, not a gospel of self-help. With the true gospel, boasting is excluded:

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

If this false gospel of self-help was true, then when we get to heaven, we can always say that the difference between us being in heaven and our neighbour being in hell is that we "chose" Christ and our neighbour didn't. That is boasting, and so cannot be a true gospel.

We need to expose this false gospel of self-help and the proud perpetrators of it, and show how it is leading people further away from the true gospel and from seeing their real need of a Saviour. Every one of us ought to see our sin for what it is, and flee from the wrath to come by embracing our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as the only Saviour from sin. Only then will boasting be excluded, when we realise that salvation is by grace alone.

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

"Foreigners Fellowship", Lanzhou, Gansu (2018-2020)

Family matters meant that we were to leave Shenzhen in 2018 and move to Lanzhou, the capital of Gansu Province, where my wife's parents lived. We started going to the Shanzishi TSPM church there, but, although the format was the same as the TSPM church in Bao'an, the preaching was a lot poorer. Soon after we moved to Lanzhou, the government started changing their stance on the TSPM churches. A Chinese flag now has to be flown outside. Placards depicting "Socialist values" had to be erected around the perimeter. And I have just found out that the name of the church on Google Maps has been changed it no longer says "church" but "Government Office."

The preaching was bad enough anyway, so I wasn't too concerned about not feeling welcome there any more and leaving. But it is very difficult to find a church to go to in a country if all of them are forced to disappear underground. However, after prayer, the Lord miraculously led us to a "Foreigners Fellowship," named as such because it was only for foreigners. Chinese citizens are not allowed to join, with the exception of Chinese spouses of the foreigners attending. (I believe this policy has now changed and Chinese spouses are no longer welcome).

Most of these "Foreigners Fellowships" around China are registered with the state, but the one in Lanzhou wasn't. I was told that there were at least five other of these fellowships in Lanzhou alone, all unregistered, catering for foreigners only. The remarkable thing was that of all of these, the Lord led us to the only one that was vaguely "Reformed," so we were very thankful for that.

The group was meeting in function rooms of hotels. Just before we started attending, two of the three elders had been thrown out of the country for running this fellowship without registering with the government. One elder was left, who had slipped under the radar and was continuing to run the whole thing on his own. So he was pleased when we joined, it encouraged him. However, soon after we started attending, the government insisted that the hotels check the passports of all those who attended, so we decided hotels weren't safe any more to hold our meetings in, so we started meeting in private flats, a different one every week.

It was good. The vast majority of the congregation were African students, but there were others from Japan, Indonesia and Armenia, amongst other nationalities, attending regularly. However, the whole show was run by Americans, bringing their American music (with guitars), their American laid back attitude and their usual trip to the restaurant after the service. I can understand the Africans coming to the services, because the teaching was good. But, sadly, it seems that the only connection with white men they ever had was with white Americans, who are very self-confident by nature, and who just have to bring their musical taste and attitude with them. So I can also understand why they don't really get along with white people very much. We're not all like that!

Things changed dramatically in January 2020. The break between the two university semesters always occurs over Chinese New Year, which is a moveable lunar feast which takes place around the end of January and beginning of February. So, most in the church had gone home after the end of the semester. Then on January 26th we were all locked down. We couldn't leave our street for four weeks, and after that we could only leave with a pass.

That was the end of the "Foreigners Fellowship." The others, who were all teachers or students, couldn't return to China, although they could carry on their studies via the internet. We got stuck in China, the British government advising its citizens to leave without having the means to do so as all the planes were cancelled. Most of the embassy and consulate staff had left the country already.

Chapter Seven: Lockdown

Salem Congregational Chapel, Martin Top, Rimington, Lancashire. (2012-2021)

On our breaks in the U.K. whilst we were mainly living in China, we attended this church. The church acquired a new pastor whilst we were away in China. We had met him already from our travels around the local churches, and knew him to be a very good Christian man. Consequently, Martin Top Chapel has become a very good church. Why do I say that? Several reasons:

(1.) The pastor believes in expository preaching, verse by verse through Scripture.

(2.) This resulted in many people, from many different church backgrounds, who had been disillusioned with other churches in the surrounding area, all coming together to this little church in the middle of nowhere. They had many differences in background, but they all had one thing in common. They all loved the Lord Jesus Christ in their hearts. That's the sign of a healthy church.

(3.) The Thursday evening Bible study was a real Bible study. Most other churches don't even have a Bible study. And in those that do, it is effectively just another preaching meeting with the minister telling the congregation what to believe. In Martin Top, however, the Bible study is how a proper Bible study ought to be conducted. Bible books are gone through verse by verse. The pastor would ask questions on the verses to encourage discussion. Everybody was made to feel relaxed enough to be able to say anything they wanted to say. If they were wrong, it didn't matter. The pastor would gently lead them into the right way by asking them more questions, getting them to think about their position. All this is very healthy.

After spending three months in various kinds of lockdowns in China, I managed to get back to the U.K. in June 2020, followed by my wife a month later. We continued attending Martin Top, which had just reopened after being forced to close by the government.

Although it was compulsory by law to wear masks in church at this stage, only a third of the congregation of Martin Top did so (I counted 8 out of 23 on one occasion). I never understood why nobody would obey a relatively simple government rule. I had just come back from a country where there were far stricter rules set by the government which people just had to put up with, yet so many at Martin Top wouldn't even do the simplest thing when asked. Some people even left the church over the issue of, what they thought was, the church "caving in" to a dictatorial government.

The lack of mask-wearing kept us away from church, especially as Covid was still around and on the rise again. All summer my wife and I went online for our church services. It's such an easy thing to do. And one can "attend" the "best" churches one can find. This technology is all very good for those who have Covid, or who can't get out of the house for whatever reason. But one has to ask the question: Why bother going to church any more, when everything we need is available in our living room?

Around this time, a nationally-known evangelist moved into the area and became a member of Martin Top. To the pastor and most of the other members he was the great celebrity, and could do no wrong. But I had problems with him. He is a very chatty man who likes telling jokes. In introducing a guest speaker once, he told a joke about the thief on the cross. I found that most offensive. Reducing any Biblical things to joke material is just not right.

My wife had never been happy “up north.” I just said to her one night, “Shall we move to Cardiff?” And I just knew that we were going to go.

Chapter Eight: Cardiff

Heath Evangelical Church, 122 Whitchurch Road, Cardiff. (2021-present)

My wife had been a student in Cardiff many years ago. I, too, like the city. Having known of the existence of Heath Evangelical Church from my days in Bangor, that was the obvious church to attend after we had arrived. There are many churches in the city, of which Heath is one of the largest. The minister is very good, but it is very difficult to get to know people in the church because it is so large.

One month after we arrived, the church held a week of outreach meetings, led by.... you guessed.... the very same evangelist from Martin Top. We didn't go to any of them.

A few months afterwards, a friend told us that during that week of outreach meetings, he had organised for the evangelist to speak to a group of mainland Chinese students. Afterwards, the Chinese students told our friend that they didn't like him at all. (And I thought I was the only one! What a relief to find others!). They couldn't understand how he could be so chatty and jokey while at the same time trying to get across a very serious subject. They expected him to be serious. A deadly serious subject demands a deadly serious manner. He wasn't serious at all, but jokey, and they couldn't understand that attitude. Consequently they couldn't take his message seriously.

In December 2021, Heath church announced that it was going to employ a man who had just retired from another local church, to be an assistant pastor. It turned out that he, too, is a chatty, jokey person – just like the evangelist from Martin Top. How can anyone take the gospel message seriously when church leaders are like this?

All this has taught me to always pray for the preaching. That the Holy Spirit may guide, not a man assert himself in any way. And I'm not just complaining about the two men that I have mentioned. In Heath church, when the main minister is away, other visiting preachers come, and too often they seem to be similarly inclined. And it has to be said it invariably seem to be the sons of ministers or elders in the church that have this problem the most. Second or third generation Christians. The fathers, who were maybe converted directly from heathendom, tend to be good preachers, but the next generation down, born and brought up in the church, seem to be a lot weaker. Yet, since their entire families for several generations are now well entrenched in the church, nobody seems to be allowed to say anything against them. Nobody dare complain. We're not members, so we can't do or say anything. We need to pray and pray again for the situation to change, not just in Heath church, but this is a problem generally. Cardiff has so many churches, and they all seem to be in a similar situation.

Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Heol Trelai, Caerau, Cardiff (2022)

For two months we went to Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Caerau, a western suburb of Cardiff. It at least had expository preaching and a more serious tone. We met some

very good Christians there. But my wife found it too political. After reading the Christian press in this country (mainly fed by China Aid, a puppet of the American government), most people in the church have been given a very bad view of the situation in China, which was not the truth in reality. This wasn't their fault really, simply a product of the biased propaganda they are fed by the national "Christian" press in the West. We did try to explain the situation more truthfully, but my Chinese wife especially felt that the church as a whole was too political in nature.

Christianity is about God, through Christ, changing souls one at a time. It is not about campaigning against abortion, against LGBT issues, against persecution, against this injustice and that injustice. The world will always be unjust. Our job is not to be so ourselves. I wrote an article about this:

"What do we think of the Crusades? I mean, 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. If any of us are truly Christian at all, surely we should abhor the whole concept of all that. The Crusades are a total disgrace to the name of Christ, and a terrible witness to Him.

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

These atrocities are the works of men. An army will fight better if you tell them that God is on their side. That's why men always try to involve religion in their petty wars. Religion isn't the problem, men are. Thankfully 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. But how do we get our unbelieving neighbours to understand that, in the light of what they read in their history books?

All we can do is point them to the Bible. There they can find out what Jesus Christ was really like:

'Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion; shout, O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass.' Zechariah 9:9

'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.' Matthew 11:28-30

There they can read what Jesus Christ really taught:

*'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.'*

*Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.
Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.
Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.'* Matthew 5:3-12

Where is the warmonger here? Jesus Christ was the Prince of Peace:

'For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.' Isaiah 9:6

'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.' Luke 2:14

But there are some verses in the Bible, which have been deliberately misinterpreted in an attempt to teach that Christ's followers should physically fight for His cause:

'Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.' Matthew 10:34-36

This is not Christ telling us to take up arms and fight for Him. God forbid! If that was the case, this passage would be teaching we should go to war against our own families. No. We're told elsewhere that Christ came to bring peace between God and men. Here, He's simply telling us that because some people won't believe – maybe even some in our own families – there will inevitably be division:

'Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division....' Luke 12:51

But what about:

'And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on his head were many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies which were in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on his vesture and on his thigh a name written, King of Kings, and Lord of Lords.' Revelation 19:11-16

This takes place at the end of time, showing Jesus Christ coming as the great judge of all the earth. He came the first time to this world in humility, to show us that the only way to the Father is through Him:

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

'He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it.' Matthew 10:39

'For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.' Luke 14:11

What do we, today, think of Jesus Christ? What do we think of the idea of humility as the only way to the Father? Do we think of it as being weak and pathetic? Or do we think it's beautiful? What we think of Christ in this world now, will determine where we'll spend eternity. This picture of Christ as a judge and warrior, is here to show us that He is the One with whom we will all have to do:

'For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad.' 2 Corinthians 5:10

Christians are never called to spread their faith at the point of a sword. No. No. No. It's not possible anyway. Our faith is all about an internal change in the heart of each individual who embraces it, and we can't make that happen, only the Lord can. We're called to love our enemies:

'But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.' Matthew 5:44,45

But here's the next question. We're agreed we shouldn't go to war in Christ's name, but can we set up a political movement in His name? Should we fight, by all legitimate, peaceful means possible, to change the government's mind so that it more reflects "Christian" values?

The answer is, No. Otherwise Jesus Christ would have done that when He was on earth. He never came as a political leader. In fact, He said as much at His trial before Pontius Pilate:

'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.' John 18:36

We don't fight, either physically or through any ballot box or protest movement. Christ's kingdom is not of this world. It's spiritual, heavenly. Our weapons are not physical weapons, but spiritual ones:

'For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.' Romans 14:17

'For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand.' Ephesians 6:12,13

We don't don physical armour to fight physical enemies, but spiritual armour to fight spiritual enemies:

'Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God....' Ephesians 6:14-17

And our best weapon of all is prayer:

'...Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints....' Ephesians 6:18

That's the Christian life. Fighting, either physically or politically, is the way the world operates, and we leave the world to it. No matter what men try to do, the Lord is in control of everything anyway, so we've no need to worry:

'The Lord is on my side; I will not fear: what can man do unto me?' Psalm 118:6

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. Then the Lord will delight in him, and he in the Lord:

'But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the Lord which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the Lord.' Jeremiah 9:24

'O how love I thy law! it is my meditation all the day.' Psalm 119:97

But what about people like William Wilberforce, who managed to get parliament to abolish slavery. That was a good thing, wasn't it? Yes, but he was in a privileged position. Whenever we have influence, it's right that we should use it for good. Like Queen Esther saving the Jews from destruction, or Joseph saving both Egypt and the Israelites from famine, for example. They were in the right place at the right time. They were doing the Lord's will in the situation they found themselves in. They weren't actively opposing or fighting any authority.

Every weekend throughout the summer of 2019, there were protests against the Chinese government in Hong Kong. The Chinese media make a point of telling us that the leaders of the protest movement were Christians. They go to church. They are students at Christian colleges. Some of them are even pastors. Before every protest they hold prayer meetings. They sing hymns. Then they go out and fight

the police. As a result, the Chinese government thinks, wrongly but understandably, that Christianity is a political movement. They see it as a destabilising “Western” influence, against themselves. But we’re nothing of the kind.

Jesus Christ Himself was not a Westerner. In China, I attended a small fellowship containing Christians from four different continents. Christianity is international. Every tribe, tongue and nation is invited to embrace Jesus Christ for the salvation of their souls:

‘And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people....’ Revelation 14:6

Christians are individuals who have been changed by God and are now living differently from the world. We’re no threat to any government. But, it only takes some people to raise opposition against a government in the name of Christianity, and all Christians will be tarred with the same brush. Ordinary Christians, who don’t oppose anybody, who are just trying to live their simple, Christian lives, are going to be regarded all together as enemies of the State.

Christians should always submit to whatever government is in charge. Even the most wicked government that rises up, is ordained of God. And Christians should always obey. It’s never up to us to fight it, or try to replace it, otherwise we find ourselves fighting against God:

‘For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft....’ 1 Samuel 15:23

‘...if it be of God, ye cannot overthrow it; lest haply ye be found even to fight against God.’ Acts 5:39

There is only one exception to this rule, and that is when the government tries to force us to sin. Then, and then only, should we refuse. And even then, if caught, we mustn’t fight, but meekly take the (unjust) consequences.

Submitting to all authorities that have been set over us – not only the government, but also our employer, and parents too – is part of our very witness to the world:

‘Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men....’ 1 Peter 2:13-15

There is only one thing we are told to pray for with regards authorities, and that is to pray that they would allow us to be free to be able to live godly Christian lives:

‘I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings, and for all that are in authority; that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.’ 1 Timothy 2:1,2

Notice here that Paul didn't say that the Christians should campaign to stop the Roman authority's atrocities. The Romans were cruel. They were evil. But he didn't suggest fighting the government, or demonstrating in the streets demanding change, or even trying to get Christians onto the Senate. Instead, Paul asked prayer for the authorities that the Christians "may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty."

Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon to pray for a similar thing:

'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.' Jeremiah 29:7

Our spiritual life is the most important thing we Christians are to be concerned about. As long as Christians can be free to live good Christian lives, that's all we need to pray for. We don't need to pray for the government in anything else, other than the salvation of their souls as individuals.

Governments will try to make life difficult for us. If we do have any freedoms, we ought to be thankful for them. We should never pray either for or against a government. We never take sides. We only need pray that we may have the freedom to be able to live out our Christian lives without harassment. God will sort out the powers that be in His own good time:

'[God]hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation....' Acts 17:26

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

'He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision. Then shall he speak unto them in his wrath, and vex them in his sore displeasure.' Psalm 2:4,5

We are not to think, "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 want 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 it.

But aren't we to be concerned with justice? Yes, of course. But personally, as individuals:

'He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?' Micah 6:8

Our individual relationship with the Lord should be more important to us than anything:

'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.' James 1:27

The world will always be crooked. It's unreformable:

'Do all things without murmurings and disputings: That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world....' Philippians 2:14,15

To politically fight for any cause in the name of Christ, is just as bad a witness to the world as to physically fight in the name of Christ, as in the Crusades. Fighting for any cause is not Christianity, whether physical or political. Christianity is altogether different.

Let's be finished with fighting, and concentrate on living holy, righteous and godly lives, which is in God's sight of great price:

'For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ; Who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.' Titus 2:11-14"

We stayed in this church for two months before returning to Heath.

Tabernacle, Pen-y-Waun Road, Roath, Cardiff (2022-)

Only after leaving a church for a while does one get to see things in a whole new light. This is good. It is refreshing. We went back to Heath, but only after a few weeks we realised the shocking truth that there was precious little Bible in any of the meetings. We hadn't noticed this before, when we were attending week by week. But it was true.

Heath indeed has a reputation of being an "Evangelical" church, which is why we went there in the first place. It had come out of the liberal denominations because it stood for the Bible and its truths. But imperceptibly over the years, as generations come and generations go, things change.

The Monday evening Bible study had already disappeared altogether from the schedule, COVID being the limp excuse for doing this. Instead, the prayer meeting now incorporates a shortened Bible study, but even these are easily lost when the opportunity for a missionary (either live or on Zoom) to speak about their work comes along. Then in August, every year, the Bible studies – indeed nearly all the midweek meetings – are stopped altogether, only the prayer meeting continues. And those who are in the church are unaware of any problem, any lack of spiritual food. Is this you? Is this me? We need to notice these things when they occur in our church rather than blindly attending week by week, blissfully unaware of anything.

We noticed all this after just a couple of months away from Heath in a church where the Bible was more prominent. That opened our eyes to the real situation. So, what do we do

now? Well, in the Lord's providence, the annual Tabernacle conference came along. Tabernacle is a church which was formed in 2003, as a split from Heath when the previous pastor retired. It is the more "Reformed" of the two churches. In fact, it would have been the obvious place for us to have gone as soon as we moved to Cardiff, except for the fact that I was reluctant to end up back in a "Reformed" ghetto again. Experiencing other churches is a very healthy thing, and the Lord has been so good to us in letting us learn from them all.

We went to the conference. It was very good. We fully expected people we knew from other churches in Cardiff to attend at least one or two of the meetings. But, as far as we knew, no other local outsiders came, the only visitors being from other like-minded "Reformed" ghettos elsewhere in the U.K. Anyway, despite this sad state of affairs, we've stayed in Tabernacle ever since.

To be continued.....

Conclusion

I have now reached state retirement age. It is at this point that one begins to realise (and should have realised a lot sooner):

"...For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away." James 4:14

All this activity, all these difficulties, trials and tribulations that I have experienced in the Christian life and mention here. Where have they all come from? The church. The church. Jesus Christ loves His people and looks after them. He is the source of all good, and rescue His people from all adversity. No, it's not His fault in any way. It's the church that is to blame. Men are the ones who shall be brought to account for making the heart of the righteous sad.

"Because with lies ye have made the heart of the righteous sad, whom I have not made sad; and strengthened the hands of the wicked, that he should not return from his wicked way, by promising him life: Therefore ye shall see no more vanity, nor divine divinations: for I will deliver my people out of your hand: and ye shall know that I am the Lord." Ezekiel 13:22-23

"Hear the word of the Lord, ye that tremble at his word; Your brethren that hated you, that cast you out for my name's sake, said, Let the Lord be glorified: but he shall appear to your joy, and they shall be ashamed." Isaiah 66:5

The Lord has kept me thus far. What else could possibly be around the corner before I fly away to be with Christ, which is far better?

I have never doubted my faith for a moment. I have backslidden at times, and certainly I could have done a LOT more than I have done for Christ. My sins are ever before me. May the good Lord forgive me. He has kept me thus far, and I can be assured He will keep me to the end, despite me being me. I have no doubts about my faith, and the fact that I am one of Christ's redeemed people. Hallelujah! But, all these years in various visible churches have not helped, but rather hindered my journey. All of these churches will seriously have to answer for that. Church is not a game to play, which just gives the

players a bit of excitement and a huge social life. Going to church should be a joyful thing, where I go to publicly worship my Maker and Saviour.

The true believer will always be *“without the camp”* (Hebrews 13:13). I am convinced that this is his lot in this world. It is no good searching for a visible church that has all truth, for there is not one on the face of the earth. Don't take the advice I have been given in the past, and move, giving up a job and everything, just to be near a decent church. It is not worth it. The Lord puts us all where we are for a purpose, and does not ordinarily move us on, unless in providence there is a good, overwhelming reason to do so. Trying to find a perfect church is not one of those reasons, because we'll never find one. We go, if we can, to a nearby public assembly to worship God. We are called to do this for our mutual edification if at all possible:

“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.” Hebrews 10:25.

But if we can't do this, then so be it. Actual membership in a visible church is a waste of time, it will only lead to disappointment in the end. We trust solely in God to keep His little flock to the end.

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

“Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.” John 16:33.

“Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.” Hebrews 13:13,14.

These promises, and others in the Scriptures, keep the true believer from utter despair. We get to heaven *despite* any visible church.

“I am not mad most noble Festus, but speak forth words of truth and soberness.” Acts 26:25.