

What is the True Church of Jesus Christ? Are YOU a part of it?

Introduction

Are you privately dissatisfied and frustrated with the church you attend? Have you sought genuine Christian fellowship and friendship but found yourself hindered because, perhaps, you expressed a point of view which ran counter to the 'mainstream' or might have been construed as 'extreme'? Have you ever paused to wonder why the standard procedural models for 'doing church' seem to involve a small, full-time, 'elitist' ministry who are paid to prepare the staple diet of teaching & instruction for you – the 'laity'? Are you generally encouraged FROM THE PULPIT to make thoroughly good use of the internet to source supplementary teaching & information on various subjects? Have you been frustrated because the general level of teaching you're presented with has been simplistic or just 'safe'? Have you ventured to cross-question or clarify a point of instruction only to find yourself 'rebuked' for exhibiting a spirit of insubordination? Have you ever moved to a different Church where the idiosyncrasies (particulars of what the leadership believes) were different from the last place you attended? How did you make the doctrinal adjustment? Do you ever wonder why it is that there are so many different independent 'gatherings'? Have you privately indulged the thought that THE BIBLE MUST BE UNCLEAR in its pronouncements! Have you never really bothered, for example, to wrestle with the difficult theology of eschatology or baptism since....., well there are so many FINE BIBLE TEACHERS out there who have done so and yet disagree among themselves! I want to try to account for the present climate and practice found within that constituency of folk who identify as 'evangelical (Bible believing) Christians. I do not doubt that many (perhaps most!) of them are genuine brothers and sisters in the faith; but I do dare to wonder whether somehow, like the proverbial frog in a pan of hot water, the present church scene is an honourable heir to the purest and best legacies bequeathed to us from the past.

Having felt constrained to cease attending 'church' each Sunday for the past six months or so what I write here springs very much from an intense period of careful reading, personal experience and considered reflection. As I write, I have not arrived at a settled destination in my thinking. On the contrary, I reckon that if my deliberations possess any integrity, they might merely BEGIN to spark a more thorough investigation into what the Scriptures actually teach about our collective duties and responsibilities as fellow saints of Christ. May it please the Lord to furnish these 'ruminatory' considerations with greater substance and helpful practical application among generations to come. [It goes without saying that I am not expecting Jesus to return imminently!]

My aim here then is to overturn LOGICALLY and Scripturally what is commonly believed (and therefore practised) by 'evangelical Christians' among whom I have moved for over thirty-five years. Those who follow through my appraisal of the data and the tightness of the argument will necessarily undergo a 'paradigm shift' in their thinking. Please therefore brace yourself for that challenge. If you are one of the countless souls 'at ease in Zion' (Amos 6:1) quit straight away and read no further. This is not a piece for soft-bellied evangelly-fish; rather it is a wake-up call and a trumpet blast which, I pray, God might use to stir the dead.

And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent; the day is at hand. Therefore, let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light [Rom 13:11-12].

1. ***The Goal of Sanctification***

Sanctification is the gradual process by which saints who are truly converted to Christ are made perfect and ready for glory, etc. It is a life-long enterprise. We need to think about what it ought to look like at the close of life when the Christian's pilgrimage has been successful. Hopefully, there is more patience, gentleness, kindness and charity, etc. However, there ought to have taken place ALSO a profound adjustment of the mind and outlook of the Christian. It is significant that the Greek word for repentance, 'metanoia' connotes a change of mind. True saints seek to cultivate a comprehensive, biblical and consistent 'world and life view' so that their comprehension of all things is like God's. Paul exhorts the Christians at Corinth and Rome 'to make every thought captive to Christ' [2Cor 10:4]. To the converts in Rome he urged, 'And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.' [Rom 12:2] An important question I have asked myself is, 'Was I helped or hindered to acquire such comprehension by attending the Churches I have over the past 35 years? Were the pastors and preachers I have 'sat under' especially instrumental? Did THEY drive me to the positions I now hold on all/most matters?'

2. ***Reality Check!***

Perhaps, a little! Frankly, the most significant help came from the books on my shelves and a few well-informed personal friends! Why, if this is so, was it the case? Most Christians attach themselves to local assemblies and many of them rely upon the weekly ministry to formulate within them the substance of their belief system. Few local assemblies however comprise individuals who think and believe precisely the same things. Recent experience teaches me that in just one small evangelical gathering, diverse opinions exist on matters such as (i) the legitimacy of capital punishment; (ii) whether the return of Christ is imminent; (iii) the exercise of charismatic gifts; (iv) the legitimacy of divorce and remarriage; etc. The professional pulpiteers perhaps imagine that all seated participants are singing from the same hymn sheet (another divisive subject!) but the reality is, conceivably, quite different; a wide range of opinions and convictions prevail out there.

3. ***Two Pragmatic Solutions***

There are generally two ways in which local assemblies deal with the problem of diversity of conviction among the laity:

Either (i) they relegate certain topics to a realm they designate 'secondary'. I've heard these issues referred to as 'open-handed.' And they retain other topics – typically the blindingly obvious – to a category they deem 'primary' or 'closed-handed.' Folks are told they are welcome to adopt differing points of view of the former but are under strict orders to maintain fidelity and consistency with the latter. This accounts for why most evangelical assemblies tend to have a very limited doctrinal basis of fellowship compared with the great catechisms and confessions of the past.

Alternatively, (ii) they assign certain issues as SPIRITUAL (e.g. baptism, preaching, the Lord's supper, evangelism) and other issues COMMON (e.g. politics, pop-culture, whether to send your children to this school or that, etc). This approach to life and Christianity represents 'Dualism' and is as old as the hills. Accordingly, the world of matter, culture and hard life in the physical reality of earth's theatre is typically perceived as lower-level existence comprising an unimportant, transient, visible 'worldly realm.' The actual 'spiritual' realities,

by contrast, are invisible, everlasting and immaterial! This parallel, unseen realm is the domain of Christ's kingdom and power where we, His subjects, are called to live by faith and not by sight. The perceptive reader will recognise in such an outlook the very essence of 'Gnosticism'. Too right!

4. *The Biblical Resolution – Theoretical Unity*

Neither of the pragmatic solutions (see 3 above) represent a Biblical response to the reality of actual diversity of conviction found within the visible assemblies of 'Christian Churches.' Rather, resolution is to be found in the realisation that 'true Truth' – whatever the subject – is a unit. Why? Because true Truth corresponds to that which God thinks! And God is One. Wherefore, we are exhorted by Paul to '*make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (For) there is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all*' [Eph 4:3-6]. Again, '*Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel*' [Phil 1:27]. Our failure to see the essential unity in the created order, which also accounts for the establishment of UNIVERSITIES rather than MULTIVERSITIES, stems from the indoctrination in postmodernism and relativism we've received in recent decades.

5. *Carnal Sectarianism*

Alas, what typically prevails among assemblies (which implicitly imagine themselves 'bastions of orthodoxy') is functional sectarianism – the notion that it is NECESSARY and PRAGMATIC, because of the plurality of opinion out there, to set up shop around an idiosyncratic doctrinal statement crafted by the wisdom of incumbent (duly elected and commissioned!) experts. Notwithstanding the false humility of their pleas, such gatherings tend to justify their existence by insinuating that 'competing assemblies aren't quite as orthodox or principled (in a thousand different ways) as ourselves.' Unwittingly, they become local high priests (i.e. judges), condemning their competitors while commending their own exclusive practices and beliefs as authentic. St Paul's stinging rebuke applies to them:

'Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ."' [1Cor 1:10-12]

Later in the same letter, the Apostle further indicts the believers for their practice of sectarianism identifying the nature of those who would establish 'cliques' in Christ's church as carnal – i.e. babies!!

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? [1Cor 3:1-4]

Are we missing something? Is there an explanatory motif which we need to invoke in order to make proper sense of the 'disconnect' between the idealised (future) Body of Christ and its, all too common, corrupt manifestations?

6. *Visible and Invisible Church*

Yes, indeed! Much trouble has assailed Christian assemblies over centuries on account of their failure to distinguish properly between the visible and invisible Church. St Paul wrote letters to various churches dispersed throughout the ancient world. He addressed specific matters relevant to particular assemblies. Nevertheless, he plainly identified the totality of God's people as a universal group. Robert Reymondⁱ notes helpfully, 'all its members are baptised by one Spirit into one body having one Head and one Lord. There is one building with one foundation, one flock under one shepherd.' When someone becomes a Christian, they automatically become a member of the universal INVISIBLE community of Christ's saints; genuine participation in the INVISIBLE body of Christ so stirs the heart that participation is sought within the local formal gatherings of its VISIBLE expressions. But notice immediately the possibility of someone belonging to the INVISIBLE Church (by virtue of regeneration) whilst being somewhat awkwardly attached to a particular local, VISIBLE assembly. I first encountered the dual, complementary concepts of visible/invisible church back in 1997 after reading carefully through Dabney & Hodge on the Covenant of Grace. It revolutionised my thinking back then. The present widespread failure to recognise this important theological distinction between the visible and invisible communities has a long pedigree.

7. *Principled Ecumenism*

The LOGICAL conclusion to all this is that **NO** local assembly should regard itself as possessing definitive Christian doctrine. Rather, it ought to recognise its remit in history as a principled attempt to display before local citizenry the magisterial claims of Jesus Christ as Lord. Visible assemblies are charged with declaring the crown rights of Jesus Christ as Prophet, Priest and King over every aspect of life. Each local assembly, being made up of fickle, partially sanctified saints together with many spurious hypocrites, must necessarily recognise the very real possibility that it might stumble into doctrinal confusion – even heresy! Two thousand years of Church history is replete with countless examples of consequential doctrinal divisions. We imagine our exemption from such trials in vain! ***Principled Ecumenism*** is the only honourable way ahead. Accordingly, no local assembly should regard its existence apart from its FORMAL connection with every other formal communion AND its informal attachment to the invisible Bride of Christ. For such reasons, local visible assemblies ought to manage carefully internal expressions of dissent. This especially jars in the contemporary climate in which, as we have noted, formal orthodoxy is effectively dictated by the minister or the assembly leadership (pastors/elders).

8. ***Sola Scriptura & Liberty of Conscience***

The Scriptures alone provide the bed-rock upon which assembled participants can lay spiritual claim to Christ. Recognising the finality and ultimacy of Scripture, local Church officers must guard against being heavy-handed when confronting formal dissent in their midst. Artificial unity is easily achieved by tyranny. Alas, a fair-minded (i.e. proper and thorough!) enquiry into a matter, followed by an honourable adjustment of worldview, is rare! But it was for this reason St Paul urged each member of the Church to *'submit to one another in the fear of God'* [Eph 5:21]. It can never be right for one man to exert his brute opinion over another man [cf Matt 23:9]. Jesus warned, *'The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors'* [Lu 22:25]. The proper warrant or justification for any principled opinion requires that it be shown to arise from Scripture itself when properly exegeted, etc. Reymond again, exegeting the Larger Catechism (Q.159) concerning those who preach, comments,

He must also bear in mind that his authority is ministerial and declarative, not magisterial and legislative. That is to say, his authority is the authority of God himself when he proclaims God's Word and ministers as Christ's ambassador in Christ's stead. But he must not take offense when his auditors examine the Scriptures, as did the Bereans (Acts 17:11), to see if what he is preaching is true. To the contrary, he should encourage them to examine God's written Word for themselves. Nor does he have the authority to enact new laws for men's consciences or to abrogate the laws of Scripture that some may think bind them too severely.

Martin Luther famously said, 'Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen.' [Diet of Worms 1521]. It is thus a central tenet of reformed theology that we respect only Biblical assertions. The same cry was heard from Peter and the apostles some 2,000 years ago when, filled with the Spirit of God, they too resisted the coercive dictates of civil and religious powers of their day, insisting, *"We ought to obey God rather than men"* [Acts 5:29].

9. ***What then are we to Believe?***

We are to believe ***that body of Truth bequeathed to us by the most honourable teachers of God's Word down through time.*** God, by His Spirit, has providentially superintended a great fight for Truth which has prevailed over two tumultuous millennia! Anticipating this struggle, St Paul reminded the infant Church at Ephesus that *'He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.'* [Eph 4:11-15]. Consider that those here designated 'evangelists, pastors and teachers' might easily apply to the great scholars down

through time (e.g. Augustine, Athanasius, Calvin, Edwards, et al) i.e. not merely those contemporary with St Paul!

10. *Councils & Confessions – Semper Reformata*

Gary North has drawn attention to the gradual formal progress towards a purer expression of orthodoxy down through time beginning with the simplest creed: 'Jesus is Lord' (1Cor 12:3) through short pithy affirmations (e.g. 1Tim 1:15-16; 1Jn 4:1-3), creeds (e.g. Apostle's, Nicene, etc) and later Reformation Confessions (e.g. Westminster; Savoy, Augsburg, etc). Such august declarations are an eloquent testimony to the Church's honourable desire to exhibit formal doctrinal unity representing genuine Biblical orthodoxy to the unbelieving world looking on. Authentic Christians duly recognise the virtue of such 'Creeds' while looking forwards to even purer and more precise formulations in future days. There is doubtless an urgent need to affirm Biblical orthodoxy in the face of recent widespread capitulations to Darwinism, Deconstructionism, Postmodernism, Dispensationalism, etc. This is why the Reformation Church declared loudly and clearly that it was a 'work in progress' acknowledging the need to be 'Semper Reformata' – always reforming!

11. *Apostolicity and Catholicity*

Note also that we are to be steadfastly 'Apostolic' in what we believe. Jesus imbued His original followers with apostolic authority to lay a foundation upon which future generations of the Church would later build [1Cor 3:9-11]. The pages of the NT provide us with THEIR authoritative pronouncements. Reymond again helpfully affirms, 'Just as the true seed are those who walk in the faith of Abraham, irrespective of lineal descent, so too the apostolic Church is one which walks in the faith of the apostles, irrespective of the issue of unbroken succession. [Matt 10:40; Lu 10:16; Jn 13:20]. The catholicity of the Church arises from its worldwide commission (see below) to disciple the nations. It follows that *'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female,circumcised or uncircumcised, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'* [Gal 3:28; Col 3:11]; Twice in the Book of Revelation this same thought is to the fore: *'You have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth.'* [Rev 5:9-10] And again, *'After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands.'* [Rev 7:9]

12. *Exemplary Chalcedon*

By way of example of honourable procedure from the past, consider that throughout several centuries the Church wrestled with various so called 'Christological Heresies' which disturbed its peace and unity temporarily. Assailants included the: (i) Docetists (ii) Samosation Adoptionists (iii) Sabellians (iv) Arians (v) Apollinarians (vi) Nestorians and (vii) Eutychians. The following statement was formulated and adopted at the **Council of Chalcedon** in 451 in Asia Minor by all Churches throughout the western world to return them to formal visible unity. Chalcedon was the fourth of seven such ecumenical councils. It is still endorsed by Eastern Orthodox, Catholic, and many Protestant Christian churches. It reads,

'Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in

manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one substance with the Father as regards his Godhead, and at the same time of one substance with us as regards his manhood; like us in all respects, apart from sin; as regards his Godhead, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his manhood begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the God-bearer; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.'

What a noble model of 'Principled Ecumenism'!

13. Seek First the Kingdom of God – not Church Planting!

Returning then briefly to what we have found so far. The goal of the Church is the advancement of Christ's glorious kingdom throughout the world by the preaching of the 'Crown rights of Jesus Christ'. Since His humiliation on the cross followed by His resurrection and ascension to the right hand of the Father on high, Jesus is destined to receive ever increasing recognition and acknowledgement of His primacy in this – HIS – world. This is the central burden of the Lord's Prayer where the Church's mission is succinctly rehearsed:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Deliver us from evil; for Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, now and forever. [Matt 6: 9-13]

Paul spells it out also in 1Cor 15 where we read,

*'For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. **For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.** Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all [verses 21-28].*

It is the mission of the Church to bring all this about (see #15 below). The ultimate goal of the gospel is NOT to bring folks into Church (i.e. Church planting). Rather, church growth and participation is INCIDENTAL; soul winning is a commendable first step; but it is not the 'be-all and end-all of our business'. Thus, the vision of contemporary evangelicalism is teleologically short-sighted. It leads, inevitably to a culture of mere 'corporate ingathering'. Well did Jesus chide the spiritual shepherds of His day, '*Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.*' [Matt 23:15] The primary source of confusion in the contemporary evangelical scene arises from the prevailing conflation of the 'kingdom of heaven' with 'the Church'. The Church is God's ordained means to bring about His glorious end – the establishment of His kingdom &

Christ's dominion over all. In its final form the two shall be one; but not until then.

14. *The T-R-U-E Church of Christ is 'Theonomic, Reformed, Universal and Eternal.'*

[There's a mnemonic there somewhere!] For reasons spelled out above, many (most?) contemporary Churches are 'pietistic'; meaning that they have reduced the gospel message to a call to outsiders to escape from the world (i.e. culture) and become members of their local assemblies (an alternative sub-culture). The Jesus they're introduced to is 'Lord of their singing on Sundays' – perhaps even their 'spiritual life.' 'Lord of all!' effectively translates as 'Jesus is Lord of ALL of my heart!' But such a diluted form of Christianity is a sham. The true Gospel – 'the Gospel of the kingdom' – Christ's rule and reign in every sphere (Church, Family & State) impacts every human enterprise (Science, Maths, Politics, Music, etc). Christ, being Lord of the Civil sphere, requires Churches to be 'Theonomic' – i.e. that justice, crime & punishment be established in accordance with God's revealed Law (found mostly in OT). Given the inherent corruption of human thinking, authentic Christian Churches must pursue 'Christian Reconstruction' – i.e. self-consciously seeking to bring every thought captive to the Word of God [2Cor 10:4]. The TRUE Church of Jesus Christ must also be self-consciously (i) Reformed – i.e. identifying with the distinctive soteriology of the Protestant Reformation – and (ii) Universal – i.e. identifying itself existentially with the international invisible collection of truly 'born again' (regenerate) believers. No visible assembly corresponds to the actual unseen Bride of Christ. Rather, local assemblies are necessarily mixtures of genuine saints along with professing hypocrites [cf Matt 25]. At times St Paul has in mind the former (invisible Church) – e.g. Ephesians Ch 1. At other times He plainly has the latter (visible) body in mind – e.g. Rev 2-3. It was the outstanding tendency of 16th & 17th century 'Anabaptistic theology' to remove this crucial Biblical distinction. Alas, modern evangelicalism is awash with much the same crudely simplistic outlook! Finally, the TRUE Church of Christ is ETERNAL, identifying itself with the patriarchs of old (Abraham, Isaac & Jacob) and their spiritual progeny together with all future international citizens of Zion [Heb 12:22-24].

15. *The Great Commission*

The great Commission (Matt 28) specifically involves 'national discipleship.' Modern evangelical assemblies have little or no conception of what a Christian nation state might look like. But the notion was clear enough to Calvin, Cromwell, Knox and most/all confessional Reformers. Personal submission to Christ is merely the first step. The Political subordination of all law & legislation to God is of paramount importance. This accounts for Rutherford's great treatise – Lex Rex – in which he argues comprehensively for the ultimate authority of God's Law within the civil realm. The English Civil War is incomprehensible apart from an awareness of the notion of a 'Christian state'. Here's the crucial question: Does the king possess absolute authority or was He himself subject to 'the ruler of the kings of the earth' [Rev 1:5]? The blindness and short-sightedness of many contemporary reformed theologians is apparent enough when otherwise good scholars (e.g. Reymond!) indict Calvin for sanctioning the civil execution of Servetus. Even the great Merle D'Aubigneⁱⁱ winces at some of Cromwell's political decisions!

16. *Hallmarks of Sectarianism – Ecclesiolatry!*

We have seen that the widespread failure of evangelical assemblies to recognise the primacy of the universal (invisible) Church as the true Bride of Christ arises, by and large, from their simplistic identification of their local assemblies with 'The Church of Christ'. The persistence

of such notions (especially when they are pointed out!) represents nothing short of idolatry (i.e. ecclesiolatry). Authority subtly slips from Scripture to an alternative *magisterium* - the appointed minister or an elite ministry team. Attendees typically are conscience-bound to subscribe to an idiosyncratic local constitution and become 'formal Church members' as a mark of their fidelity to Christ, etc. All too frequently, baptism is (wrongly!) associated with regeneration and the tacit assumption is made that conscientious subjection to a local assembly of mere men provides a practical gauge of one's fidelity to the gospel. Cross-questioning of preached messages or even measured informal dissent is decidedly unwelcome. Any attempt to engage formally with what is taught is perceived as dishonourable insubordination and those expressing contrary convictions – however plainly warranted by Scripture/reason – are smeared for their 'mean-spirited effort to rock the boat.' But not all divisions are bad. St Paul himself said, *'For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you.'* [1Cor 11:19] Thus, the same insidious magisterium which blighted the 16th and 17th centuries has today subtly morphed into a new 'protestant popery' which deters participants from pursuing Biblical Truth independently of the local of elders/deacons. In its worst manifestation, (I speak from genuine personal experience!) it even dares to caution those of its crew who venture to trawl for answers to life's big questions by going on-line!

17. Introduction to Calvin's Institutes

The subtle yet tyrannical control exercised by so many of today's evangelical leadership is little different from the Romish hegemony exercised by the Papacy during the 16th century. Calvin addressed his Institutes of the Christian Religion to King Francis I of France defending the *bona-fide* status of the newly constituted Reformation Churches. Arguing persuasively and Scripturally for their legitimacy in his introduction, he comments:

*Look now to our adversaries (I mean the priesthood, at whose beck and pleasure others ply their enmity against us), and consider with me for a little by what zeal they are actuated. The true religion which is delivered in the Scriptures, and which all ought to hold, they readily permit both themselves and others to be ignorant of, to neglect and despise; and they deem it of little moment what each man believes concerning God and Christ, or disbelieves, provided he submits to the judgment of the Church.*ⁱⁱⁱ

With the Church we wage no war, since, with one consent, in common with the whole body of the faithful, we worship and adore one God, and Christ Jesus the Lord, as all the pious have always adored him. But they themselves err not a little from the truth in not recognising any church but that which they behold with the bodily eye, and in endeavouring to circumscribe it by limits, within which it cannot be confined.^{iv}

Let us rather reverently admit, that as God alone knows who are his, so he may sometimes withdraw the external manifestation of his Church from the view of men. This, I allow, is a fearful punishment which God sends on the earth; but if the wickedness of men so deserves,.... Is not this the just vengeance of God? It was thus that God, in past ages, punished the ingratitude of men; for after they had refused to obey his truth, and had extinguished his light, he allowed them, when blinded by sense, both to be deluded by lying vanities and plunged in thick darkness, so that no face of a true Church appeared.^v

According to Calvin, traditionalism & Phariseism (i.e. ecclesiolatry) were alive and well

within the constituency of Christ's visible body. What was true *then* is still conceivably true today.

18. *Apostate Churches*

It is astonishing how swiftly error and impiety creeps into God's work – see for example the seven letters to the Churches of Asia (Rev 2-3)! But we ought not to be surprised for Christ Himself warned, *'Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'* [Matt 7:21-23] Within a few short decades of Jesus' death and resurrection the Apostle Paul, anticipating the spirit of apostasy wreaking havoc in the 1st century churches wrote, *'Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also, from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.* [Acts 20:28-31]

19. *Are You under False Shepherds?*

The Minor Prophets in the OT abound with examples of false leaders & false shepherds of God's OT saints. They are extensively and comprehensively indicted for *'healing slightly the hurt of my people, saying 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace.'* [Jer 6:14; Ez 13:10]. Let us not lose sight of the fact that it was the visible (formal) assembly of God's people that crucified the Lord of Glory. *'He came to His own, but His own received Him not'* [Jn 1:11]. Speaking of the same group of religious leaders in Israel, Jesus quoting Ps 118 explained, *'the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.'* Have you SUBTLY allowed your commitment to Christ to be substituted by your commitment to a local assembly and its governing authority? Do the leaders & preachers in your assembly welcome open cross-questioning of their teaching? Or do they safeguard it and ring-fence it by treating genuine critical examination of its substance as subversive and mean-spirited? St Paul urged the Christians at Colosse to *'Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.'* [Col 3:16]. A genuine work of God has nothing to fear from open, public scrutiny. St Paul regarded his public rebuke of Peter in Galatia (see Gal 2:11) as an honourable exercise of brotherly affection and spiritual kindness. Alas, expressions of dissent within the modern evangelical constituency tend to be judged as harsh, critical, unloving and ill-spirited. So zealous for local unity are the contemporary watchmen that they neither dare blow the trumpet themselves, nor do they suffer its warning when others around them venture to sound its blast! [Ez 33].

20. *Separation and the Whore of Babylon (Rev 18) – Come out!*

What then is the faithful foot-soldier of Jesus Christ to do? What is the honourable way forwards when, seemingly, the great majority of visible assemblies have compromised and yielded to the spirit of the age?

Notwithstanding fierce pressure to conform and the many loud/persistent cries of

acquaintances – even close family! – to ‘Come back to Church’ we must not. For them, the simple (simplistic) evaluation of your departure will be viewed in terms of ‘your poor attitude towards the Church.’ But, of course, it isn’t. On the contrary, it is you who are being truly faithful to Christ; it is you who are ‘seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.’ NOWHERE in Scripture is there an exhortation to remain, COME WHAT MAY, formally attached to a local religious assembly. But EVERYWHERE in Scripture there are to be found exhortations to remain exclusively and conscientiously faithful to the plain propositions of Scripture. The true Church of Christ is allied to God’s laws and His commandments (see Jn 14:21; Rom 3:31; Jam 2:8ff). But alas, most ‘Christian assemblies’ are practically antinomian. I could count on the fingers of one hand the number of sermons I’ve heard over 35 years in evangelical Churches where God’s Law is recommended to the congregation and extolled for its integrity!

The prospect of this all we are witnessing today happening in future centuries is strikingly rehearsed in the 17th and 18th chapters of the Book of Revelation. Indeed, its occurrence there would seem to indicate that it is scheduled to occur under God’s guiding hand of providence in future years of earth history. There we read about, ‘*MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.*’ We are told, ‘*the woman whom is that great city which reigns over the kings of the earth.*’ [Rev 17:5;18]. In the verses that follow in Ch 18, the discerning reader is commanded to ‘*Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues*’ [Rev 18:4]. Notice:

- (a) she is a woman – i.e. a symbolic subversion of the Bride of Christ: i.e. the Church!
- (b) she is depicted as a harlot and therefore to be understood in terms of a prostitute who has abandoned the marriage covenant for illicit liaisons with other husbands/lords. This the Church of Jesus Christ does when it subordinates itself to the statutes of men rather than the commandments of God [see Rev 12:17];
- (c) she is in the wilderness – identifying herself with the woman of Rev 12 – the Israel of God. Many great biblical scholars^{vi} have therefore identified ‘Mystery Babylon the Great’ as a significant false religious system operating in tandem with the beast (corrupt humanistic government) in the closing epoch of earth history.

21. Conclusions!

Is there any escape? Yes, indeed! One of the primary symptoms of creeping spiritual death in gatherings of Christians is their loss of desire to cultivate among themselves a comprehensive, Christian world and life view. But such a desire is BASIC to authentic religion. Such fellowships do exist here in the UK. Alas, they are possibly small numerically and somewhat geographically scattered. However, you are welcome to join with us &/or get involved via the internet. Just as the printing press revolutionised communication 600 years ago, the world wide web has created the possibility of virtual ‘hang-outs’ (i.e. gatherings!) in which true disciples of Christ can meet and learn from one another, etc. Meetings will be the First Sunday evening of each month from 7.00pm. Let me know if you want to take part. An enquiry into the proper format of small house-group meetings must await future study. Watch this space!

ⁱ Reymond – A New Systematic Theology 1998

ⁱⁱ Merle D'Aubigne – The Protector: a Vindication. 1847

ⁱⁱⁱ Calvin's Institutes – Prefatory Letter p xviii

^{iv} Calvin's Institutes – Prefatory Letter p xxix

^v Calvin's Institutes – Prefatory Letter p xxxi

^{vi} E.g. FN Lee & Phillip Mauro