

CHOOSING A CHURCH

This is a privilege (or problem) that Christians of the first century did not have. In fact, there were no Christian "churches," only heathen ones, since the word translated church, the Greek *kuriakon*, was an adjective describing a heathen temple. It is regrettable that our Bible translators did not preserve for us the more meaningful "fellowship" or "communion," or "called" from the Greek *ecclesia* that is used to designate the body of Christian believers in the Bible.

In the first century, denominational divisions, doctrinal errors, apostasy splits and schisms had not yet taken their toll on the Christian community. When a person believed, he became a part of the only fellowship in the city or area where he lived.

In this country and in others where religion has not been uniformly mandated by the state, and where the gospel has been preached for scores of years, churches of all shades and sorts have sprung up. Not only is there a wide selection of denominations, and more recently, undenominated independent groups, but a considerable variety within one denomination.

This is more of a curse than a blessing, since we are now compelled to choose, not the best of something that is mostly all good, but the lesser of the evil out of what is practically all bad. That is the general case. There are, to be sure, some excellent churches; but every town or city or area in the U.S.A. does not have one. When a person lives in such a place, he must decide if he is going to subject himself and his family to one of the corrupt fountains of lies, or if he will take the responsibility of evangelizing in view of a true church being established. I am more immediately concerned in this paper, however, with those who do not have to make a choice like the one above. These live where, not only is the usual array of sick churches infecting all they contact with their own particular brand of religious disease, but a sound spiritual godly church exists. The question to be addressed is this: Can there be a valid reason to choose the unspiritual church, where there is a mixture of truth and error, and where flesh dominates the spirit, rather than the spiritual fellowship, where flesh is mortified and God is exalted by the Spirit?

I have too long delayed addressing the problem in a definitive dogmatic way, preferring rather to say, "You do what the Lord leads you," or "Whatever you have liberty to do," or "Whatever you think best," feeling I had no right to tell anyone what church they should embrace.

There are certain biblical considerations, however, under which a free choice must be guided, and I do not think I can any longer escape my responsibility to call attention to them.

1 *The church of God is declared to be the pillar and ground of truth [I Tim. 3:15].*

Therefore a church that does not believe and teach the Holy Scriptures, the whole counsel of God, is not worthy of consideration. (And what one will not teach, he does not believe.) It must not dilute, avoid, diminish, or distort those difficult and humanly distasteful portions of God's word which are so essential to our salvation. It is not enough that it preaches faithfully certain truths, and simply avoids, without attacking, other biblical teachings. A false prophet is marked, not only by the error he teaches, but by the truth he avoids. This usually makes him appear more of a nice fellow, a wolf in sheep's clothing. **How can a church profess to be the pillar and ground of truth when it teaches only man's responsibility and avoids divine sovereignty? Or when it teaches only the glories and power of Christ, carefully avoiding any reference to the moral demands of God upon man?**

2 *The church of the living God is a habitation of God through the Spirit (Eph. 2:22).*

A people that is not *spiritually* alive cannot be a habitation of God. It is altogether possible for one to be orthodox in doctrine, correct in creed, meticulous in the fine points of hair-splitting theology, and be altogether empty of spiritual vitality. True Christianity is warm, vibrant, alive in personal communion with God through the Holy Spirit. It is careful and responsive to the needs of all its members. They are demonstrably loving and affectionate, unafraid of emotional demonstration. It lives, acts, prays, wages warfare by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

3 *Nothing can be considered the church of Jesus Christ that has not Him as its Head (Eph. 5:23).*

Most all churches make this claim for themselves; but even a casual investigation will often prove Him to be only a figurehead. Ask a few reasonable questions: Who really governs it? Who or what is consulted when decisions are to be made? From whence comes its polity and rules of practice, the scriptures, or tradition? To whom do its members look for approval and guidance in their actions? Whom does it strive to please?

A church that has a pope, an imposter professing himself to be the vicar of Christ, is not the Lord's church: it is the pope's church. A non-Catholic one which has a pastor making claims to be God's living word to the membership is not the Lord's church: it is the preacher's. (It is usually actually called his church). **Nor can a church be Christian which fears to make any move that is not sanctioned by a denomination's practice, policy or tradition.** Call it voluntary cooperation if you wish; the fact remains, that church's life is not ordered by Christ. It is dictated by the denomination, if not by legal coercion, then by popular pressure. Nor can a church ordered by a deacon board or by congregational vote be headed by Christ. If we are to commit ourselves to a body of believers in the way the Bible says members must, then we must be certain that church, to the best of its ability, is headed by Christ alone.

4 *Members of a Christian church stand perfectly holy, accepted in the Beloved before God wholly on the basis of the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:4-6), Titus 3:4-5).*

It is His death that satisfies God's justice on our behalf, His blood that covers our sins, and His person that presents us perfect in God's presence. Churches which add something to Christ, despise, cheapen and make His perfect work seem inadequate. Whether it be baptisms, sacraments, tongues, penances, external righteousness, catechisms, confessions, or whatever . . . they are all denials of Christ's sacrifice as a full and complete satisfaction to God for His elect for all time and eternity. We who begin in the Spirit must not hope

to finish in the flesh. Let us not defile the white garment of Christ with the filthy garments of our own works for any religious affiliation. We must not subject ourselves to a fellowship that hopes in other than Christ Jesus alone.

5 *The true people of God are a people who are not only counted holy for Christ's sake, but a people who are holy in their daily walk. They are a separated, peculiar, different people, markedly distinctive from the world and false religion (II Cor. 6:14-7:1).*

They do not turn the grace of God into lasciviousness. Freedom in Christ to them means freedom from the penalty and power of sin, not freedom to sin. They hold in great awe God's holy law, and like the Psalmist, consider it a delight, "sweeter than honey and the honeycomb."

If a little leaven leaveneth a whole lump, how much more will a leavened lump leaven what is added to it. **Or how much more must we expect to get polluted if we get in a barrel of apples already rotting with the worldliness of loose lawless living?** Especially must we flee from churches where the leadership is allied with lodges, clubs, fraternities and societies. The Bible is explicit on that point: *Be ye not unequally yoked with unbelievers.* They may protest that these organizations do much human good and that they speak often of God, that they use the Bible for their morals and dogma. This we do not deny. Atheists also quote scriptures when it serves their liking and purpose. Some lodges are, no doubt, religious, and its members required to believe in a "supreme being," but that is far from Christianity. Be assured that there are no *Christian* fraternities or societies outside the Christian church. The true believer in Christ neither needs nor desires any. The Lord established one fellowship, the church which He purchased in His blood. He intended His people's community needs be met in it and none other.

6. *The church of the Lord Jesus Christ is obedient to His commands, especially those which direct us to evangelize and make disciples.*

The immediate consequences of true spiritual worship and communion in Christ is a bold and aggressive witness to the unbelieving world. A church without a mission is a locomotive without a track. It is consuming energy and going nowhere. It is cursed soil drinking in nourishment and rain, bringing no fruit. It is a barren tree destined to wither and die. Avoid those super elite groups, those myopic moles who have no vision, the lazy, self-centered gluttons who produce no more than they can consume. Be sure your church has a concerted outreach with the gospel in which you can share.

Some of you may now be thinking that there are special reasons, extenuating circumstances, special exceptions, which make it advisable for you to choose the less spiritual church. It has, perhaps, a more attractive program of activities for your children. More of your friends or relatives attend there. It is the old established church in the community, and it would be a scandalous break with tradition to leave it. You feel like you can reach more people, have a wider ministry for yourself in a church that has more people, even though it is short on truth and holiness and long on worldliness and unbelief. I beg of you to carefully consider the following and see if the above advantages will outweigh the following damages.

A. *In spite of what you may have heard, the first consideration in a church is your own spiritual needs - not your ministry.*

If you are not built up in the faith, you will have no worth-while ministry, only a false and self-destructive one. We have too much of that kind already. Consider then, what this polluted fountain will do to your own spiritual life and that of your family. Is it worth defiling your home with the world, the flesh and the devil? And that under the pretense of Christianity? If a man is a fool to gain the whole world at the cost of his soul, are you making any better bargain here? Please do not be so naive as to think it will not so affect you. It will most certainly do so. You cannot take fire to your bosom and not be burned, or touch the filthy without becoming defiled yourself. Is it worth it? The cost may be higher than you think. Wrong spiritual values, false teachings, moral corruptions fomenting broken homes, rebellious children and shipwrecked lives, all flow like a torrent from these worldly churches.

B. *Your choice of the worldly church over the admittedly more spiritual one scandalizes the church more true to the Lord Jesus Christ.*

You bring a reproach upon the bride of Christ and persecute her for righteousness sake, for you testify to the community by your choice that the worse is the better, and the better to be rejected.

How illogical and unreasonable it is for you to say, "Yes, I admit that church A is made up of holy God-fearing people who hate evil, love righteousness, teach truth, sacrificially give of themselves to glorify God and publish His word. However, in my circumstances, I think it is better for me to participate in church B, which is inferior spiritually, but has other valuable advantages." What sort of signal are you giving to the world? It is either that carnal considerations are worth more than spiritual ones, that you do not really believe that church A is the more spiritual one, or that you are no true Christian yourself.

C. *When you give yourself, time, energy and money to the carnal church, you are, in that measure, aiding an enemy of the Cross and helping build it up.*

Surely you do not think your contributions go only into what spiritual values the church sponsors and not into its Christ-denying activities. No, you support the whole thing, that which is devilish as well as that which is divine.

The more you build up the hybrid, the greater image you give it in the community, and the more souls it will attract, entrap, deceive and corrupt. You help promote a false concept of the Christian church and Christianity in general. The greater it waxes, the darker the community becomes, for darkness has insinuated itself as light. When the light of men becomes darkness, the false passed off for the real, how great is that darkness!

D. *At the same time you are building up the world's church, you are weakening the Lord's church. To the extent it is deprived of the fellowship and support you ought to be giving it, you are starving it of its rightful gifts for the true gospel ministry.*

How must the Lord Jesus view this betrayal of the sheep, this shunning of the cross of reproach, this preference of the earthly over the heavenly? Is it enough for us to admire, and laud those who bear the heavy load of sacrificial labors and endure the shame of worldly and religious ostracization while we take the easier route of cheap worldly approved Christendom that requires no more of us than the flesh can deliver without hurting itself? Let Isaac Watt's hymn ask us the question afresh:

*Am I a soldier of the cross, A follower of the Lamb?
And shall I fear to own His cause, Or blush to speak His name?
Must I be carried to the skies On flowery beds of ease,
While others fought to win the prize And sailed through bloody seas?
Are there no foes for me to face? Must I not stem the flood?
Is this vile world a friend to grace, To help me on to God?*

When we choose the fleshy over the spiritual, we rob the true church of our fellowship, deprive ourselves of its benefits, and encourage others to leave it for the "going thing." Thus we weaken ourselves, the church and Christian witness in general.

But, one will now object that he has a greater audience in the bigger, more worldly church. He has a bigger "ministry" there. He is there to shine light in darkness.

Please hear me carefully on this point, for it is the one that seems most reasonable and noble, and the excuse that is most often invoked for embracing the compromising church. Dear Christian friend, when the Lord spoke of light shining in darkness, He spoke of the church shining in the world, *not* the Christian shining in a worldly church. If that "church" is darkness, then Ephesians 5:11 certainly applies: "*have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them.*" We who join them reprove the light and approve the darkness. The church of Christ is light shining in the darkness of this world. We should be a part of the light, not the darkness. **The world, not the church, is the mission field; and we evangelize by being *different*, not part of it.**

If we really believe that we effectively evangelize what we join, then let us select the most wicked, worldly ungodly groups in the country, and shed our light in that darkness. At least we would not be giving them our endorsement as a true Christian church by so doing. I suspect we do not really believe that: that we join the worse church because we *like* it better. It allows our flesh more comfort, and its darkness shields us from the brilliance of God's truth and life in the cross of Christ.

It may be noted that Paul preached in religious darkness when he began in a city's synagogue. He did not join it, and his preaching was of extremely short duration. No sooner did that darkness perceive that the light of the gospel was making their religion worthless than he was thrown out. Today's unbelieving half-apostate church will love the gospel no better. If we apply its truth to the particular lie that they embrace, we will no longer be allowed to minister under its auspices. You cannot make a stand for Christ, truth, and holy living and remain an accepted part of it. You cannot do otherwise and walk in communion with Christ.

The true Christian church has never been, is not now, nor ever will be any more than a small, rejected, despised sect. Therefore, "*It is impossible but that offenses will come: but woe unto him, through whom they come! (Luke 17:1)*" Let us joyfully, willingly bear His reproach, not join those who reproach Him.

Christians, true to the gospel given us by our crucified and risen Lord, were forced to go underground in 300 A.D. when Constantine became emperor of Rome and married the church to the world. They survived until the Protestant Reformation as the hated and bitterly persecuted "heretics." Their hopes that the Reformers would restore primitive church life and order were quickly disappointed, and Protestants killed and persecuted more Christians than Roman Catholics did.

Those of us, therefore, who wish to follow the Lord Jesus Christ in sound and full Bible truth cannot find our spiritual ancestry in either Roman Catholic or Protestant churches. Nor can it be found in any of the widely proliferated rootless Charismatic sects and cults that about today. Their history is less than a century old, the most modern of all deviations from Christianity. There is, however, a people, a remnant as there always has been. They will never have an admired name in this world, will always be given the lowest place among religions. They are still the ecclesiastical outcasts, the "heretics." But it is among these that we who love the rejected Saviour and worship the reigning King Jesus, will find our true spiritual roots.

- C. M.