

Newsletter June 2016

Beginning with our March 2016 newsletter, we began a series of discussions concerning today's temporal church by endeavoring to define an ideal Christ-centered church based solely upon biblical principles. In our April newsletter we put forth an introduction to the vast history of the temporal church from which today's churches have emerged, and in May we discussed Christian denominationalism, which currently divides churches and believers into many separate camps. In this newsletter, we shall conclude this discussion by considering the many difficulties encountered by individual believers when seeking to find a sound local Christ-centered Bible-based church with which to affiliate themselves. While this discussion is primarily directed toward new believers, portions of this discussion may be found useful to mature believers as well when they need to seek out a new church home.

In last month's newsletter (May 2016) we discussed the wide array of denominations that came about as a byproduct of the *Protestant Reformation Movement* in which unified biblical reform was never fully achieved. While early emerging denominations each represented a positive move away from Roman Catholicism and toward biblical reform, many faulty teachings and traditions remained deeply entrenched, which brought a halt to the effort before comprehensive reform could take place. As still later denominations were formed out of earlier ones in an effort to advance the reform, they tended to introduce various innovative doctrinal errors and whimsies of worship and practice of their own making. Once formed, each denomination developed a dogmatic exclusivity, which elevated their member churches to a false state of idyllic prominence. Soon its ruling hierarchy displaced Christ in authority, and the church became an object of religious worship. Church-worship is presently exemplified in today's institutionalized churchianity (cf. Newsletter October 2014).

Many new believers have just come through an emotional roller coaster in their lives before they are finally redeemed in Christ. In their new-found faith, they most likely have felt the sharp sting of rejection from close friends and relatives who no longer understand them. Therefore, when they first come into a church what they are most often seeking is human fellowship and acceptance to replace that loss. They are not immediately seeking Truth, and sound doctrine is the farthest thing from their minds in this early stage of their spiritual development. A great many of them may have never before attended any church service, and have little knowledge of how temporal churches actually function. They heard and believed the Gospel message as it was presented over the radio or television, read it directly from a Bible or from a tract someone handed them, or they received it from a stranger, a close personal friend, or a family member. Regardless of how they received it, they have truly believed and in a moment have become a newborn child in Christ. All believers are born into one universal body of believers with Jesus Christ as their Lord, such that they soon desire to share in close fellowship with others of the faith, engage in unified corporate worship of God, and grow in their knowledge of Jesus Christ. However, due to doctrinal and procedural schisms that continually divide the temporal church into many factions, they are faced with searching out a sound local church congregation from the limited number of churches available within the locality in which they live.

Believers are commonly criticized by established churchgoers for making this search for a sound church – believing that they should immediately join almost any local church in order to worship and grow; sincere searchers are often referred to as “church tramps.” This notion is based upon the false assumption that all churches are alike, but they will usually simultaneously deny that notion by imploring you to join their particular church. Only a pseudo-Christian who has never seriously considered searching for Truth at face value could make that kind of statement; he just believes what he has been told over many years and has never tested the teachings of his own church or denomination directly against Holy Scripture. Churchianity has him imprisoned within its rigid paradigm – a closed intellectual box without windows through which he could see outside to anchor his faith in absolute Scriptural Truth. Consequently, he can have no real understanding of the difficulty and agony of conscience that a genuine seeker of Truth encounters.

Nevertheless, many new believers begin their search by attending a church recommended by a friend or perhaps one regularly attended by other members of their family. Lacking any personal ties that lead them to attend a particular church, others merely select a church at random – falsely thinking that one church is much like all others in doctrine and practice. They tend to focus on externals such as the size and construction of the building as well as the decor of the sanctuary walls and seats. The style of worship music, the charismatic nature of a pulpit preacher, and the apparent friendliness of members that may greet you at the door are also

strong attractions. If the new believer is initially comfortable with all that he hears and sees, and the drive-time is not too great, he or she may soon decide to attend that church on a regular basis. Conversely, some new believers may be shocked or repulsed by something that was observed during their initial encounter with a particular church, such that they conclude that all churches are not for them and bring their search to an abrupt end. Thinking that all temporal churches are just alike is a serious mistake that all believers must be careful to avoid – the variety of church doctrine and practice varies considerably.

Some unsaved persons may have regularly attended or have even held membership in a temporal church for many years before God in his infinite wisdom reaches down and redeems them in Christ. The more fortunate of these new believers find themselves already placed in a sound biblical church where they can immediately exercise their new-found faith with others of like faith and begin to grow in their relationship with Christ. Others are abruptly awakened from their lethargy and are shocked to find that they no more belong within the fellowship of their present church than they belong in fellowship with the world at large. Not unlike the unchurched, they are abruptly faced with finding a sound church within the great abundance of churches around them – about which they likely know very little or nothing.

The wide array of churches available to the immature believer today represents a virtual jungle with a serpent potentially hiding under every rock – or perhaps we should say under every church steeple. Church members in these churches are often directed to warmly welcome new visitors with a smiling face out of a cold sense of religious duty. Just as Satan most often appears as an “angel of light,” many liberal churches put on a face that is quite different from that which is actually within (cf. 2Co. 11:14). Therefore, making the rounds of these churches can be potentially hazardous – especially so for a new believer who is not yet well grounded in Scripture. Since he is as yet ignorant of many important major doctrines, he is vulnerable to accepting all forms of falsehoods and deceptions. He is particularly susceptible to the many methods that some churches promote as a quick road to spiritual enlightenment such as short self-improvement courses, a certain number of prescribed steps to faith, and so forth. Finish this course and you will have achieved immediate spiritual maturity – so they imply. The gimmicks that some churches offer are as attractive to new believers as are shiny rattles to a baby, and the new believer is truly a “babe” in Christ. Since he is often ruled more by his emotions rather than his intellect, he may impulsively grasp at the first thing that comes along and swallow it whole without examination. In doing so they may be sucked into the deep dark pit of churchianity from which escape is very difficult, while still others may even be ensnared by satanic cults.

For those reasons, some initial homework should precede the search for a church congregation with which to worship and grow. First of all, this important effort must be accompanied by unrelenting prayer before and throughout. The importance of prayer cannot be overemphasized; the choice of a church home must not be left to “blind chance” or to human pragmatism. The search must become a prayerful and diligent search for Truth as the new believer must throw aside all preconceived notions of religious tradition he may have previously held or heard of – unless or until they are biblically verified.

Secondly, a new believer must immediately begin studying the Scriptures on his own before selecting a church to attend. A solid background knowledge of God’s Word is the only way to prevent false doctrine, into which many churches have already fallen, from overwhelming them. Scriptural study requires a cover-to-cover reading of all sixty-six books of the Bible as well as an in-depth study of many of its individual passages. There is no substitute for a direct personal study of Scripture to verify and develop one’s own personal belief and confidence. No one can do that for another no matter how well intentioned that person may be. This takes considerable time and effort, and it must continue indefinitely even after a home church is finally selected to ensure that the believer remains centered in the true biblical faith. Do not let other professing Christians convince you that only their particular denomination, church, or pastor can interpret Scripture and that you are incapable of understanding it on your own. That is not true and only ensures that false doctrines go unchallenged. Remember that you have the same Holy Spirit teaching you as does any other believer. Of course, we must acknowledge that some believers have more intellectual capacity than others thus limiting their depth of knowledge, but if they do not individually understand the very basic core doctrines found in the Bible as the Holy Spirit reveals them, they may easily fall prey to the falsehoods that untrustworthy men set before them. It is therefore imperative that every believer absorb as much biblical knowledge as his personal intellect will allow before and during the search.

Regarding Scripture itself, it is very important to utilize a Bible that is a trustworthy translation while engaging in serious study. Although paraphrases abound and are often found useful for obtaining an initial overview of the Bible, they fall very short of the authenticity required for a serious study that must lead to identifying and accepting sound doctrine. That is because a paraphrase is someone's interpretation of Scripture, not Scripture itself. For the English-speaking world, the *Authorized King James Version* remains an excellent translation for those who do not stumble over its archaic English. For others, the *New King James*, the *New American Standard Bible*, and the *English Standard Version* are all reliable modern-day translations worthy of consideration. Be sure to choose a sound translation that you can read and understand.

Thirdly, all believers should strive to gain a working knowledge of the history of both the visible and the temporal church on earth in order to achieve a basic understanding of the manner in which today's diverse factions, doctrines, and congregations have come into being (cf. Newsletter April 2016 and *CRC Book III*, Sections 17 and 18). The temporal church is now nearly two-thousand years old. We live in an age when the institutionalized temporal church has already gone through many periods of terrible doctrinal error, spiritual darkness, moral corruption, and near total abandonment of biblical Truth. Conversely, it has also gone through other periods of positive biblical reform and revival as the Holy Spirit inspired God's elect through his Word. Certain core biblical doctrines have come through this historic period like shining beacons having been tested through very troubled times, while unfortunately many erroneous doctrines have also been perpetuated. We must carefully study past errors in order that we may not repeat them today, and we must fully acknowledge historical truths such that we do not attempt to rebuild a doctrinal foundation that is already firmly laid. Holy Scripture must be the standard for verifying both sound doctrine and practice.

Today's denominational churches present two faces to the unsaved: one is a strict formal face and the other is a very liberal accommodating face. Because legalistic formalism exhibits a stern exacting face, new believers are less often attracted to Roman Catholic or ritualistic Protestant "high" churches – unless they seek to do so out of a misguided sense of serving penance through religious works for their past sins and the lifestyle that accompanied it. This is sometimes the case with a newborn Christian who was plucked as a brand from the fires of extreme sin, since he or she has not yet fully comprehended the broad scope of forgiveness and redemption that they have received in Christ. We cannot make further propitiation for our sins through legalistic ritual and ceremony, inasmuch as Christ has already atoned for our sins in full. Any attempt to add to what Christ has done for us is to fall away from saving grace and fall back into the condemnation of sin. Therefore, a believer must be very careful not to equate traditional churchianity, cloaked in solemn ritual, ceremony, and formalism, with Truth. Occult paganism is also rampant within many false rituals and ceremonies, and the fallen nature of man is excited by performing these outward religious exercises.

In approaching God to worship Him, we must always do so with due reverence and seriousness of mind, but our heart must also be fully engaged. Somber ritual and ceremony without genuine love for God, and Christ our savior, is cold and can provide no lasting warmth for the soul – it does not satisfy the deep spiritual longing of men. Moreover, it does not honor God who desires us to worship him in spirit and in truth (cf. Jn. 4:23,24). Truth is active as it motivates and directs every aspect of our being, and it provides a firm foundation motivating us to worship God through the unconditional love we have received in Jesus Christ. As important as is warm fellowship with other professing believers, Truth is imperative for the new believer's nurture and growth to spiritual maturity. A believer must constantly seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit and rely upon that initial measure of faith that He has given to all whom God the Father effectively calls to receive salvation.

In contrast to strict formal churches, liberal churches present a false warm fuzzy love that is not founded in Truth, but is a cheap counterfeit for what the new believer truly needs that can be found only in Christ and among his elect. The most common facade these churches hide behind is a promise of unconditional acceptance of believer and unbeliever alike. A sampling of many church marquees, will reveal messages that read, "We love visitors," "God is love", "Come fellowship with us in love," "We love the community," "God loves sinners," "Everyone is welcome here," and so forth. Many of these churches promote various programs and services specifically designed to attract the masses and draw the unconverted into their ranks. This facade of fake human love manifests itself in various worldly parties, games, and other "good times" sponsored by the church to "get to know each other," but it has no genuine foundation in Truth or true Christian fellowship. Truly, the newborn in Christ must grow up rather quickly in today's world. Like a young child, he must learn

not to accept “candy from strangers.”

An infant believer may accept what various professing Christians tell him at face value without question. Because of his initial lack of spiritual discernment, he may not at first notice that he receives different answers to his honest questions from different Christians – many of whom are possibly false professors. If a new believer gets a vague or evasive answer, he may come to believe that he is at fault in not being able to reconcile those diverse answers in his own mind. However, obscure and evasive answers most often stem from blind ignorance. Unenlightened and unsaved churchgoers are actually baffled by serious doctrinal questions and have no valid answer for them. In the place of sound doctrine, liberal churches have adopted a broad agenda to be all things to all people. This causes them to place a strong emphasis upon human relationships to appear less radical to secular society at large and to attract still more people out of the world. Consequently, most liberal church members are woefully ignorant of important biblical doctrines – and how their own local church may or may not relate to them. Truth is viewed as a nebulous standard that is relative to circumstances rather than being absolute and inviolate. Therefore, most liberal churches promote a doctrinal tolerance that recognizes anything as true as long as an individual believer sincerely accepts it as such in his own mind. They commonly accept the beliefs of others as factual no matter how unscriptural they may be.

The biblical reform effort is presently continuing outside of doctrinally frozen denominationalism within various individual autonomous Bible churches (cf. March 2016 Newsletter). Unfortunately, these churches are widely scattered among many other non-denominational churches that engage in various non-biblical doctrines and practices making sound churches difficult to find. A few of them have become regional churches that draw genuine believers from great distances, but since it is located at an extreme distance from home, it becomes difficult to lend support and personally participate in the way that one should as an official member.

In some areas true Christ-centered Bible-churches do not exist at all, thus forcing a believer to attend one of the many denominational churches in order to engage in corporate worship and experience a limited form of Christian fellowship. In doing so, it becomes necessary to prioritize biblical doctrines and practices. Errors of doctrine and practice deemed to be less important must be tolerated in order to embrace more profound truths that the denomination may emphasize. This is an irrational balancing act that most devout believers find very difficult or impossible to maintain, inasmuch as biblical Truth is a unity that cannot be subdivided and categorized according to an assumed importance. Our conscience will surely condemn us if we feel that we have compromised Truth by agreeing to tolerate any form of biblical error. Some believers “bite their tongue” and settle for whatever church is nearby to worship God in the midst of an estranged congregation and may attempt to reform erroneous church doctrines from within – or since that is nearly impossible, try to ignore them. Others may choose to stay at home to worship in private or “attend” various electronic Churches, which require less commitment from their viewers, but provide no real sense of fellowship. Supporting non-biblical hypocritical churches with time or money only because they are close by or are convenient to “attend” is an exercise of poor Christian stewardship that must be carefully avoided lest we aid the enemy of Truth.

Finding a church to attend is a difficult task, but actually joining a church is a very serious step. This is because in doing so, one must agree to accept all of the teachings of that particular temporal church, not just their truly biblical ones. Their religious paradigm becomes your own, thus erecting artificial barriers that inhibit further biblical reform. We must never rationalize away Truth in order to affiliate ourselves with a temporal church or denomination. It may become necessary for some believers to consider moving to an area where a Christ-centered Bible-church can be found. Although this is often a spiritual imperative, it is a very difficult decision to carry out since it means uprooting oneself from extended family members and friends and finding new employment through which to earn a living for oneself and, if married, ones immediate family.

As we rapidly approach the end of this current age, Christ-centered biblically-sound churches will become increasingly rare as today's growing spiritual darkness finally overwhelms all institutionalized churches. Severe persecution of faithful Christian believers by a future powerful worldwide secular government will force the residue of true believers remaining on earth to huddle together in small covert enclaves for their personal safety. There they must live and worship in secret as they await the trumpet-call of Christ to be transported off the earth to join Him in the air (cf. 1Th. 4:17). The earth and its reprobate earth-dwellers will then be ripe for judgment. Next month, we shall begin a series of newsletters setting forth a careful study of all end-time events as they are recorded in prophetic Scripture. © Arthur J. Smith June 2016