

CHAPTER 4

HOW THE CHURCH GOT INTO ITS CURRENT CONDITION

³For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, ⁴and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. 2 Timothy 4:3-4 (NASB)

Anyone looking at the state of Christianity today would have good reason to be confused by the wide range of opinions and denominations. By ‘denomination’ we mean a group of people who have a particular tradition, structure or form of organisation. These denominations have each been started, one after the other, particularly since the sixteenth century, as men have tried to reform Christianity, or to emphasise a different approach, or doctrinal stance.

It is too complicated within the scope of this book to try to go into these, but it is generally true to say, for many denominations, that they began well. Many have been used by God to correct some error or clean up some problem or to bring the church back closer to where it should be. Sadly, history tends to repeat itself. Therefore within a generation or two, each new denomination has usually begun to degenerate and to reintroduce errors and man-made traditions of their own. The net effect of all this is that there is a baffling range of different opinions and styles. A person may wonder how they could possibly choose between all these alternatives, or how they can know who is right and who is wrong about various controversial issues.

I want therefore to recommend an approach which will enable you to arrive at a clear understanding of Christianity, without confusion. It is that you should be confident and ambitious enough to read the whole Bible for yourself. Also take it at face value and believe what it says. In other words, instead of relying on other people, or on the traditions of any particular denomination that you may have been born into, just take the Bible on its own as your guide.

If you read all the way through it, taking seriously everything that is said and believing it, then the Bible will gradually make more and more sense to you. And what you read in one book or letter will help you to understand something written somewhere else. The Bible refers to itself a lot and many quotes or references are made which assume you have read the earlier book being referred to. So, you will find parts of the Bible difficult to begin with, but if you persist, things will steadily become clearer.

We must get our beliefs solely from the Bible, not from men's ideas or traditions

Our confusion comes from focusing, instead, on what church leaders or denominations say. When what they say differs from what the Bible says, too many of us opt to go along with what our leaders say and ignore the Bible. My strong advice is always to put the Bible at the centre. Then decide that you will base all your beliefs and practices on what the Bible says, not on what you're used to, or what you've always been told, regardless of who told you.

That is the way I have put this book together. I want to introduce you to all the main ingredients of Christianity and explain them as the Bible explains them, emphasising whatever the Bible emphasises. I want to stick only to what the Bible says and not add anything to it or take anything from it. I would invite you to check carefully for yourself whether I achieve that.

It is very possible to go to church but not be a real Christian

I have been a Christian since 1981. I can point to the very date and time when I became a Christian and had my sins forgiven. It was 2.30pm in the afternoon on the 8 June 1981 when I made a clear and firm decision to repent and put my trust in Jesus Christ. At 2:29pm I was not a Christian, but a few moments later I was. I had begun my journey and stepped on to the path which the Bible calls "*the Way*". That is how decisively it happened for me. It is not always the same for everyone. Some people cannot point to an exact moment when they first became a Christian.

However, there is a stark choice to be made between continuing as you are, or becoming a Christian. If you are properly instructed, you will come to a distinct crossroads where that definite choice has to be made. In my case I made it after nine months of Bible study and discussion with a Christian missionary called Dave Brown from Oklahoma. He took the time to explain things from the Bible until I had a clear knowledge and understanding. I could no longer deny that Christianity was true and that Jesus Christ was who He said He was.

I realised that I had to make a clear choice, either to follow Him or reject Him. I also knew that if I was to follow Him it had to be with my whole heart, mind and soul and that there could be no half measures. That was not just some strange notion that I took. That is the way that Jesus presents it in the Bible. He does not want people merely to 'approve' of Him or even to agree with Him. He wants us to believe and trust in Him with all our hearts and also to turn away from our sins.

He then wants us to follow Him and acknowledge Him as the Lord and King of our life who occupies first place at all times. It is a big challenge that He makes to us. But, He offers us no alternatives. It is either Him, and only Him, or nothing. Also, it is on His terms, or not at all.

I came to realise all of that after nine months of Bible study. I can say now, with many years of hindsight, that I made the right choice. I handed my life over completely to Jesus Christ. I accepted that from then on He was in charge, not me and that I had to do whatever He wanted, not what I wanted. When I made that decision, aged 19, I had only a limited understanding of what lay ahead and no idea of how many difficulties it would bring me into.

Yet, Jesus Christ has always been utterly faithful to me. He has never left me or forsaken me, even when life has been very hard. Living as a Christian in an increasingly secular and pagan Britain has not been easy. It is getting more difficult and more hostile every year. Yet, I would never go back to what I had before. Despite any hardships I have had to face, which are far less than many Christians elsewhere in the world have to face, I know that I made the right decision.

Let me say a little more about my own personal background and the life that I lived until I was 19. I was brought up in Roman Catholicism. I was born into an Irish family living in Britain and went to a Catholic school until I was 11. I continued going to the Catholic church quite faithfully until I was 19. For most of that time, never having known anything else, and never having even looked at the Bible, I did not know that there was anything missing or wrong. It was all I knew.

I was very sincere, as many Catholics are. I genuinely believed the little I knew of Roman Catholic teaching. In those years growing up in the Catholic Church I received some good things. I was taught a number of Bible stories and some parts of the Bible. However, many things were left out and a lot of false things were added in. That is because the Roman Catholic Church is a mixture. It does contain some real Christianity taken from the Bible. But it also adds to that many other beliefs, traditions and practices which are not from the Bible. Some of these directly contradict what the Bible says.

The origins of the Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church is not the “*original*” or “*true*” church. It does not date back to the first century, or to the apostle Peter, as it claims to do. In fact it really began to develop properly from AD 312, when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, alleged that he had become a Christian. He did so because he said that he had seen a vision of a cross in the sky and when he was successful in a subsequent battle he attributed it to this. As a result, this Roman Emperor, who had known nothing other than paganism all his life, suddenly “joined” the early fourth century church in Rome. He effectively took it over.

Thus, overnight, the real church, which had existed for three centuries, and which had had to be underground for some of that time due to persecution, was suddenly legal. The persecution was over and the Emperor was now supposedly a Christian. Multitudes of practising pagans flooded into the church. They joined the church, not because they believed in the Bible or had repented. Many of them did so because they now calculated that it would be socially and financially advantageous to join this institution called the “church”, which the Emperor had taken over.

Thus, the church changed from being a persecuted group, whose biblical values and beliefs were the opposite of those around them, to a group with official state backing. A massive influx of insincere, unrepentant pagans, who had no genuine Christian beliefs, took over the church. It was an invasion by the pagan world into the church as it then was.

The pagans brought with them into the church all of their own occult beliefs and practices. Instead of abandoning these and taking up Christianity in their place, they kept their pagan beliefs and practices. They simply added some bits of Christianity alongside, to create a mixture.

So, many of the traditions which still exist in the Roman Catholic church come directly from paganism, not from the Bible. It dates back to the fourth century and does not reflect the pure church of the first century which the apostles set up.

Many of the genuine believers within the fourth century church felt they had no option but to leave. They had to go outside of the newly institutionalised church which was now meeting in former pagan temples. They carried on meeting in homes as they had done for three centuries. Those genuine Christians who left were the real church, not the semi-pagan/semi-Christian church that Emperor Constantine was now leading. That real church carried on separately, and has always carried on, to this day.

Meanwhile, from the fourth century onwards, this huge institution that we now know as the Roman Catholic church, developed steadily. It added more and more unbiblical features that came from paganism or just from men’s imagination and blended them with Christian beliefs and practices. The mixing of different beliefs and practices is known as ‘*syncretism*’. It continues in the church today.

Many even view this mixture as a good thing. They think it brings together all the best aspects of different religious beliefs. However, the Bible condemns this kind of mixture. It sets out clearly what the truth is and forbids us from adding anything to it, taking anything from it, or mixing it with anything else. Jesus condemns this very clearly in Matthew's gospel. He is referring to the way Jewish leaders of the first century ignored God's Word, as set out in the Bible. Instead they focused on their own ideas and traditions which they or their predecessors had invented:

¹Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²“Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread.” ³And He answered and said to them, “Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition.

⁷"You hypocrites, rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you:

*⁸"This people honours Me with their lips,
but their heart is far away from Me.*

*⁹"But in vain do they worship Me,
teaching as doctrines the precepts of men."*

Matthew 15:1-3 and 7-9 (NASB)

What Jesus said to the Jewish leaders back then is equally applicable to us today. We have allowed all sorts of humanly invented ideas and traditions to replace what the Bible says. The net effect of this unhealthy mixture of Christianity and paganism, that we now know as the Roman Catholic Church, is that I was able to remain in it for 19 years but never find salvation or become a genuine Christian. To make matters worse, I had no idea that I was lacking anything, or that I was believing in a mixture of truth and error. If someone had asked me at that time what would happen to me if I was to die, I would have had no idea. If someone had asked me what "salvation" is, or how it is obtained, I would have been unable to answer.

Error, confusion and apathy have crept in to most churches, not only the Catholic Church

That vagueness was not unique to me. It is the position of most Catholics. But, I must emphasise, it is by no means confined only to the Catholic church. It is widespread in the modern Western church, throughout the denominations. Much of the Church of England is also deeply confused and mixed up. The same applies to the Methodist church, the Baptist church, the Lutheran church and so on.

It alarms me to see how many people, even in what used to be solid, Bible believing, evangelical churches, are drifting along with no clear faith or repentance. I fear that millions of people, even in Reformed Protestant and nonconformist denominations, may be unsaved, due to the shallow and compromised teaching they are receiving. A lot of what goes on in all kinds of churches is just dead tradition and things being done by rote, without sincerity or passion. Isaiah spoke of this condition long ago, but it still applies:

Then the Lord said,

"Because this people draw near with their words

And honour Me with their lip service,

But they remove their hearts far from Me,

And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote,

Isaiah 29:13 (NASB)

So, I was an unsaved, unrepentant "churchgoer" in the Catholic Church, together with countless others. But there are also millions of unsaved churchgoers in other denominations too. We each need to ask ourselves whether that applies to us personally.

Having said that, I should also add, for the sake of accuracy and balance, that there are also, within such denominations, some people who are saved and who are genuine believers. People are at all sorts of different levels and stages. That means we can't make blanket statements about them as groups. Each person's circumstances are unique to them. The key point, though, is that we also cannot assume that people are saved, or that they are real Christians, just because they go to church. That is the case whatever denomination they belong to.

In case anyone imagines that I am picking on the Catholic Church, I should emphasise again and more clearly, that even within what are known as the 'Protestant' denominations, such as the Lutheran Church or the Church of England, and also in the nonconformist denominations

such as the Baptists, Methodists and Pentecostals, there is today a large and growing amount of error, ignorance, deception and apostasy. ‘Apostasy’ is where someone has known the truth but they subsequently turn away from it.

There are many problems and errors in Protestant churches too

The Protestant denominations arose in the “*Reformation*” of the sixteenth century. They are called that because they protested against many of the false teachings and practices of Roman Catholicism. The nonconformists went even further in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and were in some ways even more biblical in their approach.

Yet, it is sadly true to say that in the Western world today, even the Protestant and nonconformist denominations have declined alarmingly. They have degenerated in the quality of their teaching and preaching and in the nature of the message that they give. I am speaking of denominations such as the Church of England, the Lutheran churches, the Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals and also the Charismatic churches. The problem is basically across the board.

Many churches in these denominations have watered down their teaching. They have also mixed it with ideas and teaching that come from the New Age, humanism, liberalism, scepticism and higher criticism. “Higher criticism” involves sitting in judgment on the Bible and criticising it as if it was an ordinary work of literature, rather than honouring it as God’s Word.

Many churches focus on what is called “*the social gospel.*” By that they mean that Christians should bring the good news to our societies, especially to the poor, by doing good works. That means seeking to relieve poverty or deal with disease, hunger, homelessness etc, rather than just speaking about personal salvation from our sins and from God’s judgment. There is more than a grain of truth in that approach. God does want us to have a heart for the poor and needy and to seek to make a practical difference in our world. That is beyond doubt. (See Book Four for more detail.)

Where the problem arises is when people begin to focus solely or excessively upon such social issues and forget about, or cease even to believe in, the very heart of the gospel. That is that Jesus came to commence His Kingdom and to save us from our sins and from being sent to Hell and the Lake of Fire after we die. Those facts must always remain in the central place as the most crucial points that we emphasise. If not, we will end up, eventually, with an unbalanced and even a false gospel.

The “*apparent church*”

In the Western world therefore we see, by and large, a spineless, and biblically illiterate church. It is too weak to be a witness to our world and too unimpressive to be able to teach or preach effectively. One could call it the ‘*apparent church*’. It appears to outsiders and non-believers to be the church, but very many of the people in it have no true faith or accurate understanding of what the Bible teaches. This ignorance and error applies even to church leaders. Thus, what they do not know, they cannot teach. But, any wrong ideas they have will be passed on to others.

Tragically, countless people have rejected real Christianity solely on the basis that they are not impressed by what they have seen and experienced within what I call the “*apparent church.*” They mistakenly assume, when they reject all of this, that they are rejecting the real church.

They have seen a lot of hypocrisy, falseness, confusion, compromise and shallowness in the apparent church and have been appalled by it. On that basis, they have then rejected real Christianity. It is almost as if they have been “vaccinated” against real Christianity. They have had a small dose of

something which is not the real thing, but which sufficiently resembles it to put them off Christianity for life. It prevents many from ever looking into it any further, so they never find the real thing.

Therefore, people can reject real Christianity solely because of what they imagine it is, based on what they have seen in the apparent church, without ever finding the real church or the real gospel. However, if Christianity really was what they wrongly imagine it to be, then I would reject it myself, as would any sensible person.

Who would want to be part of a church which is about self-righteousness, religious smugness, empty tradition and superstition? Who would want a church which is spectator-orientated, with a large group of people depending on one man to do everything for them, rather than actively participating, serving, forming relationships, studying and learning for themselves?

Unbelievers can see that the apparent church is largely an irrelevance. It has little to offer in their lives or to society. Non-Christians are astute and can see that lukewarm Christianity is empty and false. But, they do not realise that elsewhere the real thing does exist, because most have never come across it. The media certainly doesn't report it.

What I experienced growing up in Roman Catholicism, and what many other people experience, even in the Protestant and nonconformist denominations, is a lifeless, superficial church. It does not bring them to a place of salvation. That was my position for 19 years. Then I discovered that Jesus is offering us eternal life, forgiveness of our sins and a complete set of blessings that we call 'salvation'. Yet, I had entirely missed it in all my years in institutionalised religion.

What is "religion"?

I have just used the word "*religion*". It is a much misunderstood word. **Real Christianity is not a religion. Christianity is God's one and only way of reaching out to lost people who need His mercy and forgiveness as a free gift. "Religion" is the many different futile ways in which men attempt to find their own way to God.** It is usually done through seeking to improve their behaviour so as to impress God. They hope to earn a place in Heaven through living a good life, or at least a life that is more good than bad.

That viewpoint is so widespread that to challenge it shocks people. Yet, I can say, quite clearly, that real Christianity is not about trying to impress God or being a good person. Neither is it anything to do with trying to earn salvation through a good life or good works. That is what every type of religion is about. But it is the opposite of what real Christianity is about.

The need to check everything for yourself in the Bible

I urge you to read what I say with caution. Do not just casually assume that what I say, or what anybody else says, must be true because it's in a book. Check it carefully for yourself in the Bible. Be like the people of Berea that we referred to earlier. Take the responsibility upon yourself to find out from the Bible whether what I say, or what anybody else says, is true or not.

I have come across many people over the years who are highly suspicious of any idea or book which comes from someone outside of their own denomination or church tradition. They imagine they will be safe provided they only listen to people of their "own kind". However, you are just as likely, if not more likely, to be misinformed and led astray by a teacher from within your own denomination as you are from one outside it.

Safety and truth are not to be found simply by staying true to your denomination, but by staying true to the Bible. The people you know are just as likely to get things wrong and have gaps in their knowledge as the people you don't know.

In fact, there is danger in only ever listening to or reading the teaching of people you are used to. It will tend to accentuate and entrench any error that you and your teachers already have. That is why there is value in looking at a wide selection of good and genuine teachers from other backgrounds. See the Real Christianity website for more information on this, www.realchristianity.com. Go to the section called 'Approved Ministries' and listen to the teachers listed there. They are all of the highest quality.

That said, even though genuine Bible teachers are very important, the real key is to study the whole Bible for yourself. Weigh up everything and everybody by what the Bible says, not the other way around. Don't weigh up the Bible according to what men say. Resolve now that that you will approach the Bible correctly from now on and that you will abandon any belief or practice which is shown to contradict the Bible.