

CHAPTER 2

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘CHURCH’?

²⁴And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Hebrews 10:24-25 (ESV)

¹³For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 (ESV)

³⁴ They answered him, "You were born in utter sin, and would you teach us?" And they cast him out.
John 9:34 (ESV)

The different uses of the word ‘church (“ekklesia”)', to mean either the local church or the entire Church as a whole

There are two main ways in which people use the word ‘church. At a ‘micro’ level it means a local assembly or congregation, consisting of Christians who live in that town or village. Indeed, there will be several such churches in that locality. So, that small local group, provided they see themselves as a church and an elder or group of elders have been appointed, is a ‘church’, with a small ‘c’.

I included the proviso about how they see themselves and are structured because not every group of local Christians is necessarily a church. They could just be a Bible study group or a prayer group or the organisers of a soup kitchen or food bank and, if so, they would be doing good work and they might all be Christians, but they would not be a church.

So, although the Bible tells us “...where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20), that does not mean that every such gathering of two or three people is a ‘church’. They may just be two or three people gathered together, no doubt doing valuable work, but not being a church because they do not see themselves as a local church, are not structured as such and do not function as such.

That said, it is also entirely possible for a group of people, even as few as two or three, to be a local church *if they see themselves as such*, and have at least one elder, and function as a small house church. Indeed, in these apostate days where genuine Christians are extremely scarce, it may be that many local house churches will be obliged to function with very small numbers.

There may be no alternative because there are so few real Christians around, especially in a rural area with a small population. Yet, even as a tiny handful of people, it would still be a perfectly valid house church. So, it is to the local church that Paul is primarily referring in this verse when he refers to doing good to the “family of believers”:

¹⁰Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Galatians 6:10 (RSV)

At a 'macro level, the word 'Church', which I always spell with a capital 'C' to distinguish it from a local church, means the entire worldwide group of saved Christians, numbering many millions who have believed the Gospel and been saved from the Day of Pentecost in Acts onwards and right up to the Rapture. At that point the Church will cease, and be removed to Heaven.

Anyone on the Earth from then on who becomes a Christian will be saved and will be referred to as a 'Tribulation Saint'. However, he will not be part of that special group known as 'the Church' which is also known by the metaphors of '*the body of Christ*' and '*the bride of Christ*'. So, it is this wider group, the Church as a whole, with a capital C that is being referred to in these verses:

³²This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Ephesians 5:32 (RSV)

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

1 Corinthians 12:27 (ESV)

² For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

2 Corinthians 11:2 (ESV)

⁷ Let's rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, because the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has prepared herself." ⁸ It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean; for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints.

⁹ Then he said to me, "Write: 'Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are the true words of God."

Revelation 19:7-9 (NASB)

What do we mean by a 'genuine' church?

You will see many times in this book and in my other books, that I speak in terms of whether people, leaders and churches as a whole are 'genuine', 'real' or 'sincere', as opposed to being false, phoney, heretical or apostate. So, when I speak of a church being genuine or false I am not referring to the church structure and method of leadership, but focusing instead on whether the leaders are honest men or phonies and whether they care for their people or exploit them.

So, this is the first of my ways of classifying a church and, in particular, its leaders. When I speak of such things I am not referring to extremely rare problems that one hardly ever sees. Sadly, we live in a century where there has been a catastrophic decline in the authenticity and sincerity of the Church as a whole and also local churches and individual Christians.

Right across the board, locally, nationally and internationally, multitudes of churches, even many which used to be solid and genuine, have become controlling, manipulative and abusive in terms of how they treat people. They are also false, deceitful and have no qualms about telling lies to protect themselves or get their own way. I give many examples of such abuse in my Book 6.

In this book, and also in my Book 6, there is some explanation of why this is happening now at such a stratospherically high level. In my opinion, it is happening because this is the great apostasy or falling away which the Bible says will happen in the last days prior to the rise to power of the antichrist.

But the key point for now, is simply to recognise that this decline in integrity is happening, i.e. that most churches are to some degree toxic and unhealthy places for you to be. You might never have realised that and may be shocked by the very suggestion but, sadly, it is the truth. Having realised that, our task is then to figure out what to do about it.

This problem of corrupt, carnal, heretical leaders is not new. It also existed in Old Testament Israel

These problems of corrupt, domineering, apostate leaders are not unique to the Church age. The Old Testament prophets have much to say about the same problems caused by carnal, worldly leaders who led the Jewish people astray. But note from these few sample passages that God clearly does not regard this as a minor matter for which such leaders should receive a mild slap on the wrist.

God is profoundly angry at how these men abused and misled His people and I see no reason to suppose He is not equally angry today when He sees corrupt leaders ruling over the churches which they are meant to serve, and exploiting the people they are meant to protect. So, let us take this seriously:

*⁸ The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?'
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the shepherds transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Baal
and went after things that do not profit.
Jeremiah 2:8 (ESV)*

*¹³ "For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
¹⁴ They have healed the wound of my people lightly,
saying, 'Peace, peace,'
when there is no peace.
Jeremiah 6:13-14 (ESV)*

*²¹ For the shepherds are stupid
and do not inquire of the LORD;
therefore they have not prospered,
and all their flock is scattered.
Jeremiah 10:21 (ESV)*

God plainly takes this problem just as seriously today in the Church age and is just as angry at the actions of ungodly, domineering leaders who exploit His people rather than serve them. That must be so because He addresses the same problems in the New Testament:

¹ But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. ² And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. ³ And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

2 Peter 2:1-3 (ESV)

⁹ Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

2 John 9-11 (ESV)

³ Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. ⁴ For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ

Jude 3-4 (ESV)

What do we mean by a 'biblical' church?

We have looked at whether a church is 'genuine' by which I mean whether its leaders are honest men or deceivers and whether they are servants or abusers.

If we refer to a 'biblical church' there are two things about it which we might claim are biblical:

- a) its doctrines, teachings, beliefs and approach to interpreting Scripture
- b) its structure, method of leadership and way of operating

So, the first dimension to this second classification of churches is about what that local church *teaches* and the second is about how it *operates* and how it is *led*. It is actually possible to have a church which is biblical in one or other of these ways, but not both. So, you could see a church with an unbiblical structure, based on the traditional hierarchical, clergy dominated model and yet their teaching of the Bible is good.

Or it could be the opposite, a house church which is structured just as churches were in the New Testament, with local unpaid elders, meeting in homes and with everyone participating, and yet its teaching of the Bible is heretical. So, a good and biblical structure does not guarantee doctrinal accuracy. But the point is it does make it more likely.

In this book however, I shall focus primarily on how a church is structured, led and organised and whether it meets in homes with unpaid elders or in traditional "church buildings" with paid full time ministers or 'clergy'. My contention is that if we get that right and begin to benefit from all the safeguards which the biblical model of church is designed to provide, then we are far more likely to get our doctrine right as well. Plus, we are more likely to develop leaders who are servants, not abusers and tyrants.

A church can be genuine even if it is not biblical. Conversely, it can be biblical, but still not be genuine

A church can be '*genuine*' in the sense of being honest, real, sincere and authentic in terms of the *character of the leaders* such that they are gentle, kind, humble servants who tell the truth and look after people. And yet, such a genuine church with honest, godly leaders could have an *unbiblical structure* with a formal traditional building and a paid 'clergyman' leading it and wearing a dog collar.

Or it could be a biblical church in terms of its structure and leadership model and yet its theology and teaching are hopelessly muddled and inaccurate.

We could even have a church which is biblical in both its doctrines and its structure, type of building and leadership model and yet one or more of the leaders are not honest men and they exploit and manipulate people instead of serving them. I have personally known men with good, accurate doctrine who have still been domineering leaders who use and control people.

I know a former Anglican vicar called Nigel who broke away from the Church of England and set up an independent church, taking much of the congregation with him. His theology was actually very good and accurate, so much so that I joined his church for a couple of years. However, we learned during that time that *in his dealings with people*, he was remarkably dishonest and devious.

For example, when the church took votes on important decisions, Nigel used to go into a side room by himself *and count the votes alone!* Thus, the result was whatever he said it was, with nobody to check anything. Somehow he convinced the elders that that was the right way to do it and they were too passive and too much under his control to argue about it.

Over the past 43 years that I have been saved, I have come across just about every type of church you could imagine and every combination of features. Therefore, you will realise that I am advocating that churches should be BOTH biblical AND genuine such that they maximise the chances that they will get things right in ALL of the following areas:

- a) their teaching of the Bible and their doctrines
- b) their structure, model of leadership and type of building
- c) the personal character and integrity of the leaders, i.e. they should be good, honest, humble servants who treat people rightly.

So, I emphasise again that getting your church structure right doesn't by itself guarantee that its doctrine and teaching will be accurate. Likewise, having sound accurate doctrines does not guarantee that the leaders will be honest men with servant hearts. There are no guarantees of anything but what we can say is that getting our church structure and leadership model right will greatly *increase the chances* of those leaders being, and remaining, kind, honest, diligent men with sound doctrines.

The state of the churches today

It is vital for every Christian to try to find a local church to be part of which is both biblical and genuine. However, that is now far easier said than done because there is a tremendous amount of confusion,

deception and error about what a church is and how it should operate. Indeed, this is possibly the area on which the Church as a whole is more ignorant, confused and deceived than on any other issue.

Just about every conceivable error, false doctrine or false practice that one could think of has found its way into some part of church structure and practice. That is mainly due to us getting our ideas of how church is meant to operate from looking at the churches *as we have always known them* and automatically assuming those methods must be valid because we have never seen anything else.

Instead of looking at how churches have always been, throughout our lives, we should be looking *at how they should be*, as described in the Bible. Most of us have made the mistake of following human tradition, rather than imitating what we see described in the Bible. However, God tells us to do the exact opposite. He wants us to follow the Bible, *not what we see other people doing*, even if it has been done for centuries.

For many of us, our own personal experience of church has therefore been a profound disappointment. However, we tend to assume the problem is unique to us and that we have just been unfortunate in the particular churches we have found rather than it being part of a worldwide problem. In fact, the problems within our churches are very widespread.

In the West, most of what claims to be the Church, is actually worldly, carnal, biblically illiterate, authoritarian and dysfunctional. Many people attend churches, but show no sign of having been born again. Even fewer are seeking to become mature disciples or grow in character, let alone to help others to become mature disciples as Jesus commanded *all of us to do* in the “Great Commission”.

¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.”

Matthew 28:19-20 (RSV)

Yet, hardly anybody questions or challenges anyone else as to whether they are even saved, let alone maturing as a disciple. Much of what calls itself the Church today is actually 'apostate', at least in the West. That means it has turned away from what it once knew to be the truth and has become false. And nothing is done about it. Indeed, if anyone tries to do something about it, as I have tried, they are seen as the problem and as a threat to the leadership.

This chapter is aimed at three different groups of people

Most people who have any dealings with church tend to belong to one of three very different groups. The first group approve of church but are so naive they are unaware of the problems that this chapter will discuss. This group tends to see any criticism of church leaders, or of the structure of church as inherently invalid and even improper. So, with this group, the task is to get them to be able to see that there is anything wrong with the way church is led or structured today.

The second group are those who see no point in church, i.e. they are not motivated to attend regularly or even to join a church at all. They assume that it is ok just to go it alone and be a Christian without being part of a church, or at least without being active with other believers locally.

Some of the people in this second group have had some experience of church either recently or in childhood but and have found it dull, lifeless and unhelpful. So, with this group, the task is to get them

even to see the point of church, i.e. why it matters and why we need to belong to a local church. They are just too bored and disillusioned about church to want to get involved.

The third group is one that has grown very rapidly over the last 30 years or more. It is those people who have been so wounded and damaged by authoritarian, controlling or dishonest church leaders and/or by the manipulation of fellow church members, that they are now 'allergic' to church. They see it as something toxic and, sadly, they are often right.

These wounded, damaged people may have seen the value of church in the past. They mostly used to belong to the first group i.e. the naive trusting group, which is why they were so vulnerable to being exploited. However, their experiences at the hands of controlling leaders and manipulative fellow members have left them badly scarred. The task with this group is to get them to understand why they came to be damaged and how to avoid it happening again.

Even harder than that is the task of persuading such wounded Christians that it is worthwhile, or even safe, to make another attempt to be part of a church. Some just will not have anything to do with churches anymore, because their experiences have been so consistently awful.

I truly sympathise with them but, even so, they are still making a big mistake (and disobeying God) if they choose to have nothing to do with any church. They, therefore, need to keep searching until they find a biblical, sincere, non abusive church. Or, they need to *start one themselves*, which is an option most people never even think of as they assume it to be both impossible and illegitimate. Yet, it is probably the right option for many of these people.

So, it may assist you if you were to try to identify which group you are currently in. There is no single message that can be given to all people. Therefore, I will seek to address the particular needs of your group, alongside the other two groups. However, please bear in mind, when I am addressing issues relevant to the two other groups that such groups really do exist, even if you aren't aware of them or haven't come across them yet.

Church is a very sensitive subject, about which people tend to feel strongly. Many resent anything that they regard as criticism. For example, people who belong to the first group, the naïve and trusting types, tend to see nothing wrong with church and regard any criticism of church or of a leader, as the equivalent of an attack on God. It isn't. At least in my case, it is a genuine, and necessary, attempt to address some very real and urgent problems.

I visited an old Anglican church in the countryside some years ago and there was an article pinned to the notice board in which the vicar (a woman) was bemoaning the fact that so many people criticise the church, by which I think she meant the Church of England. She spoke as if to do so was inherently wrong and unjustified. The essence of the message was that the church (of England) and its workers/leaders are doing their best and that it does no good to criticise them.

The article had a point, in one sense, but the writer was evidently unaware, or did not consider it important, that there are many people whose experience of church has been very different, even horrific. So, if you are in the first group listed above, the naïve and trusting types, and can't see any problems, I would urge you to be open-minded to hear about the experiences of those who have been wounded by church, or by what claims to be church.

They are numerous and they have a real and valid story to tell. Moreover, they are not necessarily being negative or unfair in their criticism, even if they don't always know how to express themselves constructively or cannot contain their emotions sufficiently to speak calmly. Sadly, the victims of abuse in all contexts often make poor witnesses and do not present their case well because they are so emotionally damaged. You therefore have to make allowances when listening to them.

Those in the third group who have been spiritually and emotionally scarred, tend to be so wary and reluctant to get back into any church that they are agitated even by the suggestion. They are suspicious of anyone who urges them to join a church. To those in that group I would suggest you try to be open minded. Consider it possible that some trustworthy people do still exist in Western churches, even amongst leaders, and to be willing to try again, albeit carefully.

A large proportion of the Western church has also become compromised in its doctrine, is lukewarm in its worship and provides little or no discipleship training. In most churches the Bible is hardly taught. Or if it is taught at all, it is done badly. Instead, the leaders focus on teaching the traditions, opinions and practices of men and the Bible itself is ignored or they merely scratch the surface of it and leave out 80% of its contents.

Consequently, a large percentage of churches today have unbiblical practices, woke/liberal teaching, scepticism and very confused theology. These false ideas and practices have not come from the Bible but from man-made philosophy, other religions, the New Age, or even the occult. Few Western churches even mention sin, judgment, Hell or repentance today, let alone emphasise them.

That's a depressing, but sadly an accurate, summary of the Western church as we now know it. This should not surprise us though, as the Bible tells us it will happen and that, in particular, false leaders and false prophets or “*fierce wolves*” will come into the Church. It's not a possibility but a certainty. Indeed, we are warned of it repeatedly:

¹⁵ "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.

Matthew 7:15 (NIV)

¹ Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.

1 John 4:1 (NIV)

²⁸ Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. ²⁹ I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.

Acts 20:28-30 (ESV)

¹ "I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. ² They will put you out of the synagogues. Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God. ³ And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me.

John 16:1-3 (ESV)

This is nothing new and we are not the only generation to have these problems. The prophet Jeremiah warned the people of his day that many so called prophets, teachers and leaders were actually insincere men, giving out wrong teaching and false prophecies:

¹⁴Then the LORD said to me, "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name. I have not sent them or appointed them or spoken to them. They are prophesying to you false visions, divinations, idolatries and the delusions of their own minds.

Jeremiah 14:14 (NIV)

These passages above are a warning to us to take care and scrutinise very closely whatever is taught in our churches. We cannot, and must not, simply accept everything that church leaders say. That would be very foolish, because much of what is taught in our churches is false. Therefore, we have to “judge” everything we are told and weigh and assess it against the Bible to see whether it is true or false.

The Greek word for this kind of judging is *diakrino* and it is not only allowed to us but we are positively commanded to do it. In order to do that, we have to get to know the Bible thoroughly for ourselves or we will, inevitably, be led astray by false teachers.

Sadly, many people today are being led astray, and are even failing to find salvation or become genuine disciples, simply because they are not willing to put in the effort to study the Bible for themselves and apply it. Therefore, they have no ability to test or assess anything they are told. And they have no idea that the gospel message (if any) that was preached to them may have been false or incomplete.

Thus, many of us attend churches, whether biblical or otherwise, without ever having truly repented or even believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, many of us have only the flimsiest, misguided understanding of what it is all about, or even why we are there. People’s motives for attending church vary.

For some the church is simply a respectable institution to which they can belong. For some it is a place to find friends. For others it is just something they were born into, and which they feel is a comfortable, familiar part of their culture or heritage. For many others it is a place where they can practice man made religion, obey rules and feel respectable.

'Religion' is the self centred attempt by mankind to get to God through our own efforts and self righteousness. That religious mindset is surprisingly widespread. There is something about religious ritual and tradition that appeals to our fleshly nature and pride and which is even addictive. One reason for it is that our flesh likes pomp and ceremony. Another is that the practice of man-made religion and keeping rules seems to offer us the chance to achieve merit or righteousness for ourselves.

All in all, the Western church today is probably in the weakest condition it has ever been in since before the Reformation of the 16th century. In historical terms, the number of truly born again Christians in the West is now at an alarmingly low level. That fact cannot be denied. The real Church has only a fraction of the influence it once had on our society and on political life.

Instead, the West is now far more influenced by secular humanism, paganism and left wing political correctness or “wokism” than by the Gospel. These anti Christian ideas are growing rapidly in militancy and power. They are increasingly replacing Christian values in our government, councils, legal system, schools, police, hospitals and workplaces.

The same is true even within churches. For example, take note of how many misguided churches now regard “racism” and “global warming” as the key issues we face, albeit that they are now starting to call it “climate change” because even they can see it is not getting hotter. So, they don’t preach the Gospel but they do urge you to avoid using plastic bags.

The torrent of new laws that are passed each year, are no longer based on the foundation of biblical principles, but on political correctness, globalism and misconceived concepts of "human rights". Most of this legislation and the anti Christian thinking on which it is based, emanates from the World Economic Forum (the WEF) which now dominates and controls most of the governments in the world.

Christians ought to know what the WEF is and be appalled by it, but the vast majority have never even heard of it. Its thinking is based on secular humanism, the values of which are very different from what the Bible says about our responsibilities and duties. Indeed, many and perhaps all of the leaders of the WEF are literally Satanists. All of this social and spiritual change is happening remarkably quickly.

The principal reason for the rapid advance of the WEF is the extreme weakness of the Church, which is no longer exerting anywhere near the same influence on our society as it once did. A vacuum has therefore been created which is rapidly being filled by pagan, antichristian philosophies, even within the apparent church, not just out there in the unbelieving world. Please refer to my audio series “Modern Deceptions” for more detail.

The condition of the Church worldwide before Jesus physically returns to the Earth

Again, all of this decline and decay in the professing Church ought not to surprise us. Jesus said that these things would happen, and that in the period just before His return to the Earth, a large proportion of what claims to be the Church would have become corrupt, lukewarm and apostate. Therefore, it is only to be expected that in the last days many people in the churches will abandon the truth of the Gospel and replace it with man made ideas and philosophies.

This decline into worldwide apostasy is inevitable, and we need to be prepared for it. Jesus prophesied about it very clearly. Therefore, it will happen. Consider these statements by Jesus Himself in which He tells us about the cold hearted and corrupt condition into which most churches will have sunk in the period leading up to His return to the Earth:

¹⁰At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, ¹¹and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. ¹²Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, ¹³but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. ¹⁴And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

Matthew 24:10-14 (NIV)

Indeed, Jesus prophesied that far from the Church taking over the world, as some misguidedly believe it will, the decline of real faith at the end will be so extreme that He asks, as a rhetorical figure of speech, whether He will find any faith at all on the Earth when He returns. That expression is intended to illustrate how bad it will get. So, He did not envisage merely a relative decline but rather a drastic collapse into widespread apostasy.

⁸ I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Luke 18:8 (NIV)

Paul also describes the depths to which people will have sunk prior to the return of Jesus. Consider the description Paul gives of the people of that future time. Alarming, it sounds just like our own generation, as our wickedness and people's insane delusions about gender etc have already reached unprecedented levels:

¹But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. ²People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, ³without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, ⁴treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God— ⁵having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them.

2 Timothy 3:1-5 (NIV)

Note the verse above in which Paul says that the final generation on the Earth, in the "last days", just before Jesus' return, will have "a form of godliness but denying its power...". That description fits us so well, far better than any previous generation. When has the truth of the Gospel been less well known and less valued, at least in the West, than it is now?

There are very few people today who want to hear sound biblical doctrine or who are willing to make the effort to study or to listen to thorough teaching. Not many church members are asking for it, and even fewer leaders are providing it. Most of the churches just give short jocular feel good messages and tell their people whatever they want to hear, without much regard to whether it is true. Again, Paul said it would be so:

³For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. ⁴They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

2 Timothy 4:3-4 (NIV)

Peter also had much to say about this. He refers to how scoffers will arise (i.e. those who despise and ridicule sacred things). Moreover, we are specifically told they will pour particular scorn on the very idea of Jesus returning to the Earth. It is significant, therefore, that in our own day there is such a widespread abandonment of belief in the fact that Jesus will physically return. That used to be widely believed but our generation rejects or ignores that particular truth more than any past generation I can think of:

³First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. ⁴They will say, "Where is this 'coming' he promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation." ⁵But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens existed and the earth was formed out of water and by water. ⁶By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. ⁷By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men.

2 Peter 3:3-7 (NIV)

Peter also draws attention to the fact that in the 'last days' there will be a widespread abandonment of belief in God as Creator. No previous generation has ever done that on any significant scale, but ours

has. Ever since Charles Darwin wrote *'The Origin of Species'* in 1859 his absurd theories have spread. It was slow at first, but since the mid twentieth century, belief in evolution has largely taken over.

It is now aggressively foisted upon our children in schools and presented as if it was fact, when it is actually just a feeble theory which is obviously false. Indeed, God considers His role of Creator to be so utterly self evident that He classifies anyone who denies it as a fool. We are told this in Romans:

¹⁹ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, being understood by what has been made, so that they are without excuse. ²¹ For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their reasonings, and their senseless hearts were darkened. ²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and they exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible mankind, of birds, four-footed animals, and crawling creatures.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up to vile impurity in the lusts of their hearts, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. ²⁵ For they exchanged the truth of God for falsehood, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

Romans 1:19-25 (NASB)

Nevertheless, many churches have also succumbed to pressure and absorbed evolutionary nonsense. They are embarrassed to speak of God as Creator, in case anybody should laugh at them, or consider them old fashioned or unsophisticated. That level of error on such a profound issue is unprecedented in the entire history of the Church. Therefore, even in terms of the belief in evolution alone, aside from all other heresies, the churches are more misguided now than they have ever been.

All previous generations, no matter what their other religious views were, saw it as plainly obvious that God is our Creator. That is no longer the case. I emphasise all this because it seems highly likely that we are now in, or are very close to, that final generation. That is why modern Western churches are so appallingly weak and corrupt. They have never been as lukewarm as they are now.

The problems we see are not merely in our imagination. Neither are they exaggerated. Things really are bleak, such that many churches are led by men (and even women) who have no real faith. They do not know the Bible and do not even recognise Jesus as Saviour, let alone as Creator, Judge or King.

Let us examine these issues and look at what we can do to try to find a way to restore at least pockets of real Christianity here and there, and set up some genuine biblical house churches as we await Jesus' return. Sadly it is no longer easy for anybody (in the West) to find a sincere, genuine, biblical church to be part of. Indeed, that is to put it mildly as it is actually really difficult. Such churches are few and far between. But, we now need to look more closely at what we mean by a "good biblical church" and why we need to be part of one.

What do we mean by the word 'church'?

Before we look again at the difference between a biblical and an unbiblical church, let us first define what the word 'church' means. It is the English translation of the Greek word 'ekklesia', from which

we get words like ‘ecclesiastical’. We first hear the word ekklesia being used by Jesus Himself in Matthew chapter 16, before the Church even came into existence:

¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.

Matthew 16: 15-18 (NASB)

The word ‘ekklesia’ itself comes from two other Greek words being put together, i.e.

- a) ‘ek’ which means ‘out of’ or ‘out from’ and
- b) ‘kaleo’ which means ‘to call’ or ‘to summon’

Thus, you could say that ekklesia means an assembly of those who are ‘called out of’ or ‘called out from’. It therefore means a group of people who are called out of this world for a uniquely privileged purpose. Jesus was using the word to refer to the special new society, of which He was to be the Founder. That is one aspect of what Jesus meant.

However, the word ekklesia was also used among the Greek people to refer to a body or assembly of citizens who are gathered to discuss affairs of state. It is used that way in Acts 19:39.

**³⁹But if you want anything beyond this,
it shall be settled in the lawful assembly.**

Acts 19:39 (NASB)

The word ekklesia, or ‘church’ therefore has two main meanings for our purposes:

- a) When spelled with a capital C, the word Church refers to the church at a ‘macro’ level, i.e. the whole worldwide company of redeemed people, i.e. all Christian believers of all nations and all ages throughout the present era. The Church age runs from the day of Pentecost shortly after Jesus’ resurrection, when the Church as a whole was formed, and it continues up until the Rapture in the future.

That is when Jesus will remove the whole Church of that day from the Earth. From that moment onwards, any unbeliever who becomes a Christian will be called a “Tribulation Saint”, but will not be part of the Church. This broad meaning of the word ‘Church’ is what Jesus was referring to in Matthew 16:18 above and it is also what Paul is referring to in Acts 20:28 and Ephesians 1:22-23

²⁸ Be on guard for yourselves and for 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.

Acts 20:28 (NASB)

²² And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 1:22-23 (NASB)

- b) ekklesia also refers to every smaller scale group of professing believers which meets together at a local level, i.e. when the word church is being used in its ‘micro’ sense. When we mean it in this

local sense we spell the word church with a lower case c. It is also used at an intermediate level in Acts 9:31 when it refers to that part of the church which was in Judea, Galilee and Samaria, i.e. the believers in that whole region which would, of course, have consisted of many small local churches but was not the entire Church.

³¹ So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase.
Acts 9:31 (NASB)

At the smallest end of the spectrum we have the word ekklesia being used to refer to a church meeting at a very localised level, e.g. the church which met at the house of Philemon. That too was a church with a small c:

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, ²and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house

Philemon 1-2 (NASB)

What then is a ‘biblical church’?

The phrase ‘biblical church’ is not itself found in the Bible. It is a phrase which is used by me, and by others, to seek to draw a distinction between the two following alternatives:

- a) church as we generally know it and as we usually see it around us, i.e. traditional, denominational churches.
- b) what a church ought to be (and used to be) as described in the book of Acts and in the letters of the New Testament. So, it is led and structured on a small scale, meeting in houses, with mostly unpaid local elders in the way the churches of the first century were.

My contention is that most of what we see around us in churches today is not structured, led or conducted in a way the apostles would recognise. They also contain a high proportion of unsaved people who are just “churchgoers”. If Paul walked into one of our churches today, even a small ordinary one, let alone a large cathedral, he would probably assume it to be a pagan temple.

The Christians of the first century did not have the large elaborate buildings we have today. More importantly, they did not have our church structures, methods, liturgy, traditions, vestments or forms of leadership. Therefore, in almost every respect, what most of us know as church today is unrecognisable in comparison with what the apostles knew and practiced.

The Bible never spells out any rigid formula for exactly how every local church should be conducted. But it does lay down some clear general principles.

We need to emphasise that the Bible does not spell out or mandate precise ways of operating i.e. how every church, without exception, should sing or pray or dance or not dance. Neither does it tell us at what time, or even on what day, meetings should be held or exactly how they should be conducted. The Bible has been deliberately written in such a way as to give us maximum freedom.

It is quite the opposite of the approach taken by President de Gaulle, who wanted a rigid structure and timetable for every primary school in France. He said he could look at his watch at say 10:00 am on a Thursday morning and know that every nine year old child in France is doing maths at the moment.

That kind of uniformity may have appealed to De Gaulle, but it is not God's way and is not how He wants church to be. We are given a lot of latitude to conduct ourselves as we see fit, in accordance with the culture, character, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, age, abilities, nationality etc of the people in that local church.

So, a church in rural Wales is not obliged to try to imitate some other church which meets in a city in England, and vice versa. A church in Africa does not have to act as if it was in America. We are all free to operate in whatever ways suit the needs, personalities, culture and preferences of the people in our own local church.

So, for example, I am a very bookish, reserved, conservative person and I don't like dancing in church or clapping my hands in an exuberant way. So, I am not a tambourine player. It just doesn't suit my personality. Yet, when I was a new believer, many people tried to pressurise me to act as they do and to be demonstrative in worship. But, I always felt uncomfortable doing such things and that I was being bullied into acting in ways which were alien to me.

But eventually I realised that God made me the way I am and is happy with my personality and does not require me to imitate other people who are more extrovert. Realising that was very liberating and I never again allowed anyone to pressurise me to act as they do. I fully accept that God is pleased with them when they dance and shake tambourines. But I now know that He is equally happy with me when I don't.

The point is there are many ways of expressing worship and being passionate. In my view, one of the very highest forms of worship is to study the Bible with a whole hearted desire to learn it and obey what it says. That may not sound like passion but I am quite sure God sees it as such, as with the writer of Psalm 119.

When I was in my 30s, I received an unexpected compliment from a man in church who said that when he first met me he had thought I was very reserved and buttoned up. He said he had initially assumed this indicated a lack of passion. However, he then said *"But I now see that you are one of the most passionate people I have ever known."*

That said, despite all the freedom we have as to the details of how to operate church, there are still some very clear and important principles which are set out in the book of Acts and in the letters of the New Testament. These reveal the big picture and show what all of the first century churches did and how the apostles all operated.

The New Testament is not therefore being prescriptive and giving us commands as to exactly what we must do and how and when to do it. But it is telling us what the first century churches did. So, it doesn't give us orders but it does present us with a clear and consistent pattern or template and we would be foolish to ignore that and even more foolish to choose to do the direct opposite of what they did.

So, notwithstanding the very real freedom we have to make our own choices about matters of timing, style, procedure and approach, we would be most unwise to ignore what all the apostles did in all the churches they established.

When I raise this issue of unbiblical churches people often get defensive and remind me that the New Testament doesn't command us to imitate the structure and methods of the first century churches. That is quite true, as I have already said. But what they don't do is explain why the early Church operated as it did, why God told us about it, and why it would be alright for us to completely ignore their example.

At any rate, if we are to depart from the methods and approach which they adopted, we surely ought to have thought about it enough to have some good reasons for doing so. At the very least, we ought to be aware of what they did in the first century in order to be able to make an informed and conscious choice not to imitate them.

The reality is, however, that in the vast majority of churches no teaching is given about the methods, structure or practices of the early Church. Therefore, most of us have no idea what happened in first century churches, or how they conducted themselves, or why, or even why it matters. In fact, if we give it any thought at all, which most of us don't, we probably just assume they operated in the same way as we do.

So, we might picture Paul standing at a lectern, or in a pulpit, or at an altar, speaking to a large group of people all of whom are sitting quietly in rows of chairs in front of him. We might also picture Paul wearing clerical vestments and a 'dog collar' with a pointy Cardinal's hat, giving out 'orders' and being in authority over everyone.

We might also picture a hierarchy of 'clergy' assisting 'Pope' Peter, Cardinal Paul and the other apostles, performing the liturgy, keeping the people in order and directing them as to what to do. However, if you do picture the early Church in any of those ways, you would be very mistaken.

None of those things were true of the first century Church. Yet all these things, and even worse things, are to be seen in the vast majority of traditional denominational churches today. The point is, therefore, that those practices obviously did not come from the Bible, but from:

- a) the imagination of men's minds, with the 'help' of demonic deception
- b) a wish to protect the power and prestige of 'clergy'
- c) even worse, from the practices of the pagan priests who had previously served in Roman temples, but who came into the church when the Emperor Constantine took over the (apparent) church in the year AD 312.

We shall look more closely below at what the Bible says about the principles of church leadership, structure and organisation. However, for now, one could just say how odd it is, given the freedom of every church to choose how to conduct itself, that virtually all of them have opted to do *the exact opposite of what the apostles did* and on every issue and practice.

One could understand it if we had all chosen a multitude of different combinations or permutations, some valid, some not, some biblical, some unbiblical. However, for virtually all of us to choose an unbiblical approach, and in virtually all the things we do, gives the distinct impression that it is not a coincidence and that a sinister unseen hand, or rather a sinister mind, is at work.

I believe it is the Devil who is behind it, seeking to subvert and undermine all the churches throughout the world. He wants them to choose an unhealthy and unbiblical approach at every possible point in order to deny them the benefits and protections which would have come from adopting the methods of the Early Church.