

## CHAPTER 11

**COME TO TERMS WITH THE FACT THAT THERE ARE MANY WICKED PEOPLE INSIDE CHURCHES AND START TO SEE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THAT**

*<sup>17</sup> I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for he has appointed a time for every matter, and for every work.*

*Ecclesiastes 3:17 (RSV)*

*Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know that they are doing evil.*

*Ecclesiastes 5:1 (RSV)*

*<sup>9</sup> I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; <sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.*

*<sup>11</sup> But rather I wrote to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or robber—not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup> God judges those outside. “Drive out the wicked person from among you.”*

*1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (RSV)*

*<sup>15</sup> “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

*<sup>16</sup> You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. <sup>18</sup> A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will know them by their fruits.*

*Matthew 7:15-20 (RSV)*

*For you bear it if a man makes slaves of you, or preys upon you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.*

*2 Corinthians 11:20 (RSV)*

*Your wickedness will chasten you,  
and your apostasy will reprove you.  
Know and see that it is evil and bitter  
for you to forsake the Lord your God;  
the fear of me is not in you,  
says the Lord God of hosts.*

*Jeremiah 2:19 (RSV)*

*<sup>14</sup> For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.*

*Ecclesiastes 12:14 (RSV)*

**Be willing to accept the shocking fact that there are many wicked people in the churches, even in leadership positions.**

It would never occur to most of us that there are *any* wicked people in the churches, let alone large numbers of them. We tend to assume that wicked people are only found *outside* of the churches. If you want to begin to discern accurately what is going on, you need to come to terms with the fact that some of the most wicked people you'll ever meet are inside churches. Indeed, the bitterest opposition to the real Gospel, and to genuine Christians, usually comes from false Christians, not atheists or secularists. Outright unbelievers can be hostile, but they rarely match the level of contempt that is shown by apostates.

Many falsely religious people have lied to me and about me. On one occasion I was writing on Facebook about the need for honesty amongst church leaders and avoiding the love of money. I also criticised the “*prosperity gospel*” whereby corrupt leaders focus on acquiring money and possessions and see those as the primary evidence of God’s blessing. They exploit gullible Christians and make a fortune by urging naïve people to give money to them in return for God’s blessing. I spoke about this and, as a result, a prosperity preacher, who was also a woman, became agitated.

She then sent out posts about me making false accusations, for which she had no conceivable basis. She warned people not to listen to me as I was a “*heretic*”. She then specifically said that I was teaching that *Jesus never rose from the dead!* That was a complete fabrication, which she had simply made up. She must have known that her words were false. Yet she still went ahead and sent it out. Her cage had been rattled because her own income was being threatened. She then said whatever she needed to say to protect that, regardless of whether it was true.

She must have been fully aware that it was all lies but that did not bother her. I would say she came within the category of the wicked, given that she was claiming to be a Christian and was acting as a church leader, though she was female. All over the world the wicked are active in churches, as full members and even as leaders, and they are alarmingly numerous. I could give many examples just from those I have personally met, not to mention those I have only heard of or read about. It was the same in Jeremiah’s day. He had to contend with many religious people who were false:

*<sup>26</sup> For wicked men are found among my people;  
they lurk like fowlers lying in wait.  
They set a trap;  
they catch men.*

*Jeremiah 5:26 (ESV)*

*“Both prophet and priest are ungodly;  
even in my house I have found their wickedness,  
says the Lord.*

*Jeremiah 23:11 (RSV)*

*<sup>14</sup> But in the prophets of Jerusalem  
I have seen a horrible thing:  
they commit adultery and walk in lies;  
they strengthen the hands of evildoers,  
so that no one turns from his wickedness;  
all of them have become like Sodom to me,  
and its inhabitants like Gomor'rah.”*

*Jeremiah 23:14 (RSV)*

*<sup>31</sup> Behold, I am against the prophets, says the Lord, who use their tongues and say, ‘Says the Lord.’*

*<sup>32</sup> Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, says the Lord, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them; so they do not profit this people at all, says the Lord.*

*Jeremiah 23:31-32 (RSV)*

**If there were no wicked people inside churches, why would Paul tell us to “remove the wicked man from among yourselves”?**

It could be that you are reluctant to accept that there could be any wicked people inside churches, or at least in any significant numbers. If so ask yourself why apostle Paul raises this issue and why he urges the Christians in Corinth to “*remove the wicked man from among yourselves*”. For that to be done, the wicked plainly have to be *inside* the churches to begin with:

*I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people;<sup>10</sup> I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world.<sup>11</sup> But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.<sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church?<sup>13</sup> But those who are outside, God judges. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.*

*1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (NASB)*

The sin focused on in 1 Corinthians was sexual immorality but Paul does not limit this instruction about the wicked to such cases. His list includes the immoral, the covetous, idolaters, revilers, drunkards and swindlers and there is no reason to assume that is a comprehensive list. Those are really just headings and could be broken down into many other areas of sin. It is also important to make clear that Paul isn't speaking about visitors to the church, or enquirers. So he doesn't mean the unsaved people whom we invite to our church meetings.

Such people, who are on the fringes of churches, may have all sorts of chaotic lifestyles and be committing terrible sins, but they are not the people to whom Paul is referring. He means people who have become Christians, or have claimed to do so, and who have joined the church as members, but are still engaging in sinful practices or lifestyles. They are in a completely different position from mere enquirers or visitors who should be welcomed to our meetings, regardless of how sinfully they live. Indeed, how else can we reach the lost if we don't mix with them or let them mix with us?

Paul is speaking about those who ought to know better because they are members of the church and profess to be Christians. When they behave badly they not only harm other people in the church but the reputation of Jesus Christ too. That is not the case when an enquirer, or even a new convert, acts badly. Nobody expects anything from them in the first place. If anything, we expect the unsaved to have messed up lives and to be living immorally until they get themselves sorted out. Paul's concern is about established church members who are *within churches*.

Wickedness on their part can do terrible damage and needs to be taken very seriously. What Paul says proves that such phoney people and deceivers do exist within churches, as members and even leaders. So this is not a hypothetical discussion about people whom we're never likely to meet. Such behaviour is found in almost every church, even those *which Paul had attended* and in which he taught. How much more likely is it that they will be found in today's churches, which Paul has never visited or taught at, and where his letters are rarely, if ever, preached on?

You may recall 'Imelda' whose workplace story I told earlier. She was amazed to discover that church leaders could be dishonest and malicious. She learned that lesson, in her fifties when she was deceived and treated abusively by a leader. It came as a complete shock to her because she had assumed that *all* church leaders were trustworthy. However, after discovering that some can be devious, she then went to the other extreme. Instead of trusting *all* leaders without question, as she had been doing, she became phobic, like a wild animal, and would not trust *any* of them.

### **Why might God view a wicked 'churchgoer' as being even worse than a wicked unbeliever?**

It makes sense why God might view the wickedness of a religious person as worse than that of an unbeliever. A man who knows what God has said about lying, but still lies, is more blameworthy than one who has never heard what the Bible says. An unbeliever who lies is going against his own conscience and doing something which he knows to be wrong. That is bad enough. However, a 'religious' person who knows something of the Bible is sinning directly against God's *known commandments*. His transgression is therefore even worse. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of someone continuing to sin after knowing the truth of the Gospel:

<sup>26</sup> For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, <sup>27</sup> but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. <sup>28</sup> Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>29</sup> How much worse punishment, do you think, will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has outraged the Spirit of grace? <sup>30</sup> For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." <sup>31</sup> It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God

*Hebrews 10:26-31 (ESV)*

I once heard someone pose the question "Which age or dispensation in the whole history of mankind is the most wicked?" Some suggested the time of the Flood or the Crucifixion, but the speaker disagreed. He felt that sinfulness would reach its peak in the Millennium, the 1000 year reign of Jesus over the whole Earth after His Second Coming. Jesus will then be visibly present, reigning on the Earth, and providing the best circumstances for a person to live in since the Garden of Eden. The people alive then will have His direct rule over them and also perfect laws and government.

They will be able to hear Jesus speak on the TV or even see Him in person. Yet, despite all of that, the Book of Revelation says that, at the end of the Millennium, there will be a rebellion. Multitudes of people will openly defy Jesus and even join with Satan to fight against Him. So despite all the advantages of being able to see and hear Jesus in person, they will still rebel against Him. The people of that dispensation will also have a greater knowledge and understanding than we have. Therefore they will surely be even more accountable than us.

The more a person knows, the greater their sin is when they resist God and the more appropriate it is to describe them as wicked. That will be true of the people who will live during the Millennium, but the same principle also applies to us today. We have the Bible, plus the help of preachers, teachers, churches, and so on. Yet a huge percentage of us are shallow and insincere. If a man calls himself a Christian, but does what he knows to be wrong, he is not only a wrongdoer but a *hypocrite*. That hypocrisy is even worse than the original misconduct as there is the added falseness of acting contrary to what one claims to believe. Consider what Jesus says:

<sup>23</sup> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. <sup>24</sup> You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! <sup>25</sup> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. <sup>26</sup> You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. <sup>27</sup> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. <sup>28</sup> So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

*Matthew 23:23-28 (RSV)*

If you think Jesus is being blunt look at what He says next. He is not exactly taking the so called 'seeker-sensitive' approach advocated by so many churches today:

<sup>29</sup> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous, <sup>30</sup> saying, 'If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' <sup>31</sup> Thus you witness against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. <sup>32</sup> Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. <sup>33</sup> You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? <sup>34</sup> Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from town to town, <sup>35</sup> that upon you may come all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechari'ah the son of Barachi'ah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

**Matthew 23:29-35 (RSV)**

Jesus uses extremely strong words which ought to make us tremble. Instead of assuming that when Jesus refers to hypocrites He must mean someone else, let us begin to recognise that He could be referring to us. We must examine our own hearts and question ourselves about our own conduct, attitudes and motives. If we do, we may discover that we are often hypocrites. If so, we need to admit it. Then we need to humble ourselves, confess our hypocrisy, and repent of it. One reason why we must do so is that every Christian is an ambassador for Jesus Christ.

That is how Jesus views His genuine followers. It is also how the unbelieving world looks at Christians, and those who claim to be. To purport to represent Jesus Christ but to bring disgrace on His name by the way we live is to insult Him. Imagine you were an ambassador representing the Queen in a foreign country. To get drunk at a formal dinner and use foul language would be far worse than if you did those things in your own name in a private capacity. We must therefore remember *whom* we represent and take our ambassadorial role very seriously:

*<sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; <sup>19</sup> that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup> Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.*

**2 Corinthians 5:18-20 (RSV)**

A false Christian also puts people off becoming Christians. The harm caused is worse than that done by those who openly oppose the Gospel. Phoney Christians cause others to say "*If that's what being a Christian is about, I don't want anything to do with it*". We all have a duty to ask whether the way we live is a credit to the name of Jesus or diminishes Him in the eyes of others. To harm Jesus' reputation is bad enough in itself. But what about the eternal fate of those who reject Jesus Christ, and lose their salvation, *because of us*? We must ensure that nobody is ever put off becoming a Christian by the way we live. Consider what Jesus said:

*"But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! because you shut the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither enter yourselves, nor allow those who would enter to go in.*

**Matthew 23:13 (RSV)**

*<sup>1</sup>And he said to his disciples, "Temptations to sin are sure to come; but woe to him by whom they come! <sup>2</sup>It would be better for him if a millstone were hung round his neck and he were cast into the sea, than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin.*

**Luke 17:1-2 (RSV)**

**Note the severity of God's judgment on the priests, Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, because of how much they knew.**

God was particularly severe in his judgment on the priests Nadab and Abihu, two of the sons of Aaron, because they disrespected God when serving in the Tabernacle. They were in a privileged position and were in the very presence of God. Yet we are told that they "*offered unholy fire before the Lord.*" We are not told exactly what they did, or failed to do. But it was unholy and it offended God. He therefore moved decisively in judgment and took their lives, there and then:

*<sup>1</sup> Now Nadab and Abi'hu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. <sup>2</sup> And fire came forth from the presence of the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord.*

**Leviticus 10:1-2 (RSV)**

Some of us might consider their actions to be a minor infringement but God did not. Their greater knowledge and responsibility, and their being in God's very presence, meant their behaviour was seen as far more serious. Again, that has to make us tremble and fear the LORD if we are leaders or if we know the Bible well, or have been entrusted with responsibilities for God's people. We cannot treat God lightly or mock Him or take advantage of our positions. If we do we may find that God takes our sins far more seriously than we had expected. That thought should sober us.

**God was also very severe in His judgment on Korah and his followers. They were classified as wicked men even though Korah was a leader, whose descendants wrote some of the psalms.**

In case anyone thinks God's severity towards Nadab and Abihu was a one-off situation, He acted similarly with the sons of Korah and classified them as wicked. They were Levites, but not descendants of Aaron, so they could not be priests. Yet they still had important roles and served in the Tabernacle. Their sin was to exalt themselves and to rebel against Moses. It would seem that they wanted to act as priests, even though God had reserved that role for descendants of Aaron. Moses was appalled, for their sake, as he knew God would judge them.

Now Korah the son of Izhar, the son of Kohath, the son of Levi, with Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab, and On the son of Peleth, sons of Reuben, took action,<sup>2</sup> and they rose up before Moses, together with some of the sons of Israel, two hundred and fifty leaders of the congregation, chosen in the assembly, men of renown.<sup>3</sup> They assembled together against Moses and Aaron, and said to them, "You have gone far enough, for all the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is in their midst; so why do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?"

*<sup>4</sup> When Moses heard this, he fell on his face; <sup>5</sup> and he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, "Tomorrow morning the Lord will show who is His, and who is holy, and will bring him near to Himself; even the one whom He will choose, He will bring near to Himself. <sup>6</sup> Do this: take censers for yourselves, Korah and all your company, <sup>7</sup> and put fire in them, and lay incense upon them in the presence of the Lord tomorrow; and the man whom the Lord chooses shall be the one who is holy. You have gone far enough, you sons of Levi!"*

*<sup>8</sup> Then Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi, <sup>9</sup> is it not enough for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the rest of the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the service of the tabernacle of the Lord, and to stand before the congregation to minister to them; <sup>10</sup> and that He has brought you near, Korah, and all your brothers, sons of Levi, with you? And are you seeking for the priesthood also? <sup>11</sup> Therefore you and all your company are gathered together against the Lord; but as for Aaron, who is he that you grumble against him?"*

*Numbers 16:4-11 (NASB)*

Moses rebuked them and told them to take a firepan, with incense, and to stand outside the tent of meeting:

*<sup>12</sup> Then Moses sent a summons to Dathan and Abiram, the sons of Eliab; but they said, "We will not come up. <sup>13</sup> Is it not enough that you have brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey to have us die in the wilderness, but you would also lord it over us? <sup>14</sup> Indeed, you have not brought us into a land flowing with milk and honey, nor have you given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards. Would you put out the eyes of these men? We will not come up!"*

*<sup>15</sup> Then Moses became very angry and said to the Lord, "Do not regard their offering! I have not taken a single donkey from them, nor have I done harm to any of them." <sup>16</sup> Moses said to Korah, "You and all your company be present before the Lord tomorrow, both you and they along with Aaron. <sup>17</sup> Each of you take his firepan and put incense on it, and each of you bring his censer before the Lord, two hundred and fifty firepans; also you and Aaron shall each bring his firepan." <sup>18</sup> So they each took his own censer and put fire on it, and laid incense on it; and they stood at the doorway*

*of the tent of meeting, with Moses and Aaron. <sup>19</sup> Thus Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the doorway of the tent of meeting. And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the congregation.*  
*Numbers 16:12-19 (NASB)*

Moses knew the judgment of God would fall on these rebels. Therefore he warned everybody to get away from the dwellings of Korah, Dathan and Abiram, or they would suffer the same judgment. Some moved away, but others did not, even though Moses had made it clear that the ground would open and swallow them up:

*<sup>20</sup> Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, <sup>21</sup> “Separate yourselves from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly.” <sup>22</sup> But they fell on their faces and said, “O God, God of the spirits of all flesh, when one man sins, will You be angry with the entire congregation?” <sup>23</sup> Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>24</sup> “Speak to the congregation, saying, ‘Get back from around the dwellings of Korah, Dathan and Abiram.’”*

*<sup>25</sup> Then Moses arose and went to Dathan and Abiram, with the elders of Israel following him, <sup>26</sup> and he spoke to the congregation, saying, “Depart now from the tents of these wicked men, and touch nothing that belongs to them, or you will be swept away in all their sin.” <sup>27</sup> So they got back from around the dwellings of Korah, Dathan and Abiram; and Dathan and Abiram came out and stood at the doorway of their tents, along with their wives and their sons and their little ones. <sup>28</sup> Moses said, “By this you shall know that the Lord has sent me to do all these deeds; for this is not my doing. <sup>29</sup> If these men die the death of all men or if they suffer the fate of all men, then the Lord has not sent me. <sup>30</sup> But if the Lord brings about an entirely new thing and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that is theirs, and they descend alive into Sheol, then you will understand that these men have spurned the Lord.”*

*Number 16:20-30 (NASB)*

That was exactly what then happened. The ground split open and all who had followed Korah in his rebellion against Moses were swallowed up and went down alive into Sheol:

*<sup>31</sup> As he finished speaking all these words, the ground that was under them split open; <sup>32</sup> and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah with their possessions. <sup>33</sup> So they and all that belonged to them went down alive to Sheol; and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. <sup>34</sup> All Israel who were around them fled at their outcry, for they said, “The earth may swallow us up!” <sup>35</sup> Fire also came forth from the Lord and consumed the two hundred and fifty men who were offering the incense.*

*Numbers 16:31-35 (NASB)*

Then God told Moses to tell Aaron to take the censers of the men who had been swallowed up and to hammer them out as plating for the altar. This was a reminder to the people of what happened to Korah and his followers and how seriously God takes holiness and unholiness:

*<sup>36</sup> Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>37</sup> “Say to Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, that he shall take up the censers out of the midst of the blaze, for they are holy; and you scatter the burning coals abroad. <sup>38</sup> As for the censers of these men who have sinned at the cost of their lives, let them be made into hammered sheets for a plating of the altar, since they did present them before the Lord and they are holy; and they shall be for a sign to the sons of Israel.” <sup>39</sup> So Eleazar the priest took the bronze censers which the men who were burned had offered, and they hammered them out as a plating for the altar, <sup>40</sup> as a reminder to the sons of Israel that no layman who is not of the descendants of Aaron should come near to burn incense before the Lord; so that he will not become like Korah and his company—just as the Lord had spoken to him through Moses.*

*Numbers 16:36-40 (NASB)*

Even after this, many of the people continued to grumble against Moses and Aaron, blaming them for the deaths of Korah and his followers. God’s response to this was even more dramatic. In his wrath, He sent a plague which consumed 14,700 of the people. It only stopped when Aaron, on Moses’

instructions, took fire from the altar, put it in a censer with incense, and ran into the midst of the plague to make atonement for the people:

*<sup>41</sup> But on the next day all the congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron, saying, "You are the ones who have caused the death of the Lord's people."<sup>42</sup> It came about, however, when the congregation had assembled against Moses and Aaron, that they turned toward the tent of meeting, and behold, the cloud covered it and the glory of the Lord appeared. <sup>43</sup> Then Moses and Aaron came to the front of the tent of meeting, <sup>44</sup> and the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>45</sup> "Get away from among this congregation, that I may consume them instantly." Then they fell on their faces. <sup>46</sup> Moses said to Aaron, "Take your censer and put in it fire from the altar, and lay incense on it; then bring it quickly to the congregation and make atonement for them, for wrath has gone forth from the Lord, the plague has begun!" <sup>47</sup> Then Aaron took it as Moses had spoken, and ran into the midst of the assembly, for behold, the plague had begun among the people. So he put on the incense and made atonement for the people. <sup>48</sup> He took his stand between the dead and the living, so that the plague was checked. <sup>49</sup> But those who died by the plague were 14,700, besides those who died on account of Korah. <sup>50</sup> Then Aaron returned to Moses at the doorway of the tent of meeting, for the plague had been checked.*

*Numbers 16:41-50 (NASB)*

This incident shows how seriously God views sin and unholiness by those who should know better, because they have more knowledge or have witnessed more of God's power. This generation, which came out of Egypt, had seen God's miraculous dealings with Moses, plus the giving of the Law. So they were held to a much higher standard and their behaviour was judged more severely. The same principle applies to us today and should cause us to fear God and obey His Word because we have been given so much compared to almost every other generation.

### **A liar inside a church causes more damage than a liar who is outside in the world.**

Whether a deceiver can be a real Christian is a complex question but to the unsaved people who are deceived by them it is largely academic. They will assume the liar was a real Christian anyway, whether he was or not. Then they are likely to conclude that Christianity itself, and the Church as a whole, is no good. Therefore, when assessing the damage caused by a deceiver in a church, we need to see it from two angles. Firstly there is the lie itself and the harm that causes. Secondly there is the underlying objective which caused them to lie in the first place.

Most people don't lie purely for the sake of it. There is usually a deeper motivation. It could be they want to control other people in the church. If so, the lie is a tool to help them achieve that even wicked objective, rather than a goal in itself. Therefore, when a person lies, that is a serious problem in itself. But we also need to consider what the underlying motive may be. If we don't, we are only dealing with the smaller of the two issues, the deception itself, but ignoring what lies behind it, such as the desire for control. That needs to concern us even more.

### **The difference between people in churches who are wicked, and those who behave badly, but are only immature or simple**

Amongst those who claim to be Christians there are people of every conceivable type and level. We need to distinguish between the wicked and the merely immature, whose behaviour has not yet changed since they were converted. Those people are not wicked, or at least not yet. They just need to abandon their carnal ways and become mature disciples. Hopefully they will do so, over time. There are various explanations for why someone can act and speak sinfully and yet still be a real Christian. The church at Corinth contained many appallingly carnal people but they were still recognised by Paul as being real Christians:



*<sup>1</sup> And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. <sup>2</sup> I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, <sup>3</sup> for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?*

*1 Corinthians 3:1-3 (NASB)*

Some were engaging in sexual sins which even the people of our own depraved generation would regard as wrong:

*<sup>1</sup> It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. <sup>2</sup> You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. <sup>3</sup> For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. <sup>4</sup> In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, <sup>5</sup> I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

*1 Corinthians 5:1-5 (NASB)*

Apostle Paul distinguished between sins committed by unbelievers and those committed by people who were Christians, or claimed to be. Those *within* the Church who acted in these ways were viewed by Paul as wicked. Their greater knowledge made them more accountable and more blameworthy for their sins than unbelievers are for theirs. Their sins were also more capable of damaging others. Paul therefore instructed that they be “*removed*” from their local church, i.e. put out of fellowship. Paul also goes on to say that such people will not inherit the Kingdom of God:

*<sup>9</sup> Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, <sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*

*1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (NASB)*

Paul would not have warned genuine Christians against such immorality unless he thought we were capable of it. Even amongst *real* Christians, carnality can reach very high levels. Thus we can't assume that doing these things *necessarily* proves that a person isn't a Christian, on the basis that no genuine Christian would ever do so. Sadly, they can, and they do, and we need to recognise that or we will misjudge people and situations. It is hardly ever easy to gauge what another person really is.

He could be a deliberate deceiver and a charlatan. Or he could just be a spiritual baby, who is still behaving like an unbeliever, but will eventually change. We need discernment to distinguish the different types of person and the alternative reasons why people in churches act as they do. Some really are wicked, whereas others may just appear to be. They may be uninformed, immature Christians who don't yet know how to behave properly and who still operate in the flesh much of the time. It depends on all the facts of each individual case.

Consider how the apostles Peter and John dealt with an ex-occult practitioner called Simon. He seems to have become a real Christian, albeit one whose heart was not yet right. He offered them money if they would lay hands on him so that he could have the power to enable others to receive the Holy Spirit. He was still thinking in the same worldly, self-centred way as he did when he was an unbeliever and a magician. Yet, despite being a recent convert, which would ordinarily make us more tolerant, Peter still described him as wicked:

*<sup>14</sup> Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent to them Peter and John, <sup>15</sup> who came down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit,*

<sup>16</sup>for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. <sup>17</sup>Then they laid their hands on them and they received the Holy Spirit. <sup>18</sup>Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money, <sup>19</sup>saying, "Give me this power also, so that anyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit." <sup>20</sup>But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money! <sup>21</sup>You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. <sup>22</sup>Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. <sup>23</sup>For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity." <sup>24</sup>And Simon answered, "Pray for me to the Lord, that nothing of what you have said may come upon me.

*Acts 8:14-24 (ESV)*

It seems Simon really was a Christian and had been born again. Yet there was still such a lot of pride and self-importance left in him that Peter classified him as wicked. So, Simon was a real believer, but he needed to repent and change. However, there are also people who behave wickedly who are not, and never were, real Christians. It can be very hard to tell the difference. We cannot do it solely in our own wisdom. It may require the gift of the discerning of spirits, whereby God enables us to know what someone really is, or where an idea comes from.

We need that because we can never be absolutely sure what is going on in the mind or spirit of another person. At an individual level it is difficult to reach conclusions such as "*This man is a fool, and this man is wicked, but this other man is just immature and misinformed*". One can't reliably discern such things by oneself, in the absence of God revealing the truth to us. It can often be very complex and so we need to be cautious about labelling individuals. However, at a macro level, it is possible to state the wider position much more confidently.

Accordingly, it is undeniable that a high percentage of people in British churches have no real repentance and no fear of God. Likewise, most people in Western churches today have little or no understanding of God's judgment and no expectation of being judged when they die. There is also serious sexual sin and involvement in the occult, even whilst continuing to go to church. There is often no discernible change in people's behaviour following their alleged conversion. Many do not even claim to have had any 'conversion' and never *speak* of having 'repented'.

They just attend church, as if that was all there is to being a Christian. Only God knows those who are saved and those who are not. You and I don't really know for sure. We can have a view as to the *likelihood* of whether a person is saved (justified). However, we can't be absolutely certain because only God really knows the heart of any person, exactly what their background is, and why they do what they do. Also only God knows what traumatic experiences they have suffered which might still be affecting them, and which might explain some or all of what they do.

**There is an urgent need for the Church to be taught about God's judgment because very few know about it.**

Many 'churchgoers' have never heard of God's impending judgment, mainly because they have been so badly taught. Many deny that God will ever judge anybody, not even unbelievers. Some accept that God may judge unbelievers, but deny that God will ever judge *Christians*. Even more hold no view at all and have never even considered the subject of judgment, or heard any teaching on it. I was once at a men's event with about 30 men from a large Evangelical church. The subject of God's judgment came up and I mentioned the Judgment Seat of Christ (the judgment for believers).

It was in a small discussion group of about six or seven men, all committed Evangelicals. Yet only one had ever even heard of it! One of them looked at me as if it was me who was confused rather than himself. What I had said about Christians facing God's judgment was so completely new to him he thought I meant that Christians will face the *same* judgment as unbelievers, i.e. the *Great White Throne*,

which leads to condemnation and the Lake of Fire. He couldn't understand, or cope with, the idea of there being any form of judgment at all for *saved believers*.

That was because he had never heard of it, which was because he had never been taught about it. Neither had any of the others in the group, except one older man who was taught about the Judgment Seat of Christ by a previous pastor 30 years before. However, no other leader had ever taught on it since then, despite it being such a major theme in the Bible. I later told 'Carl', one of the leaders, that only one man in my group had ever heard of the Judgment Seat and suggested we have some teaching on it. However, he just stared at me uncomfortably for a moment and changed the subject.

The concept of God's judgment was almost as new to him as it was to them, so he had no idea what to say. The men in my group were not deliberately rejecting the concept of judgment. They were just totally unaware of it, the blame for which is mainly on those leaders who failed to teach them. However, the men were also partly at fault themselves because every individual, at least in the West, has virtually unlimited access to the Bible. Therefore, when they read those passages which speak of God's judgment of Christians, why do they pass over them with their eyes closed and their minds asleep? Why don't they ask themselves the obvious questions which any reasonable person would ask?

If you were reading any other document you would ask questions if you came across words which you did not understand. So why do so few people ask any questions when they see God's Judgment spoken about in the Bible? Not enquiring into this makes them blameworthy, firstly for failing to take seriously what the Bible says and, secondly, for relying on what their *teachers* say, without looking into it for themselves. The lack of knowledge about God's impending judgment is one of the main reasons why there is so much wickedness in churches, so little conviction about it, and so little repentance.

### **Some of the most wicked people you'll ever meet are false Christians, operating within churches.**

I cannot offer any statistically reliable evidence, but my view is that the number of false Christians and false leaders is vastly higher than it was when I was saved in 1981. Paul spoke of such people in his second letter to Timothy and said that they would come "in the last days":

*<sup>1</sup>But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of stress. <sup>2</sup>For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, <sup>3</sup>inhuman, implacable, slanderers, profligates, fierce, haters of good, <sup>4</sup>treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, <sup>5</sup>holding the form of religion but denying the power of it. Avoid such people.*

*2 Timothy 3:1-5 (RSV)*

Jeremiah also had to contend with many such people in his day, including leaders. The apostates and false prophets were just as popular then as they are now:

<sup>30</sup> *"An appalling and horrible thing  
Has happened in the land:*

<sup>31</sup> *The prophets prophesy falsely,  
And the priests rule on their own authority;  
And My people love it so!*

*But what will you do at the end of it?*

*Jeremiah 5:30-31 (NASB)*

<sup>14</sup> *And the Lord said to me, "The prophets prophesy lies in My name. I have not sent them, commanded them, nor spoken to them; they prophesy to you a false vision, divination, a worthless thing, and the deceit of their heart.*

*Jeremiah 14:14 (NKJV)*

Consider also this verse from Proverbs:

***<sup>8</sup>The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD,  
but the prayer of the upright is his delight.***

***Proverbs 15:8 (RSV)***

Note that Solomon says the *sacrifice* offered by a wicked man is an abomination to God. But that wicked man would not be offering a sacrifice to God in the first place unless he was, or was pretending to be, a believer. As well as the wicked, fools are also active in churches, as some were once active in the Temple, offering sacrifices when their hearts were not right. Some were actually doing evil even though, to undiscerning observers, they may have looked alright:

***Guard your steps when you go to the house of God; to draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools; for they do not know that they are doing evil.*** ***Ecclesiastes 5:1 (RSV)***

Amos said their religious ceremonies were odious to God because they were empty rituals conducted by shallow, insecure people who had no real concern for justice or righteousness:

***<sup>21</sup>“I hate, I despise your feasts,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
<sup>22</sup>Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings,  
I will not accept them,  
and the peace offerings of your fatted beasts  
I will not look upon.  
<sup>23</sup>Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
to the melody of your harps I will not listen.  
<sup>24</sup>But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.***  
***Amos 5:21-24 (RSV)***

In Psalm 50 the wicked recite God’s statutes and take His covenant on their lips. But God is not impressed, because He knows they are insincere, hate discipline and cast His words behind them. Although such people are classed by God as being ‘wicked’, they still look and act like real believers. They read God’s Word, and even quote from it, but without really believing or honouring it. Yet they also claim to be part of God’s people. The appearance of ‘religiosity’ and regular ‘churchgoing’ do not mean that a person is a genuine believer. On the contrary, when it is combined with falseness and hypocrisy, it only makes the person’s wickedness *more* intense in God’s eyes:

***<sup>16</sup>But to the wicked God says:  
“What right have you to recite my statutes,  
or take my covenant on your lips?  
<sup>17</sup>For you hate discipline,  
and you cast my words behind you.  
<sup>18</sup>If you see a thief, you are a friend of his;  
and you keep company with adulterers.  
<sup>19</sup>“You give your mouth free rein for evil,  
and your tongue frames deceit.***  
***Psalms 50:16-19 (RSV)***

Eli the High Priest ministered in the Tabernacle and trained up the young prophet Samuel. Eli’s sons were also priests, but they were wicked men. The fact that they were wicked didn't stop them continuing in their roles as priests, and for many years. On the contrary, they intentionally used their positions as priests to benefit themselves through dishonesty and they had no respect for God:

***<sup>12</sup>Now the sons of Eli were worthless men. They did not know the LORD. <sup>13</sup>The custom of the priests with the people was that when any man offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, <sup>14</sup>and he would thrust it into the pan or***

*kettle or cauldron or pot. All that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there. <sup>15</sup> Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the man who was sacrificing, "Give meat for the priest to roast, for he will not accept boiled meat from you but only raw." <sup>16</sup> And if the man said to him, "Let them burn the fat first, and then take as much as you wish," he would say, "No, you must give it now, and if not, I will take it by force." <sup>17</sup> Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the LORD, for the men treated the offering of the LORD with contempt.*

*1 Samuel 2:12-17 (ESV)*

The sons of Eli continued in their wickedness, even after their father confronted them about their behaviour. They brazenly ignored him, and God's Word, and carried on as before:

*<sup>22</sup> Now Eli was very old, and he kept hearing all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who were serving at the entrance to the tent of meeting. <sup>23</sup> And he said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people. <sup>24</sup> No, my sons; it is no good report that I hear the people of the LORD spreading abroad. <sup>25</sup> If someone sins against a man, God will mediate for him, but if someone sins against the LORD, who can intercede for him?" But they would not listen to the voice of their father, for it was the will of the LORD to put them to death.*

*1 Samuel 2:22-25 (ESV)*

In the end God said, through the young prophet Samuel, that He was going to bring judgment on the whole house of Eli, because of his sons' wickedness and Eli's failure to restrain them:

*<sup>12</sup> On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. <sup>13</sup> And I declare to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them.*

*1 Samuel 3:12-13 (ESV)*

Despite what happened to Eli's sons, both of whom died on the same day, Samuel's own sons later became corrupt. He appointed two of his sons to be judges over Israel, but they both became wicked and took bribes:

*<sup>1</sup> When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel. <sup>2</sup> The name of his firstborn son was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beersheba. <sup>3</sup> Yet his sons did not walk in his ways but turned aside after gain. They took bribes and perverted justice.*

*1 Samuel 8:1-3 (ESV)*

The same applies today in our churches which have such a lot of wicked people, many of whom are in leadership. Whatever their own private motives may be, Satan has a plan for these false Christians. He uses them to discredit the name of Jesus and to undermine the real Christians in those churches. But you are unlikely ever to hear a sermon about wicked people within churches. Their behaviour, and even their existence, is not mentioned. You will hear even less about wickedness within the *leadership* of churches. It is a taboo subject which is not taught about, even by honest leaders.

I have met a lot of wicked churchgoers and there are many others I have been told about. I have also tackled at least three wicked church leaders, not counting their assistants and fellow elders, who covered up their wrongdoing. I believe those men knew themselves to be false. I can't imagine how they could have been unaware of it, unless their consciences were so badly seared they had ceased to function. They continued to lead churches, and to teach and preach, without showing any trace of the fear of the LORD, or concern about His Judgment.

**The hostility and contempt that a real Christian receives from the religious wicked can be worse than that which comes from the non-religious wicked.**

One is likely to get worse opposition from compromised, insincere, apostate churchgoers than from outright unbelievers who make no claim to be Christians. In my case, it has been the wicked people *within* churches who have treated me with the most contempt, probably because they felt threatened. Liberal churchgoers, more so than unbelievers, have despised my readiness to take the Bible at face value and to believe it literally. They really don't like my approach to Scripture and can be very hostile in response. I have also had such reactions from 'high' and liberal Anglicans and from Roman Catholics, who have very little knowledge of the Bible.

If you know the Bible well and take it seriously such people will feel threatened. They don't know how to answer you, so they will lash out at you personally, or close the argument down. They know that in any open debate their ignorance would be exposed and they won't allow that. However, it can get a lot worse than that. If such men can get themselves into positions of sufficient power they will even use violence to silence you properly, as successive Popes did over many centuries, and as Jesus warned us would happen:

*I have said all these things to you to keep you from falling away. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> And they will do these things because they have not known the Father, nor me. <sup>4</sup> But I have said these things to you, that when their hour comes you may remember that I told them to you.*

*John 16:1-4 (ESV)*

Falsely religious people have always opposed the truth. They hold to man-made beliefs and traditions and oppose the real Gospel. I have encountered such opposition myself, especially from leaders. They can't argue their case from the Bible itself or show why it ought not to be taken literally. Neither can they explain why my doing so is so objectionable. They usually end up engaging in '*ad hominem*' arguments, attacking the *person* rather than debating the *issue* itself. They feel threatened, so they prevent the expression of any contrary view. For example, note how hysterical people can become if you stand up for Israel.

The Roman Catholic church has always persecuted real Christians, not just the reformers of the 16th century. Also, both before and after the Reformation, the Catholic church banned the translation of the Bible into any other language. Indeed, they forbade lay people to read it at all, even in Latin. They knew that if ordinary people were allowed to read the Bible they would soon see that it does not support Catholic practices or beliefs, because the contrast is so stark. They also murdered countless genuine Bible-believing Christians over the centuries, most notably John Hus and William Tyndale.

They were burned at the stake for preaching the truth about the Bible and the many ways in which Roman Catholicism is the opposite of what the Bible says. If the Popes and bishops who put them to death were not wicked, who could ever be classified as wicked? However, in case anybody imagines I am singling out the Roman Catholic church for criticism, please be assured that I am not. There were, and still are, many leaders in Reformed, Orthodox, Protestant, Charismatic, Pentecostal and other churches who have also behaved dishonestly, manipulatively and oppressively.

Some have been almost as bad as the Popes, though on a far smaller scale. But that was only because they lacked the political and military power that the Popes had. If they had had equivalent powers they would have persecuted, and even murdered, their opponents in exactly the same way. Indeed, John Calvin and his supporters created a 'police state' in Geneva persecuting, and even executing, those who did not accept Calvin's teaching or did not obey their rules. I believe many of those abusers were not innocently misguided, but were wicked men and 'Nicolaitans'. (See Chapter 18)

**If a person understands the Gospel, but still chooses not to repent, that makes them even worse than they were to begin with, and liable to a stricter judgment.**

If you're not convinced that there are wicked people in virtually all churches, consider the series of warnings in the letter to the Hebrews about unrepentance and hardness of heart. Remember also that the letter to the Hebrews was written to people who were *already in churches*. They were plainly believers, not mere 'enquirers'. We are even told that they had begun to be *sanctified*, which can only occur in the life of a real believer after they have been born again. (See chapter 23 of my Book 1 for an explanation of what sanctification is.)

Nevertheless, the people to whom the letter was written turned their backs on God and hardened their hearts. Exposure to the Gospel and knowing who Jesus Christ is, and what He taught, either makes a person better or worse. It does not leave them unchanged. Any person who hears the real Gospel will inevitably do one of two things. They may accept it and believe, repent and follow Jesus. If so they will steadily change and become more like Him and their hearts will become more soft and 'tenderised'. Or they may hear it but reject it, or accept it for a time, but then reject it.

If so their hearts will become increasingly hardened. Those are the only two directions you can go in when you hear the real Gospel. With that in mind, let us examine the warnings in the letter to the Hebrews and remember that these are aimed at people who are already *within* churches, not at those outside. They were given primarily to saved Jewish Christians to warn them not to return to non-Messianic Judaism. Some of them were doing that in order to avoid the persecution that the Romans were giving to Christians and Messianic Jews, but not to non-Messianic Jews.

That persecution arose because the Romans had declared that Judaism was lawful, i.e. '*religio licita*', whereas Christianity was '*religio illicita*', i.e. a forbidden religion. However, the letter to the Hebrews applies to us all, not just to first century Jewish Christians. It is a warning to all of us not to fall away and not to abandon our faith in Jesus, or cease to follow Him. Accordingly, the warnings are aimed at *real Christians*, not merely at phoney believers who were never saved in the first place. If they had never been truly saved they would have nothing to fall away from.

**Warnings against drifting away from faith and neglecting our salvation**

This first passage makes clear that, at the very least, it is possible for us to "*drift away from*" what we have heard and to "*neglect....(our) salvation*". Otherwise, these warnings would be meaningless:

*<sup>1</sup>Therefore we must pay the closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. <sup>2</sup>For if the message declared by angels was valid and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, <sup>3</sup>how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him*

*Hebrews 2:1-3 (RSV)*

The warning cannot be referring to people who are not really saved. How can they "neglect (their) salvation" unless they have got salvation? It is plainly referring to real Christians.

**Warnings against hardening our hearts, going astray or falling away**

This next passage is even more explicit. It shows that it is possible for us to "harden (our) hearts", "go astray in (our) hearts" and/or "fall away from the living God":

*<sup>12</sup> Take care, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. <sup>13</sup> But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. <sup>14</sup>For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first*

*confidence firm to the end,<sup>15</sup> while it is said, "Today, when you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."*

*Hebrews 3:12-15 (RSV)*

Again, these warnings would not be needed if these things could not happen to real Christians. If that was so, the warnings would be purely hypothetical and God does not engage in academic discussions.

### **Warning against disobedience**

In the next passage we see that it is also possible for us to “fall” as a result of “*disobedience*”:

*<sup>11</sup>Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience.*

*Hebrews 4:11 (RSV)*

### **Warning against apostasy**

The next warning is against “*apostasy*” itself. That is where a person has been a real believer but then ceases to be one. Again, logic demands that one has to have been a genuine believer, at least for a short period of time, in order to be able to *cease* being one:

*<sup>4</sup>For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit,<sup>5</sup> and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,<sup>6</sup> if they then commit apostasy, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt.<sup>7</sup> For land which has drunk the rain that often falls upon it, and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God.<sup>8</sup> But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed; its end is to be burned.*

*Hebrews 6:4-8 (RSV)*

Note also the sobering words that those who degenerate into such apostasy cannot be restored to repentance. So, their position is dire indeed. But again, we have to conclude that they were, at least for a time, real Christians because they are described as having been “*partakers of the Holy Spirit*”, which no unsaved person can be.

### **Warning against sinning deliberately after knowing the truth**

This next passage is especially grim. It speaks of such people facing a “*fearful prospect of judgment*” and a “*fury of fire*”. That implies that their punishment will be worse than what will be given to a complete unbeliever. What can that possibly mean other than that they will go to the Lake of Fire?

*<sup>26</sup>For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,<sup>27</sup> but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries.<sup>28</sup> A man who has violated the law of Moses dies without mercy at the testimony of two or three witnesses.<sup>29</sup> How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? <sup>30</sup>For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." <sup>31</sup>It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

*Hebrews 10:26-31 (RSV)*



## Warning against rejecting or refusing Jesus

Lastly, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews warns us against “*refusing*” or “*rejecting*” Jesus:

***22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a judge who is God of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel. 25 See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven***

*Hebrews 12:22-25 (RSV)*

These warnings don't mean that every person who ever stumbles or sins in any way at all is an apostate. If that was true we would *all* have to be classed as apostates, because we all stumble, disobey God and let people down. These verses are aimed at people who go beyond that, in that *they fail to repent* when they fall into such sin. They do not fear God and they harden their hearts by *ongoing unrepentance and disregard for His Word* until it becomes habitual. Such a person, if he continues to act in those ways, can eventually reach a point where his heart has become so hard and so indifferent to God that he can be said to have *'fallen away'*.

Nevertheless, even after reaching that stage he may still go through the motions of an apparently religious life, including church attendance and even leadership. On the surface he may still look and sound like a believer. Indeed, he may even be a leader, and remain for years in a leadership position. However, despite all outward appearances, his heart is cold, hard and unresponsive. If he hardens his heart for long enough, and persistently refuses to listen to God's voice, then a catastrophic tipping point will eventually be reached at which God will refuse to listen to him:

***11 But they refused to pay attention and turned a stubborn shoulder and stopped their ears that they might not hear. 12 They made their hearts diamond-hard lest they should hear the law and the words that the Lord of hosts had sent by his Spirit through the former prophets. Therefore great anger came from the Lord of hosts. 13 "As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear," says the Lord of hosts,***

*Zechariah 7:11-13 (ESV)*

If a person reaches that severely hardened condition then he has become an ‘*apostate*’. That is a person who once knew and believed the truth, but has then turned his back on it. Or at least he has abandoned it in his heart, even if in his outward actions or role he appears still to be in the Church. Such a person, having reached this stage, can properly be described as wicked because he has known the truth and even the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. His turning away is classed as wicked because he has knowingly “*..... spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace.....*”

In God's eyes, to turn one's back on Jesus after having known Him, and to dishonour Him by our lives as we harden our hearts, is as bad a sin as it is possible to imagine. It would appear to be worse than if an unbeliever, who knows nothing of the Gospel, was to reject God or even to commit a serious crime. That unbeliever who commits a crime will be judged as an unbeliever, and as one who knew very little of the Gospel, or perhaps nothing at all. He may have had nothing more than his own conscience to indicate that his actions were wrong.

However, if a man knows the truth much more clearly because he actually *knows the Bible*, and even *knows Jesus*, then to betray or reject Him is an act of the utmost seriousness. Sadly it is within churches that many of those apostates are to be found, even as leaders. They have long since abandoned any real faith or repentance and have no real allegiance to Jesus. Whatever it is that they are now pursuing, it is not Him, or obedience to His commands. We must therefore examine ourselves and ask whether we

are still *'in the faith'* or have grown so cold and hard as to have *'fallen away'*, or to be in danger of doing so.

It is vitally important to ensure we don't descend to that condition, or if we have done so already, then to repent. Knowing God's Word does not sanctify you or make you holy unless you actually *obey it*. If instead you ignore it or despise it then your greater knowledge of what God had wanted you to do only *adds to your guilt*. It makes your rejection of Him, and of His Word, all the more wicked. Therefore it is a heavy warning and needs to cause all of us to examine ourselves closely, and with sincere repentance, wherever it is needed:

***Examine yourselves, to see whether you are holding to your faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you? --unless indeed you fail to meet the test!***

***2 Corinthians 13:5 (RSV)***