

CHAPTER 13

SOME EXAMPLES FROM THE BIBLE OF WICKED BELIEVERS WHO WERE FALSE AND DID GREAT HARM

¹⁴ And the Lord said to me: "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds.

Jeremiah 14:14 (RSV)

⁹ My hand will be against the prophets who see delusive visions and who give lying divinations; they shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel; and you shall know that I am the Lord God.

Ezekiel 13:9 (RSV)

³⁸ And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces ³⁹ and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

Mark 12:38-40 (ESV)

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

1 Corinthians 5:1-2 (RSV)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

1 John 4:1 (RSV)

The prophet Jeremiah's experiences of false and wicked leaders

Jeremiah was a prophet to the Kingdom of Judah at a low point in its history when the people had been ignoring God for years. Therefore God was about to judge them by causing the Babylonians to invade and take the people into captivity. Note that the key things God focused upon were the falseness and apostasy of the *religious leaders*. They were corrupt and opposed Jeremiah because he exposed what they were. These extracts show how Jeremiah described the religious leaders of his day. Do they remind you of most churches today, where God's Word is ignored, and the values of the world are embraced?

*The priests did not say, 'Where is the LORD?'
Those who handle the law did not know me;
the rulers transgressed against me;
the prophets prophesied by Ba'al, and went after things that do not profit.*

Jeremiah 2:8 (RSV)

Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown," says the LORD.

Jeremiah 6:15 (RSV)

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 (RSV)

And the LORD said to me: "The prophets are prophesying lies in my name; I did not send them, nor did I command them or speak to them. They are prophesying to you a lying vision, worthless divination, and the deceit of their own minds.

Jeremiah 14:14 (RSV)

³²Behold, 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 23:32 (RSV)

Ezekiel's experiences of false and wicked religious leaders

Ezekiel came a little later and was also called to confront the religious leaders of his day. God gave him a series of visions of what they were doing behind closed doors, when they thought nobody could see. Note how similar they were to the men whom Jeremiah had described:

¹⁰So I went in and saw; and there, portrayed upon the wall round about, were all kinds of creeping things, and loathsome beasts, and all the idols of the house of Israel. ¹¹And before them stood seventy men of the elders of the house of Israel, with Ja-azani'ah the son of Shaphan standing among them. Each had his censer in his hand, and the smoke of the cloud of incense went up. ¹²Then he said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the dark, every man in his room of pictures? For they say, 'The LORD does not see us, the LORD has forsaken the land.'" ¹³He said also to me, "You will see still greater abominations which they commit."

Ezekiel 8:10-13 (RSV)

My hand will be against the prophets who see delusive visions and who give lying divinations; they shall not be in the council of my people, nor be enrolled in the register of the house of Israel, nor shall they enter the land of Israel; and you shall know that I am the Lord GOD.

Ezekiel 13:9 (RSV)

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ²"Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

Ezekiel 34:1-4 (RSV)

In addressing these issues of corruption, apostasy and idolatry, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are not just speaking of a few exceptional people whose wickedness stood out in contrast to the goodness of the majority. On the contrary, the false apostate leaders were in the *majority* in their day and my own experience suggests they are in the majority in the leadership of today's churches too. I wish I could say otherwise, but I don't think I can.

The apostles' experience of false teachers and false leaders, even within the churches of the first century

The series of passages below are from the New Testament and show that such corruption was also found, even in the first century. That was when the Church was in the best condition it has ever been in and still had the influence of the apostles. Such wickedness is even worse today, when the average

Western church is vastly inferior to those which the apostles wrote to. They were more wholesome, and better led, than most of our churches today. Even so, the apostles met many false people in the churches, including those in leadership and teaching roles.

Moreover, they thought this was really important. Indeed, much of the New Testament was written to correct the errors and lies that such people taught and to address their wrong behaviour and carnality, including sexual sin, false teaching and malice. I have included a long series of passages to show that these things were not at all exceptional. They arose in all sorts of churches and places, even in the 'golden age' of the Church from the AD 50s, when Galatians was written, right through to about AD 100, when John wrote Revelation. Consider this list of examples:

¹*It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and of a kind that is not found even among pagans; for a man is living with his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*

1 Corinthians 5:1-2 (RSV)

⁶*I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel-- ⁷not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.*

Galatians 1:6-7 (RSV)

⁴*But because of false brethren secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy out our freedom which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage ⁵to them we did not yield submission even for a moment, that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.*

Galatians 2:4-5 (RSV)

¹³*until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ; ¹⁴ so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.*

Ephesians 4:13-14 (RSV)

holding faith and a good conscience. By rejecting conscience, certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith,

1 Timothy 1:19 (RSV)

⁹*Do your best to come to me soon. ¹⁰For Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica*

2 Timothy 4:9-10(a) RSV)

Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will requite him for his deeds

2 Timothy 4:14 (RSV)

¹⁰*For there are many insubordinate men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially the circumcision party; ¹¹they must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching for base gain what they have no right to teach.*

Titus 1:10-11 (RSV)

¹⁸*Children, it is the last hour; and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come; therefore we know that it is the last hour. ¹⁹They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they all are not of us.*

1 John 2:18-19 (RSV)

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

1 John 4: 1(RSV)

for he who greets him shares his wicked work.

2 John 11 (RSV)

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false

Revelation 2:2 (RSV)

Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicola'itans, which I also hate

Revelation 2: 6 (RSV)

How does a Christian, even a real one, change and become wicked?

People do not change overnight from one category to another, such that a simple person becomes a fool or a fool becomes wicked. The changes we undergo are much more gradual and the boundaries are also blurred. We are all born with a sin nature, but we are not born wicked. The baby son of the wicked King Jeroboam of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in the passage below illustrates that. He was part of a very evil family. Yet God said, through the prophet Ahija, that that child, who died in infancy, was "pleasing" to Him. Accordingly, that baby was clearly not born wicked:

¹²Arise therefore, go to your house. When your feet enter the city, the child shall die. ¹³ And all Israel shall mourn for him, and bury him; for he only of Jerobo'am shall come to the grave, because in him there is found something pleasing to the LORD, the God of Israel, in the house of Jerobo'am. ¹⁴ Moreover the LORD will raise up for himself a king over Israel, who shall cut off the house of Jerobo'am today. And henceforth

1 Kings 14:12-14 (RSV)

Wickedness in a Christian, especially in a teacher or leader, rarely shows itself in spectacular acts of criminality or scandal. Very few false Christians rob banks or murder people. Very few non-Christians do those things either. If such acts were required to make a person wicked we could all let out a sigh of relief because we are unlikely to encounter many of them. If we are thinking in those terms we are misunderstanding wickedness and are unlikely to recognise it when we see it.

Wickedness in a Christian is not the ordinary sin, falling short, stumbling and inadequacy to which we are all so prone. Such things prove we are all *sinners*, but not that we are *wicked*. To become wicked requires us to go further than that and to keep doing so. Even a mature Christian sins every day in all sorts of ways. Indeed, even the greatest believers such as Daniel, Job, Samuel, David, Noah and Paul were all sinners. But they were not wicked. 'Sin' means to fall short of God's standard, which we all do regularly, but that continual falling short does not mean we are all wicked.

I was discussing this issue with a woman who said "But isn't it judgemental to consider anybody else to be wicked? Aren't we all wicked?" The answer is we are certainly all sinners, but we are not all wicked. To imagine that we are all wicked will create as much confusion as imagining that nobody is. It will also prevent you recognising those who really are wicked. Likewise, the word 'transgression' means to break one of God's known laws or commandments. We all do that regularly, whenever we covet, look upon a woman lustfully, fail to honour our parents and so on.

But doing those things does not necessarily mean we are wicked either. If it did every Christian would have to be classified as wicked and there would be no other categories. What then about 'iniquity', which means *rebellion*? That is getting closer, but it is still something we all do. Indeed, whenever we operate in our *old man* we are in rebellion because our old man, or flesh, is an incurable rebel against

God. So even going so far as to be guilty of iniquity or rebellion does not necessarily mean that a person is wicked.

Sin, transgression and iniquity (rebellion) are all inevitable in the life of every Christian. However, a person is in danger of eventually becoming wicked if he excuses himself when he sins and justifies what he did, fails to confess it, or hardens his heart about it. Likewise, he is in danger if he calls his sin by some other name such as a *weakness, condition, illness* etc, as when a drunkard calls himself an *alcoholic*. The distinction is important, because to be a drunkard is both a sin and a transgression, because the Bible forbids it.

However, to call oneself an 'alcoholic' is to view oneself as having an *illness* rather than admitting to being a *wrongdoer*. If that was true, one would not necessarily be responsible for one's own actions. That approach is misguided and unbiblical because we are fully responsible for what we drink or eat or for what drugs we take and for all other excesses or abuses. An ordinary sinner is also in danger of becoming wicked if he resists and ignores the voice of the Holy Spirit when He seeks to convict him of the wrongness of what he did. Zechariah speaks of this:

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)

An ordinary sinner is likely to become wicked if he lies to himself or others about his own sin, or if he lies to God about it. The same applies if he imagines himself to be immune to, or exempt from, God's judgment. When an ordinary sinner does such things, he eventually becomes so hardened and complacent he no longer thinks about his sin at all, or even notices it. It ceases to register with him or to concern him. In the end he reaches the stage where God completes the hardening process for him by hardening his heart even more, as God did to Pharaoh in Egypt.

If a man has only just started to tell lies he will lie in small ways and do it infrequently. However, if he is casual and fails to deal with his sin, he will progress to the next stage. Then he will lie increasingly frequently, in ever larger ways, and with less and less concern about it. Eventually he will reach a place where he feels no shame or concern about his wrong behaviour, even when he gets caught. Moreover, there will be no concern about the coming judgment, or fear as to how Jesus will deal with it.

He will eventually also lose all love of the truth, such that the truth will cease to matter to him. That is a very dangerous position to get into. Wickedness in the life of a Christian is about sinning in those ways on an *ongoing* basis, *and with those wrong attitudes* listed above. Once you see it this way it is easier to see why there is so much of it, even in churches. Having some knowledge of the truth, and of God's commands, brings greater responsibility and makes our sins a more serious matter than the sins of an unbeliever.

The greater the knowledge, the greater is the responsibility. Accordingly, it is actually within the churches that one would expect to see the *most* wickedness, not the least. The wickedness within churches would be far less common if each church only recognised as Christians those who are genuinely born again, who truly believe and sincerely repent. Instead, most churches do nothing to assess the real spiritual condition of their members, or even of their leaders. Thus the problem of false converts is widespread. They may know some factual information about God, the Gospel and the Bible, but they are not born again or truly repentant.

Nevertheless, it is automatically assumed that they are all saved and part of the real Church. It is rare even to consider such questions, let alone preach about them. It is even rarer for any leader to challenge anybody about whether they are saved. Though it might sound odd, it may possibly be God's view that

there is more wickedness in a particular church than in a prison. When one considers that the men in that prison probably know very little about the Bible, their crimes might well be less severe in God's eyes than the manipulation and lies of Christians, or those who claim to be Christians.

A 'churchgoer' knows that God exists and may also know what He has said about such sins. But the men in the prison may not know any of that. I cannot be sure and I have no clear authority which I could quote to prove that God views things this way. But I do sense that it may be the case and it does fit the overall pattern and principles of God's judgment. For example, we see in the book of James that a teacher of the Bible will be judged with greater strictness than someone who is not a teacher of the Bible:

Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness.

James 3:1 (RSV)

Note also what Jesus says, in the book of Luke, concerning the parable of the faithful and unfaithful servants. If a person is aware of his master's will, then more will be expected of him than of someone who knows little or nothing:

⁴⁷And that servant who knew his master's will, but did not make ready or act according to his will, shall receive a severe beating. ⁴⁸But he who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, shall receive a light beating. Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required; and of him to whom men commit much they will demand the more.

Luke 12:47-48 (RSV)

The example of the life of Balaam, a man used by God to give some amazing prophecies, but who became dishonest and greedy for money

Balaam was a mysterious man who was used by God to prophesy. I say it that way because some people don't think he was a prophet. Whatever he was exactly, he gave some important prophecies, such as in Numbers chapter 24. Yet, he became wicked, as he had a lot of knowledge, but behaved appallingly. Due to his high level of understanding, Balaam will surely be judged more strictly than other men for letting the love of money take over his heart. Peter records how his greed drew him into sin. Peter also confirms that Balaam was a prophet. Yet he still acted wickedly:

¹³suffering wrong as the wage for their wrongdoing. They count it pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, revelling in their deceptions, while they feast with you. ¹⁴ They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! ¹⁵ Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain from wrongdoing, ¹⁶ but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with human voice and restrained the prophet's madness

2 Peter 2:13-16 (ESV)

The account begins with Balak, the King of Moab, offering Balaam money to curse the people of Israel. Initially he refuses, but the temptation takes root. Balak realises that Balaam is tempted and keeps asking him, sensing that Balaam will eventually yield to the desire for money:

⁷ So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand. And they came to Balaam and gave him Balak's message. ⁸ And he said to them, "Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me." So the princes of Moab stayed with Balaam. ⁹ And God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" ¹⁰ And Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent to me, saying, ¹¹ 'Behold, a people has come out of Egypt, and it covers the face of the earth. Now come, curse them for me. Perhaps I shall be able to fight against them and drive them out.'" ¹² God said to Balaam, "You shall not go with them.

You shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.”¹³ So Balaam rose in the morning and said to the princes of Balak, “Go to your own land, for the LORD has refused to let me go with you.”¹⁴ So the princes of Moab rose and went to Balak and said, “Balaam refuses to come with us.”

Numbers 22:7-14 (ESV)

Balaam again refuses, but his resolve is weakening. The desire for money is beginning to affect him, even though he claims to be determined only to do what God tells him:

¹⁵ Once again Balak sent princes, more in number and more honorable than these.¹⁶ And they came to Balaam and said to him, “Thus says Balak the son of Zippor: ‘Let nothing hinder you from coming to me,¹⁷ for I will surely do you great honor, and whatever you say to me I will do. Come, curse this people for me.’”¹⁸ But Balaam answered and said to the servants of Balak, “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not go beyond the command of the LORD my God to do less or more.¹⁹ So you, too, please stay here tonight, that I may know what more the LORD will say to me.”²⁰ And God came to Balaam at night and said to him, “If the men have come to call you, rise, go with them; but only do what I tell you.”²¹ So Balaam rose in the morning and saddled his donkey and went with the princes of Moab.

Numbers 22:15-21 (ESV)

Although Balaam never directly cursed God's people, he did harm them indirectly in the end by revealing to King Balak the best way to undermine them. He advised Balak to tempt the people to worship the Canaanite gods. That idolatry and the sexual sin that goes with it brought God's own judgment on Israel, as Balaam knew it would. Thus he indirectly achieved all of what Balak had wanted him to do to harm the people of Israel:

¹While Israel lived in Shittim, the people began to whore with the daughters of Moab. ²These invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods. ³So Israel yoked himself to Baal of Peor. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.

Numbers 25:1-3 (ESV)

Balaam helped to undermine Israel despite knowing how much damage would be caused, and it was all because he wanted money. He advised Balak how to put a ‘stumbling block’ in their way to get the Israelites to sin, so that God would then punish them. That suited Balak’s purposes:

¹⁶ Behold, these, on Balaam's advice, caused the people of Israel to act treacherously against the LORD in the incident of Peor, and so the plague came among the congregation of the LORD.

Numbers 31:16 (ESV)

¹⁴ But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice sexual immorality.

Revelation 2:14 (ESV)

What Balaam did was wicked. Indeed, it would be hard to think of anything more wicked than to deliberately harm God’s chosen people and to help one of Israel’s enemies, just to get money. This therefore brought God's judgment on Balaam personally and he was later killed during a battle. However he will, one day, face God’s final judgment on the Day of Judgment itself:

⁸ They killed the kings of Midian with the rest of their slain, Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian. And they also killed Balaam the son of Beor with the sword.

Numbers 31:8 (ESV)

False teachers and false prophets in general

Balaam was not unique. There are many false teachers and false prophets like him today who share his love of money and power. Such people creep in to the churches and cause great damage:

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 4 (ESV)

Jude, the physical half-brother of Jesus, says that such false people come in to the churches and mingle with the real believers. They then engage in all their activities, including eating with them at their 'love feasts'. That is a reference to how the church met in homes to eat a meal together. Jude makes clear that such false Christians will receive a severe judgment from God:

¹⁰ But these people blaspheme all that they do not understand, and they are destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively. ¹¹ Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam's error and perished in Korah's rebellion. ¹² These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; ¹³ wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the gloom of utter darkness has been reserved forever.

Jude 10-13 (ESV)

Jesus also spoke about this problem of false prophets:

¹⁵ "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

Matthew 7:15-20 (ESV)

Jesus then goes on to say these very troubling words:

²¹ "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' ²³ And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

Matthew 7:21-23 (ESV)

If you are an insincere, unrepentant person who claims to be a Christian, but without being real, then you are in grave danger. You face God's judgment and an eternity in the Lake of Fire unless you change your direction. But few people in that perilous condition ever do change because they simply do not *choose* to do so. Let that not be true of you. If you are false and unrepentant, and if all you really have is religious tradition, with no real relationship with God, you are already well on your way to becoming wicked. If so, the only solution is genuine, sincere repentance.

How should we relate to wicked people who are inside the church and are apostates?

This is a controversial topic, and it is ignored by most churches. However, the biblical position is that for a person to be recognised as a real believer, and to be allowed to be actively involved in a church, they have to be a *genuine Christian*. That means someone who really has believed, repented, been

baptised in water and received the Holy Spirit. In other words they must be *born again*. That is how the first century church operated. For a person to be treated as a fellow believer in the early Church, they had to *actually be* a Christian, not merely *claim* to be one.

We are not meant to treat unsaved people as if they were real Christians, and therefore our brothers and sisters in the Church, just because they *claim to be*. Look at the way Jesus directly confronted a proud, haughty leader of a synagogue. He did not automatically accept him as a sincere believer. He contradicted him and called him, and others like him, ‘*hypocrites*’. Jesus viewed such false, unrepentant, people as His adversaries, not His friends. He was realistic and was not at all naive:

¹⁰ Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. ¹¹ And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. ¹² When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, “Woman, you are freed from your disability.” ¹³ And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. ¹⁴ But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day.” ¹⁵ Then the Lord answered him, “You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? ¹⁶ And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?” ¹⁷ As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him.

Luke 13:10-17 (ESV)

Today most churches have abandoned the practice of finding out whether new people are genuine believers and thus eligible to be a member of a local church. Virtually anybody is automatically allowed to become part of a church, merely because they wish to join it and claim to be believers. The question of what they really are is rarely raised. Some leaders are afraid to do so in case it causes offence. Others see no need to do it. For many, the issue would not even occur to them. Such a casual or cowardly approach is not biblical. The Church is so immensely important that we must find out whether people are genuine and only treat them as a brother in Christ if they really are one.

We must not treat unbelievers as if they were believers, or permit them to play a full role in a local church, if they are actually *unbelieving, unrepentant and unsaved*. That is even more important if they are *apostate*. That is if someone who used to believe, but has now denied the faith and begun to live in such a way as to discredit the Gospel and the name of Jesus Christ. Either way, such a person is to be classified as what they really are and excluded from fellowship. Consider also what apostle John says about how we should relate, or rather not relate, to those whose doctrine is false:

⁹ Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰ If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into the house or give him any greeting; ¹¹ for he who greets him shares his wicked work.

2 John 9-11 (RSV)

See also what apostle Paul says to the Corinthians:

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— ¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? ¹³ God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”
1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (ESV)

Then look at how strongly Jesus’ half-brother, Jude, speaks about false people who say they are Christians, but aren’t:

¹⁶These are grumblers, malcontents, following their own passions, loud-mouthed boasters, flattering people to gain advantage. ¹⁷But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ; ¹⁸they said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions." ¹⁹It is these who set up divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.

Jude 16-19 (RSV)

This does not mean that sincere *unbelievers* who are still searching for the truth, or considering the Gospel, or who are just our relatives or friends, cannot be involved in the local church. Of course they can attend and take part, as long as it *is clearly understood* that they are currently *unbelievers* and are not yet a member of the body of Christ. We must never regard an unbeliever as if he was a believer, or treat a false believer as if they were a genuine one. So, churches should be welcoming to unbelievers who are sincerely enquiring.

However, they must be assertive with those who claim to be believers, but deny the faith or live in blatant sin, for which they are not repenting. Such people need to be challenged and even put out of the local church if they won't repent. That is regrettable but necessary. If they are not they will eventually ruin that church by undermining its integrity and damaging its people. Their malignant influence will grow within that church like a tumour in a person's body. Sadly, the frankness and courage needed to challenge people can only be achieved if the church is operating in a biblical way.

If it isn't, then it is difficult to see how any of this can be done, or how anybody can even be challenged, let alone excluded. At any rate, the fact is that this isn't actually being done today in the vast majority of churches. They end up as a mixture of all kinds of people, including those who are real and unreal, sincere and insincere, true and false, saved and unsaved. Yet no distinction is made between any of them. That is deeply damaging to the church and will render it powerless, compromised and eventually apostate.

We must therefore identify the false, the apostate and the wicked amongst us and, if they won't repent, put them out of fellowship. We must do that to them not for being unbelievers, but for *falsely claiming* to be believers when they aren't, and/or for living in serious and blatant sin *while* claiming to be a Christian. Their falseness and hypocrisy are the main issues, more so than the underlying sins themselves. Instead, we see vicars and bishops in the Church of England who deny every doctrine or live in sinful relationships, even as active homosexuals, without any repentance.

They even appoint homosexuals to positions of leadership, and they boast about it, as if it was something to be proud of. Yet, far from being removed from positions of authority, they are retained and even promoted. Conversely, a godly man like Nick Howard, a Messianic Jewish believer, and the son of the former Leader of the Opposition in the UK, was refused a position as a vicar in the Church of England simply because he opposes homosexual behaviour.

That indicates how upside down and corrupt much of the Church of England has become. A godly and faithful man like Nick Howard was rejected, whereas Rowan Williams, an outright liberal and also a Druid, was made Archbishop of Canterbury! Like so many other churches and denominations today, the leadership of the Church of England refuses to identify and expel those who do wrong. But they have no qualms about obstructing, and even expelling, those who do right. The only people they consider unacceptable are those who tell the straightforward truth about what the Bible says.