

A Good Church Must be Doctrinally Correct (Part I)

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Bibliology – Beliefs about the Bible

A good church will be correct, first of all, in its beliefs about the Bible. It will believe and teach that the Bible is the inspired Word of the living God. God has spoken. He has not left us to grope helplessly in a blind search for truth. The Lord has given us the Scriptures, His infallible written revelation to man.

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

The expression "inspiration of God" in verse 16 is a translation of a Greek word that might be rendered "God-breathed." It can therefore be said that all Scripture is breathed of God. As the human authors penned the Bible manuscripts, the Lord Himself was breathing (revealing His message) through them.

Yes, we believe that "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God." In fact, we hold to verbal plenary inspiration. But what does that mean?

When we speak of *verbal* inspiration, we mean that the Holy Spirit led the authors of Scripture so meticulously that even the words they used were controlled by Him. He so guided them that they never made a wrong choice. This assures us that the Bible is true in every minute detail.

When we say we believe in the *plenary* inspiration of the Scriptures, we mean that all 66 Bible books are equally inspired. The word *plenary* comes from a Latin word meaning "full." When we affirm our belief in plenary inspiration, we are declaring that the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is inspired of God.

One of the best definitions of *inspiration* I have ever found was given by the Greek scholar Gaussem: "Inspiration is that inexplicable power which the divine Spirit put forth of old on the authors of Holy Scriptures, in order to guide them, even in the employment of the words they used, and to preserve them alike from all error and all omission."

One mark of a good church is its belief that the Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God.

Theology – Beliefs about God

The second way to recognize a good church is to examine its theology; that is, its belief about God. No church can possibly be sound in doctrine if it rejects what the Bible says about God!

We are told in 1 John 1:5 that "God is light." This is a reference to His absolute holiness. The words "God is love" in 1 John 4:8 explain the reason He gives of Himself for the welfare of

His creatures. And the declaration in Hebrews 12:29 that "our God is a consuming fire" reveals Him as One who punishes the evildoer. No teaching about God can be called biblical if it fails to recognize His holiness as well as His love. It must acknowledge His hatred and judgment of sin as well as His pleasure of righteousness. A minister who preaches God's love without ever mentioning God's wrath is not presenting the whole truth.

The Bible also tells its readers that God is one (Dt. 6:4). He is without rival or equal. There is no other like Him. Although God is one, we also recognize the fact that He is the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit--three distinct Persons yet one God. The Father is God. The Son, Jesus Christ, is God. The Holy Spirit is God. And each of these three members of the Trinity is a Person. They have always existed. They are equal in power and knowledge. Yet they are so unified in their essence that they are not three gods but one God.

Christology – Beliefs about Christ

The third key to knowing how to recognize a good church is found in what it believes about Christ. An important guideline for identifying a church that is deserving of your loyalty and support is what it teaches about the Lord Jesus Christ. I'm thinking especially about the church's statement of faith regarding the deity and humanity of Christ.

The Bible teaches that Christ is truly God and truly man. The deity of Christ, for example, is explicitly stated in the opening verse of the gospel of John: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1:1). The Lord Jesus claimed deity for Himself. He said, "Before Abraham was, I AM" (Jn. 8:58).

Jesus is not only God, He is also man. The fact of our Lord's deity and humanity is clearly indicated in Philippians 2:5-8. He was born of the virgin Mary. During His earthly sojourn, He as a man became weary, He was hungry, and He suffered physically. Nevertheless, He was truly God. A mystery? Yes! But a truth we accept by faith. If a church denies the Lord's absolute deity and His genuine humanity, it is not telling the truth about Christ and is not worthy of your trust.

A church that is correct in its Christology will also believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. It will teach that Mary was a virgin when Christ was born. After the angel announced to Mary that she was going to "bring forth a Son," she said, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" (Lk. 1:31-34). It was then that "the angel answered and said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God' " (v.35).

Now, I realize that some theologians will tell you the virgin birth is of small importance in Christian theology. But I strongly disagree! To reject the reality of the virgin birth of Christ involves not only a contradiction of God's Word but also a denial of the deity of Christ and His sinlessness.

When a minister says that Jesus was not virgin-born, he is implicitly declaring that Christ was just another human being. But the Bible makes it clear that the eternal, preexistent Second Person of the Trinity was born of a human mother. God the Holy Spirit supernaturally implanted that life. When Jesus was conceived, the eternal Word began a new

mode of being. He entered Mary's body. He allowed Himself to be born as a helpless baby. But He did so without in any way surrendering His deity. Such a miracle could never have taken place through normal, human generation! That is why the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ is essential to a proper concept of His deity.

The virgin birth of the Lord Jesus is also indispensable to His sinless humanity. If Jesus had been conceived in the normal manner, inheriting man's sinful nature, He could never have

been our Savior. Every human being born into this world (except for Christ) enters it as a sinner, guilty and depraved. We all receive a sinful nature from our parents, they from theirs, those parents from their parents, and on and on, all the way back to father Adam. Every human being born into this world since the Fall is depraved and guilty by virtue of his or her relationship to Adam. We all enter this world as members of a sinful and fallen race.

Therefore, if the Lord Jesus had been conceived in the normal manner, He would have inherited the depravity and guilt of Adam. He Himself would have been a sinner and could not have qualified to be our Savior. But the Bible describes the Lord Jesus as being totally without sin. Peter spoke of Him as "a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Pet. 1:19). And Paul indicated the sinlessness of Christ when he wrote that God "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). To be our sin-bearer, He had to be sinless. The virgin birth is what made that possible.

A church that is correct in its Christology will also believe in the atoning death of Christ. It will teach that Jesus, the sinless One, died on the cross for sinners. Yes, He died as our substitute. According to Romans 4:25, Christ was "delivered up because of our offenses." And in 1 Peter 2:24 we are told that Jesus "Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness--by whose stripes you were healed." Christ died for us. He took our place at Calvary. That's what we mean when we say we believe in His substitutionary death.

A church that is correct in its Christology will also believe that Christ literally arose from the dead. This belief is based on the Bible. "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, . . . He was buried, and . . . He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

Remember, a good church will be correct in its Christology. One way to recognize a church that is worthy of your attendance and fellowship, therefore, is to investigate its teachings about Christ. Does it believe in His deity? His humanity? His virgin birth? His sinless life? His atoning death? His resurrection from the dead? And His personal coming again? So basic are these truths to genuine Christianity that anyone who denies them cannot really be called a Christian!

A Good Church Must be Doctrinally Correct (Part II)

Many people who are looking for a church home have the wrong priorities. Some are drawn to a church by the beauty of its buildings. Others are more interested in its size. Still others are attracted by an outstanding musical program or by the pastor with the most impressive appearance, personality, and speaking ability. Some look for a church with an order of service that appeals to them. Then too, there are those who are drawn to a church because of denominational loyalty, its location, or the people who attend. Others come at the invitation of a friend.

As meaningful as these things may be, however, the most important consideration should be the doctrine of the church. In other words, what does it believe and teach? That's the bottom line. I'd rather be in a church that meets in an old broken-down building with no choir, an out-of-tune piano, and a stammering preacher who teaches the Word of God than attend a church that's proud of its beautiful buildings, magnificent choir, or eloquent minister yet denies or ignores the clear teaching of Scripture and lacks the presence and power of the Spirit of God. What is believed and preached in a church is all-important! So, in this lesson I would like to consider with you several doctrinal emphases upon which there can be no compromise whatever. In the previous lesson we saw how to recognize a good church by its beliefs about the Bible, God, and Christ. Let's look at the following additional key doctrines of a good church:

Soteriology – Beliefs about Salvation

A good church will be correct in its soteriology; that is, in what it believes about the way of salvation. It will proclaim the message of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone (Eph. 2:8-9).

In stating our conviction that salvation is by grace--completely apart from human effort--we are not denying the importance of baptism, church attendance, or living a good life in obedience to the commands found in God's Word. Not at all! All of these things are vitally important. But they are not done in order to be saved. Rather, they follow as the fruit, the result, the evidence of a genuine conversion experience. Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (v.10).

The Second Person of the eternal Trinity, Christ the Son of God, became a member of the human family through the virgin birth. He lived a perfect life, died on the cross to pay the price for our sins, and arose from the dead. And now, because of what He did by dying in our place, salvation is offered to us as a gift. It is received by faith. Church membership, baptism, a moral life, or works of charity--good as all these things are--can do nothing to save us from our sins. Salvation can be experienced only on the basis of what the Lord Jesus Christ did for us as our substitute in life and death. And faith is the link by which the blessings of His provision are received. One poet has written:

*Upon a life I did not live,
Upon a death I did not die,
Another's life, Another's death,
I stake my whole eternity.*

Pneumatology – Beliefs about the Spirit

In answering the question, "How can I recognize a good church?" I would emphasize that it must be correct in its pneumatology; that is, in what it believes and teaches about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has sometimes been called the "neglected Person of the Godhead," and rightly so in many circles. He is also perhaps the least understood Person of the three members of the Trinity.

A good church will recognize the Holy Spirit both for who He is and for what He does. Some people think of the Spirit as being impersonal. They claim He's merely an influence who guides man's conscience. Others view Him as some kind of force programmed into man to give him signals from God. But the Holy Spirit is a Person. He is God. And since He is God, He is also co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Son. So beware of those who deny the personality and deity of the Holy Spirit.

As God, the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is involved in a number of important activities. In fact, the work of the Holy Spirit played such a vital role in the early church that the book of Acts has been called by some "The Acts of the Holy Spirit Through the Apostles." The Spirit of God brings conviction of sin (Jn. 16:8). He imparts the new birth (Jn. 3:5).

He baptizes believers into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13). He indwells individual Christians (1 Cor. 6:19). He restrains sin (2 Th. 2:7). And He equips believers for effective service (Eph. 5:18). Yes, the Holy Spirit makes His home within every Christian. He dwells within to comfort, guide, sustain, and strengthen us, and to bear witness to the truth. Because of His indwelling presence, we can have victory over sin and we can successfully serve the Lord.

Christology – Beliefs about the Church

A good church will be correct in its ecclesiology; that is, in what it believes and teaches about the church itself. The word *church* may refer to either the invisible church or to a local assembly of believers. When I speak about the *invisible* church, I have in mind the body of Christ, which consists of all who have received Him as Savior, regardless of color, race, standing, or denominational label. It's the one true church. The apostle Paul had this in mind when he wrote the following words about God's exaltation of Christ:

[Christ was seated] far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:21-23).

When I speak of the visible church, I'm referring to local assemblies of believers--groups of Christians who meet regularly for worship, instruction, fellowship, evangelism, and the observance of the ordinances. A good church will recognize the distinction between a local and the invisible church. Its members will acknowledge that their assembly or denomination is not *the* only true church. They will not exclude from the body of Christ those believers in Him who don't have their particular ecclesiastical label. Rather, they will see all who have placed their trust in Christ as fellow members of His body, the one true church. They will accept them as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Before moving on, I would like to emphasize the importance of attending and supporting a Bible-believing local church. It isn't enough just to be a member of the invisible church. We must also be identified with a local congregation. We have a responsibility to gather on a regular basis with other Christians for worship, exhortation, encouragement, and edification (Heb. 10:24-25). The faithful preaching of the Word, along with the fellowship of other believers, can do wonders for our spiritual lives.

I am aware, as you are, that local churches are not perfect. I know it's possible for you as a believer to make some spiritual progress without church attendance. You can study the Bible for yourself. You can pray alone. You can grow from reading good Christian literature. But that's not enough. It's certainly no excuse to neglect the church.

If you have been born again and you are not identified with a local church, I urge you, if at all possible, to find a church home. When you do, make sure that the one you choose accepts the Bible as the infallible Word of God, and that it preaches salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God. Then, unless it's impossible because of poor health or some other valid reason, attend that church. Serve in it. Give to it. And pray for it!

Eschatology – Belief about the Endtimes

The final point in helping you to recognize a good church is that it will be correct in its eschatology; that is, in what it believes about the endtimes and the coming of Christ.

The most momentous and far-reaching event in human history was the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ nearly 2,000 years ago. There is much more to the story of Jesus, however, than His first coming. His virgin birth, His sinless life, His bodily resurrection, and His ascension into heaven are all facts of history--but they are not the end of the story. There's much more. That which lies ahead is glorious! The Bible tells us that Jesus Christ is coming again. When He does, we shall see the complete unfolding of God's great plan of the ages.

Then at the name of Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue will "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11).

It is then, as the prophet Habakkuk envisioned, that "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14).

It is then, as Paul told us, that "the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Th. 4:16), and "we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (v.17). When Christ comes again, we shall behold Him--the One who loved us and gave Himself for us.

We shall see Him, the mighty Creator.

We shall see Him, the One who nearly 2,000 years ago came into this world as a baby, born in poverty in a stable in Bethlehem.

We shall see Him, the One who had angels, people, demons, and all nature at His command.

We shall see Him, the One who broke up a funeral procession by giving life to a man who was dead.

We shall see Him, the One who placed His hand on the eyes of a man born blind, removing his perpetual night and revealing the light of day.

We shall see Him, the One who hung on that cruel cross, and when all was fulfilled cried out in triumph, "It is finished!"

At His coming again, we shall behold Him and enjoy the presence of our Savior, our Redeemer and King, the Lord Jesus Christ--forever!

I realize that even within evangelical circles, people disagree about the endtimes. But our differences must never become occasions for division and strife. Rather, let's remember that in spite of our various convictions, as brothers and sisters in Christ we can love one another just the same. The important thing is this: We agree that Jesus Christ is coming again. Any church that denies His personal return as an actual, future event falls short of the standards for measuring a good church.

In addition to its belief in the second coming of Christ, a good church will also recognize the reality of both heaven and hell. Bible-believing Christians are looking forward to a beautiful place called heaven. Based on their faith in God's Word, they anticipate with delight the joys that await them in their eternal home. And this hope brings healing to the wounds of their earthly existence and quenches their sorrows.

A good church not only believes in a place called heaven, but it also warns unbelievers of a real place called hell. The loving, gentle Lord Jesus Himself spoke of that place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched" (Mk. 9:48). And He gave this word of warning:

Do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him! (Lk. 12:4-5).

If you believe the Bible, you simply cannot avoid the fact that there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. One of the marks of a good church is its belief in and its scriptural teaching about both places.

Are you a member of a good church? Are you faithful in attendance? Do you give it your support? If you are a Christian, you should.

A Good Church must be Evangelistic Outreach in Spirit

In looking for a good church home, you should make doctrine a matter of primary concern. But you should look for some other things as well. So, as we continue our study on how to recognize a good church, I would like to call your attention to several additional marks that identify the right kind of church. It will have:

An Evangelistic Emphasis

A good church will recognize the importance of bringing lost souls to Christ. The Lord Jesus Himself announced that "the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Lk. 19:10). The very fact that the earthly ministry of Christ culminated in His death and resurrection, which made possible our redemption, indicates the great necessity of leading men, women, boys, and girls to Christ for salvation. A good church will have an evangelistic

mission. It might also have a deep social concern for the physical and material needs of people; but if that becomes its primary mission, and evangelism is given a back seat, then its priorities have been confused. A sure sign of a good church is a burden for lost souls.

Now, I'm not saying that the right kind of church has to have an "altar call" at every service without exception, or that it must schedule week-long evangelistic crusades at least once a year. Please don't misunderstand. I agree that these things are commendable, but I also feel that the evangelistic burden of a church can be demonstrated in other ways. This need may be filled through home Bible studies, the personal witness of its members, radio and television outreaches, home visitation programs, and other ministries that may be appropriate to a church in its own community.

In a rapidly changing world, we must always be alert to new methods and means of reaching the unsaved where they are. In the most effective manner possible, we must communicate to them the good news of the gospel. Our basic message must remain the same, but the means of presenting it may vary from church to church.

A Missionary Outreach

Closely related to evangelism is missions. A good church will have a strong missionary outreach. It will have a global concern. Jesus told His followers to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mk. 16:15).

As followers of Christ, we are to spread the glorious news of redemption to men and women everywhere. The last words of the Lord Jesus before His ascension were these:

You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

A good church will be missionary-minded. If it isn't--if it is so self-centered that it's occupied exclusively with its own interests--it will fail in doing its part in reaching the world with the gospel.

A Regenerated Membership

In addition to being evangelistic and having a global perspective, a good church will have a regenerated membership. The membership roll of a church provides a helpful clue as to whether or not it's worthy of your identification with it. If a church membership includes unsaved people (good as they may be, and of the highest reputation and respect in the community), beware! If it welcomes into its membership men and women who have never been born again, it is not a good church.

Again, please don't misunderstand. We should encourage the unsaved to come to church, to hear the Word, and to be confronted with the good news of God's saving grace. But to receive them as members before they are saved and to give them a voice in the affairs of the church is to stain its purity, compromise its principles, and diminish its power.

The apostle Paul commanded:

Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will dwell in them and walk among them. I will be their God, and they shall be My people." Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you" (2 Cor. 6:14-17).

Even though unbelievers are to have no involvement with believers in the work of the church, it is well to remember that churches are not exclusive "spiritual clubs" for perfect Christians. If they were, they would all be empty! I like the little slogan, "Please be patient with me, God is not finished with me yet." In fact, that's why every one of us needs the church.

A church is not a mutual admiration society for sanctified saints. Rather, it's a place where spiritual babies can grow, where the weak can become strong, and where we mature as believers through worship, instruction, fellowship, and service.

Having said that, I would underscore the point that the leadership of a church must possess certain spiritual qualities. That's why Paul, writing to Timothy, his young son in the faith, gave certain qualifications for elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:8-13).

A Biblical Message

Finally, a good church will have a biblical message. It will be a place where the Bible is believed and faithfully preached. Paul wrote to Timothy:

I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and the dead at His appearing and His kingdom: Preach the Word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching

ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

Paul said, "Preach the Word!" And that's one of the first things you should listen for when looking for a church home. Is this a place where the Word of God is preached and practiced? Or are the messages from the pulpit mere moral sermonettes intended to tickle the ears of fickle Christians? Are the messages mere expressions of the preacher's opinion, or are they proclaimed with the authority of the Scriptures behind them? Is there not only "milk" for spiritual infants but also "solid food" for those who have matured in the faith? Paul said, "Preach the Word!" And that's exactly what is done in a good church.

In some areas, a church like that is hard to find. The time has come when, as Paul predicted, people "will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables" (2 Tim. 4:3-4). In many churches today, preachers are giving their people what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear.

Sorry to say, this is happening not only in churches but in some para-church ministries as well. Their spokesmen studiously avoid offending anyone. They capitalize on popular themes. They endeavor to make their audiences feel good about themselves. Those who look to them for spiritual guidance are pacified with pleasant thoughts, but they are failing to receive instruction and correction from the Word of God.

Before I conclude this lesson, let me give you five qualities that are characteristic of the members of an ideal church:

1. The members of an ideal church are loving. Speaking to His disciples, Jesus said:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (Jn. 13:34-35).

True fellowship involves loving with a selfless desire for the good of others. It's reaching out to those who need the encouragement of genuine love.

2. The members of an ideal church are caring. In his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul compared individual believers to parts of the human body and expressed this desire:

That there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it (1 Cor. 12:25-26).

Caring includes such activities as praying for one another, visiting the lonely, ministering to the sick, and comforting the bereaved. Through prayer and the practical demonstrations of loving and caring, we fulfill the biblical admonition, "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). Sorrows are lessened and joys are increased when others share them. It's encouraging for a believer to know that his brothers and sisters in Christ are praying for him. How wonderful it would be if every member of the church really felt cared for!

3. The members of an ideal church are forgiving. This is an important element of Christian fellowship. Believers in Christ should be ready at all times to forgive those who have wronged them.

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you (Eph. 4:32).

To forgive is desirable in all of our relationships. But within the circle of believers, it is especially important. An unforgiving attitude can kill the spirit and stunt the growth of a church.

4. The members of an ideal church are forbearing. The apostle Paul, writing to the Ephesians, indicated to believers that they were to walk "with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love" (Eph. 4:2). If we are really "bearing with one another in love," we are patiently making allowance for the weaknesses of others. Irritability and impatience are selfish responses, totally out of keeping with Christian character.

Oh, I know that some church members like to be in the limelight. I'm aware that some folks are overbearing. I realize that some always need a pat on the back and that others wear their feelings on their sleeve. Rather than losing patience, mature Christians will help them overcome their weaknesses.

5. The members of an ideal church are submitting. We often like to quote Ephesians 5:22, which says, "Wives, submit to your own husbands." But we fail to note the preceding verse, which indicates that we all should be "submitting to one another in the fear of God" (v.21).

We recognize, of course, the proper line of authority in the home and in the church. Wives must submit to their husbands (v.22), and members of the church must submit to their leaders (Heb. 13:17). The key to successful mutual submission, I believe, can be found in the last part of 1 Peter 5:5, which tells us to "be clothed with humility." We must adopt the attitude of Romans 12:10, "In honor giving preference to one another." Philippians 2 exhorts us:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself (v.3).

No one, regardless of his position, should ever think himself to be above accepting advice from others. No matter what a person's authority may be, he should manifest a spirit of humility, a willingness to respond graciously, and an openness to receive wise counsel. If a spirit of mutual submission were practiced in our churches, what a difference it would make!

If you are not in a good church, I urge you to do something about it and the sooner the better! You need the fellowship, the instruction, the worship, and the opportunities for service that the church alone affords. Don't miss out on the blessing!

Marks of a False Church

In some circles, the mere mention of the phrase *religious truth* is certain to arouse a variety of responses. Some people feel so strongly about their beliefs that they would rather die than change their minds. To the opposite extreme, you often hear comments like this: "It really doesn't make any difference what you believe, just so long as you believe something." Some say it's a private matter and that everyone's entitled to his own belief. Others claim that you can't be sure of anything when it comes to religious truth anyway.

But is that really the case? Definitely not! You *can* tell the truth! You *can* rightfully maintain that some religious ideas are true and others are false--on the basis of what the Bible says. As God's revelation to man, it tells us what to believe and how to live. It gives us a measuring stick by which we can judge the accuracy and reliability of all religious statements. And when it comes to the question of my eternal destiny--whether I abide with God forever in heaven or apart from Him in everlasting judgment--I want to know the truth with absolute certainty!

Yes, I believe with all my heart that the truth can and must be discovered in the Word of God. The Bible is the final authority for the Christian, the one who knows the Lord Jesus Christ as his personal Savior.

I would warn you, however, that not everyone who calls himself a Christian is genuine. A number of groups have appeared on the scene representing themselves as having new, final religious truth. But they

don't. These groups are a distortion of historic Christianity and pose a great threat to all who would place their confidence in them.

These groups often attack the church for some failure or error even while they themselves are leading people astray. And unless you are careful and discerning, it's possible for you to be fooled by them. They often use the same terminology that Christians use. They believe in some of the same things. They often meet in churchlike buildings and carry Bibles. As a result, they have misled many. Their false teaching has been accepted as truth by their undiscerning followers. That's a tragedy, because contrary to what some may say, what we believe is vitally important--as important as the destiny of our eternal soul.

Faced as we are with so many different religious opinions and groups, it is essential for us to know how to tell the genuine from the counterfeit. Treasury agents are given intensive training in preparation for their work. As part of their instruction, they are taught to be on the lookout for counterfeit money. To help them do so, they make a thorough study of the genuine bills, not of the phony ones! This is done so that when a fake is seen, it will be recognized at once because of its contrast to the real thing.

We can learn a lesson from this. It is helpful, of course, to be knowledgeable about the cults and to be aware of their false and dangerous dogmas. But we should also be so well acquainted with the truth as we find it in God's Word that when we encounter that which is not genuine, we will detect it immediately. We must study the Bible and become so familiar with the real thing that we will perceive anything counterfeit at once.

Many unsuspecting souls are being led astray into the cults and isms because they are not aware of what they are getting into. The only way to prevent this is to indoctrinate them so completely with the truth that they will automatically recognize the false when they hear it.

For example, if a person really understands salvation by grace, he won't fall for the teachings of those who inject human works into the plan of salvation. If he is well instructed concerning the person of Christ, he won't be led astray by those who proclaim Him to be less than God. If he knows the truth about His second coming, he won't be taken in by those who distort "that blessed hope" and make it mean something other than the personal return of the Lord Jesus. Let's be so familiar with the real thing that we can detect the counterfeit at a glance!

Just as there are both genuine and counterfeit currencies, so also there are both the real and the false within Christendom. Just as the best way to identify counterfeit money is to be thoroughly familiar with that which is genuine, so also one of the best ways to guard against counterfeit religion is to be as knowledgeable as possible about the truth of God's Word.

With that in mind, we have been focusing on biblical doctrine--the teachings that are basic to evangelical Christianity. Any believer who is thoroughly familiar with Christian belief will recognize the counterfeit at once.

Even though this is true, before I conclude this booklet on how to recognize a good church, I want to tell you how to recognize a cult. Together with an awareness of the marks of genuine Christianity, a review of some characteristics of false religions will make you even more sensitive to error. Here then are five characteristics of cults, five beliefs that are at odds with the historic Christian faith:

A Lack of Historical Perspective

Some groups have appeared on the scene within the recent past and made the bold assertion that they alone know the truth and that everyone should follow them. They somehow forget the nearly 1,900 years of church history that preceded them. Claiming a monopoly on spiritual light, they imply that the church has been stumbling along in darkness all this time. But that's not the case! There has always been the right person at the right time to safeguard the truth and purify the church. Great theologians and reformers like Luther, Tyndale, the Wesleys, Calvin, and others have given of themselves to preserve the

faith and uphold the Scriptures. In spite of that fact of history, some false teachers today discount the work of yesterday's theologians and assert that they alone have finally discovered the truth.

A Distorted View of Scripture

We come now to a second characteristic of cults. Their followers often distort the Scriptures. Although they purport to believe in the Bible as God's Word to man, some groups refuse to accept the Bible as it is. They add something to it and claim a new divine revelation. They place alongside the Bible some other work that they assert is equally authoritative.

Some of these groups publish a special interpretation of the Bible. They then instruct their followers never to read the Bible by itself but to interpret it by their own literature. This suggests, of course, that the Bible is too deep or ambiguous to be understood by the average person, and that it needs the explanation their group alone has to offer.

When someone tells you he has a special formula to unveil the secrets of the Scriptures, that he has some new revelation from God recently discovered, or that it was translated from some unknown, ancient source--watch out! The Bible was given to everyone, and all can understand its basic message. It has been tested and tried in the crucible of history and experience, and it has been proven true. It does not need someone's additional revelation or secret interpretation!

A Desire to Cause Division

A third mark of a cult is a spirit of divisiveness. True Christians who are walking in obedience to the Lord Jesus feel a bond of unity with their fellow believers--regardless of minor differences in interpretation or religious practice. They may argue about certain issues, but they still recognize that they are brothers and sisters in Christ. Off-brand religionists, however, often attack or try to discredit Bible-believing, gospel-preaching churches and ministers. If a church member accepts their criticism, he is then encouraged to leave his church, even though it's one that adheres faithfully to the fundamentals of the faith.

Christian friend, I warn you against those who promote discord and division within the body of Christ. The apostle Paul spoke against false teachers, referring to them as "savage wolves" who "rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:29-30). In Ephesians 4, Paul urged believers to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (v.3). And writing to fellow believers in Rome about false teachers, Paul said:

I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple (Rom. 16:17-18).

So whenever you hear someone spewing out accusations against Bible-believing, gospel-preaching churches or ministers, be on your guard.

A Tendency to Major on Minors

Some groups that do not represent historic Christianity are so busy riding some religious hobbyhorse, trying to prove that they are right and everyone else is wrong, that they lose sight of the overall perspective of biblical revelation. The apostle Paul indicated to Timothy that we should not "give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which cause disputes rather than godly edification which is in faith" (1 Tim. 1:4).

Beware of a person who gets "hung up" on minor matters, who tries to impress you with his superior knowledge, or who attempts to convince you that you must add some work to your faith in order to be saved. If some minor point of belief or religious practice is more important to him than the major doctrines such as the deity of Christ, the Trinity, or the second coming of the Lord Jesus, be sure to turn a deaf ear to what he has to say.

A Return to Past Errors

Many false teachers revive doctrinal errors that have long ago been repudiated by the church and mix them with their beliefs. They may, for example, reopen the old Arian controversy that claims Jesus is not an eternal but a created being. Or they may revert to the legalists and say that salvation must be partly earned. Or they might return to the old heresies that distort the truth about the Trinity or question the true humanity of Christ.

These issues were settled long ago by the church. The early leaders met in special councils to work them out, and there is no reason to doubt their decisions. To revive these things is unnecessary. To make matters even worse, it adds to the confusion already existing in the minds of the untaught.

Yes, the proliferation of religious ideas being presented to the public today is cause for being on guard. It may come by radio or television, through the distribution of literature, or from people knocking on your door. They will all claim to have the truth. Review the five marks of a cult. They serve as a good test by which you can measure the credibility of those who approach you with their religious beliefs. Along with a clear understanding of the truth itself, keep these five errors in mind and you will recognize the counterfeit when you see it.

What you believe is of vital importance. This is especially true when it comes to the way of salvation. The Bible says:

By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

Salvation is received through faith. And that faith must be in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not enough just to believe something--you must believe in a person: Christ Jesus the Lord. Accept what the Bible says about Him--that through the shedding of His blood on Calvary's cross He paid for your sins, and that He arose from the dead--and receive Jesus Christ as your Savior. He said:

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Mt. 11:28).

He also promised:

He who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life (Jn. 5:24).

That life can be yours!

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16).

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