

Church Apostasy: Where do I Fellowship?

Introduction

If there's one question I get asked more than any other it is this: '*All the churches around me are apostate in one form or another; where can I fellowship with other true believers. What can I do?*'. It is not just the UK; I get asked this question by citizens of all sorts of countries around the whole world. It is also asked by all sorts of people: young and old, strong and weak, men and women, former church leaders and non-leaders. This is how great the modern falling away of the churches is, as predicted by Paul (2 Thess 2:3-12).

Now I don't have any earth-shattering answers, but I do have some advice and we do need to evaluate how serious this situation is so that we can get the relevant issues into perspective. The usual advice that leaders give to such people is often bland, superficial, unthinking and fails to take into account the higher priorities of God.

Knowing the times

One of the important features of a true believer is to know the signs of the times; to be aware what is really going on in the world in which we live. What is important in one world situation is not in another.

This was necessary in the times of the Old Testament:

The sons of Issachar who had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do. 1 Chron 12:32

and Jesus confirmed that it was just as necessary in his time:

He answered and said to them, 'When it is evening you say, "*It will be* fair weather, for the sky is red"; and in the morning, "*It will be* foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening". Hypocrites! You know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot *discern* the signs of the times.' Matt 16:2-3

Hypocrites! You can discern the face of the sky and of the earth, but how *is it* you do not discern this time? Lk 12:56

Thus what is right in one time may not be right in another; or what is normally right may be a lower priority than what is currently necessary.

Knowing when obedience to God's prior will may override God's general will

There are priorities in the will of God. There are times when God's will A must be subservient to God's will B. This requires wisdom and knowing the times.

A simple example is that God's people must not be violent; in fact God hates violent men (Ps 11:5). Yet God's word also tells fathers to discipline their sons with a rod when necessary (Prov 13:24), which is a violent act by definition. God tells us to love our enemies (Matt 5:44) and yet tells us to hate his (Ps 139:21-22). God tells us not to be angry in self-indulgence or when we are affronted (Ps 37:8) but to be righteously angry when God is offended (Eph 4:26).

The Israelites were given a worship system through the Tabernacle to obey all the time; the offering system was 'perpetual' (Lev 3:17). Yet when Israel's worship had been polluted by idolatry and hypocrisy God stated that he did not want such offerings but rather a pure heart of devotion (Isa 1:11; 1 Sam 15:22; Ps 51:16-17).

The Sabbath law was given to Israel as a 'perpetual' covenant (Exod 31:16); yet when the reality of the rest of God came with Christ, the shadow of the Sabbath was no longer relevant and it passed away, to be replaced by 'The Lord's Day' (Sunday).

Believers need to get wisdom through experience and know what the current will of God is in any situation. The obvious, external law may be overridden by a more important and higher law.

Example: rejoicing and grieving

It is normally right for God's people to rejoice in him always (Phil 4:4); but there are times when God declares that rejoicing must be held back and grieving occur instead:

In that day the Lord GOD of hosts called for weeping and for mourning, for baldness and for girding with sackcloth. Isa 22:12

There were many times in Israel that grieving was necessary, such as in times of national sin and apostasy; times of national distress and war; or when the Ark of the Covenant was taken away. Rejoicing in such circumstances would have been wrong.

Thus men of God were found to be lamenting when necessary:

When someone important had died:

Jeremiah also lamented for Josiah. 2 Chron 35:25

When the nation was in rebellion to God:

Gird yourselves and lament, you priests; wail, you who minister before the altar; come, lie all night in sackcloth, you who minister to my God; for the grain offering and the drink offering are withheld from the house of your God. Joel 1:13

When the nation was in repentance for sin and implored God for help:

Let the priests, who minister to the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar. Joel 2:17

When under conviction for personal sin:

Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and *your* joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up. Jm 4:9-10

Come now, *you* rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon *you!* Jm 5:1

Therefore, there is a time for every purpose under heaven:

To everything *there is* a season, A time for every purpose under heaven: A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck *what is* planted; A time to kill, And a time to heal; A time to break down, And a time to build up; A time to weep, And a time to laugh; A time to mourn, And a time to dance; A time to cast away stones, And a time to gather stones; A time to embrace, And a time to refrain from embracing; A time to gain, And a time to lose; A time to keep, And a time to throw away; A time to tear, And a time to sew; A time to keep silence, And a time to speak; A time to love, And a time to hate; A time of war, And a time of peace. Eccles 3:1-8

People must ascertain what is going on in their time and what God's prior will is.

Example: obeying and resisting authority

It is normally right to obey the authorities that God has put in place in the world and the church:

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. Rm 13:3-5

Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Heb 13:17

However, if these same rulers demand obedience to laws that offend God and are unrighteous, then the believer must resist those laws and refuse to obey:

Peter and John answered and said to them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard'. Acts 4:19-20

Peter and the *other* apostles answered and said: 'We ought to obey God rather than men'. Acts 5:29

Understanding the times and what the will of God is

So, understanding the times is exceedingly important. There will be occasions when you must do right by doing something that may seem wrong or out of the ordinary.

Those who live by legalistic rules and regulations cannot cope with this but the man who lives in total dependence upon God and lives in the fear of God will have wisdom and understand what do to in the right time.

This was demonstrated in the life of Jesus who constantly went against all the prevailing notions of the religious leaders, apparently breaking God's laws (e.g. Matt 12:1-6); but in fact he was obeying higher laws and everything he did was obeying what his Father was doing in heaven.

This is the problem when unthinking leaders demand that you attend a local church (which is certainly God's general will) but who fail to take into account that all the local churches are apostate. God's prior and more important will is that you do not associate with such churches. Attending an apostate church to satisfy some leader would actually be a sin against God.

There is no doubt that God's word, in hundreds and hundreds of places tells believers not to associate with darkness, with sin, with error, with unrighteousness, with idolatry, with doctrinal heresy, with deception, with hypocrisy, with satanic things. God's demand for holiness supersedes all other lesser demands. For example:

Blessed *is* the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful. Ps 1:1

I have not sat with idolatrous mortals, nor will I go in with hypocrites. I have hated the assembly of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked. Ps 26:4-5

Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evil. Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn away from it and pass on. Prov 4:14-15

I did not sit in the assembly of the mockers, nor did I rejoice; I sat alone because of Your hand, for You have filled me with indignation. Jer 15:17

I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offences, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. Rm 16:17

I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. Yet I certainly *did* not *mean* with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner -- not even to eat with such a person. 1 Cor 5:9-11

Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them. Eph 5:6-7

We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us. 2 Thess 3:6

If anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. 2 Thess 3:14

Do not ... share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure. 1 Tim 5:22

If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, *even* the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which accords with godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a *means of gain*. From such withdraw yourself. 1 Tim 6:3-5

For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! 2 Tim 3:2-5

Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds. 2 Jn 1:9-11

There is one verse that tells you not to avoid church fellowship; there are thousands that tell you not to associate with evil, error, false teaching, corruption, unrighteousness and false brethren. We will develop this later.

The importance of fellowship and meeting together

At this point we have to declare that meeting together is vitally important and deliberately avoiding fellowship for selfish reasons is wrong. I make no bones about this; it is one of the glorious privileges of being a Christian – fellowshiping with God's people.

Furthermore, deliberately and wilfully avoiding meeting with other believers is sinful.

And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as *is* the manner of some, but exhorting *one another*, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. Heb 10:24-25

Now I could write a long paper on all the reasons why we should meet together, but that is not the purpose of this paper and I have done that elsewhere. Perhaps I can just list some of the reasons and make no comment:

- Firstly, we meet as a local church in a house in order that the dynamics God has established in the church can be effectively obeyed. Large meetings cannot comply with what God tells us that church is. The Biblical precedent is that every church was a house church - there is no other.
- We meet to celebrate the Lord's Supper every week; that is the prime reason for gathering.
- We meet to mutually edify one another by sharing the gifts that differ.
- We meet to express love to one another and bear one another's burdens.
- We meet to be the family of God; an interdependent community.
- We meet to manifest the testimony of God to the angels (not the world).
- We meet to read the word of God and be edified.
- We meet to hear proper, didactic instruction in true doctrine.
- We meet to expound the whole counsel of God.
- We meet to give thanks to God.
- We meet to pray and intercede.
- We meet to sing praise to God.
- We meet to admonish one another.

Note that the NT does not primarily tell us that we meet to worship God. It is expected that believers are worshippers all the time and the concept of going somewhere to worship is played down.

Also note that there is no mention in the NT of any instrumental music because this is forbidden for the church as Old Covenant emotionalism. There was no church instrumental music for centuries and none at all in Reformed churches until the mid-19th century. Leaders who approve of instrumental music need to ask themselves why there was none in apostolic churches. This is not the place to discuss this issue further.

The sin is 'forsaking' fellowship

The sin in Heb 10:24-25 is that of forsaking fellowship; this is a deliberate abandoning of fellowship. This is truly a great sin and is evidence that a person is not truly saved. 'Christians' that have no desire to meet with other Christians cannot be truly saved. However, there are thousands of people today who are godly but who do not attend a local church. These folk have not forsaken fellowship at all; in fact they long for fellowship, probably more than folk who go to church and never contribute at all (which is also a great sin as the writer shows even in these verses).

It is no sin to avoid churches if they are apostate. It is a sin to forsake fellowship.

Interim conclusion

Without doubt it is God's will that Christians meet together every Sunday and other times as possible. Fellowship is important and it is in fellowship that we are truly built up. There should be no lone Christians.

Yet there are circumstances today which can prevent Christians from meeting together. If these circumstances are serious enough, then they override the law to gather together. The most important of these circumstances is apostasy in the church. If the churches around you are apostate, you should not attend them. Another reason would be sickness that prevents you from attending a meeting. God does not hold you guilty if you cannot attend due to a sickness that he has given you.

The argument over what apostasy is

What is apostasy?

The argument is to determine what apostasy is. Many folk will say that their church is not apostate, when it is. There are really two measures involved in discovering what is apostate.

The first is the word of God. Scripture shows us very clearly what apostasy is by giving us sound teaching on every necessary issue (2 Tim 3:16-17). Churches which ignore or contradict those teachings are apostate.

The second is individual conscience. The problem is that some people fail to see the importance of certain Biblical teachings for one reason or another and consider themselves to be sound when they are not. Many churches consider themselves to be sound when they are not. Thus it is down to the individual to obey his conscience in the fear of God.

So, two issues determine what apostasy is: God's word and my conscience in the light of that word. No man can demand that you follow his interpretation; you must be fully convinced in your own mind (Rm 14:5).

There are also historical guidelines that help us determine the truth; but these are not divinely authoritative. These are the historical creeds, confessions, catechisms and theological works of great men. Now while some of these differ on some points, we have a general consensus on key issues, even from theological works from different stables.

Example

Let us take the matter of the doctrines of grace, which are fundamentally important teachings that relate to our salvation.

God's word makes it eminently clear that grace is sovereign under God and that salvation is of the Lord. It is given to those God chooses in eternity and calls in time. It is these for whom Christ died and no one else. These are given irresistible grace, called in time and given faith and repentance to be converted. They are then preserved by the grace and providence of God until the end. This is generally called Calvinism or Reformed theology.

Now this is the basis of the Biblical Gospel. A church not teaching this properly is an apostate church – end of story.

Now there are many famous evangelical churches, and even some with leaders who call themselves Calvinists, who do not teach this accurately (they are Amyraldians or worse). Most Christians would think that you are wrong to dislike their churches because of their historic reputation; however, since they are not teaching the doctrines of grace Biblically, then they are apostate and I would not be part of them.

It matters nothing how great a name a preacher has got or how famous the church is, or even how sound it used to be. If God's word is being corrupted and it is doctrinally flawed, then it is apostate by definition.

The current apostasy

The situation before us today is that nearly every aspect of the church that I mentioned earlier is either not functioning at all in modern churches or has been corrupted. Virtually none of the aspects of Biblical church are being carried out in modern churches.

What happens is that there is a wide variety of heresies and aberrations of practice. Thus we can itemise the groups of problems as follows:

- **Doctrinal:** errors of doctrine; false teaching or corruption of teaching. There are a wide variety of problems in this area, from severe heresies to more minor issues.
- **Practice:** aberrations of practice. Again there are a wide variety of these and they stem from false doctrines. Not meeting in a house is one example; all Biblical churches met in a home and nowhere else. Charismatic worship times with the backing of a loud rock band is an error of practice. One common error is failing to celebrate the Lord's Supper every Sunday.
- **Leadership:** unbiblical leadership offices and functions; again a wide variety. Unbiblical offices would include an 'apostle' having authority over multiple churches or any office implying mediatorial authority. Styles of leadership errors would include any type of leader that imposes authoritarianism on the church; another error would be women leaders. Single dominating leaders are unbiblical. False leadership functions would include lesser leaders that have no Biblical precedent, such as worship leaders; cell group leaders etc.
- **Behaviour:** this would include all forms of unrighteousness and sin in the church and leadership. For example: there are many apostate leaders in the modern church that have committed adultery, abandoned families, committed homosexual sins, or are drug abusers and alcoholics. Many of these are still famous practising leaders.

Corruption of conservative evangelical churches

The best of the evangelical churches simply fail to obey the principles that God has laid down in his word for meeting together. They do not meet in a house. They are too formal and rigid and thus have no spiritual life because they do not operate as a family but rather as an organisation. They restrict individual fellowship and gifting. They are focused upon a single man dominating the proceedings, which is the opposite of what a church should be. They have instrumental music as central in their service.

In many cases evangelical churches are not really evangelical (Bible-based). They fail to preach a true Gospel. Their theology is corrupt and often heretical. They are bound by the traditions of men. They fail to properly teach the Bible. They have compromised with the world. Many of them are ecumenical to some or other degree.

Amongst these there are a small number that are less corrupt. There are a few that teach sound doctrine, such as the doctrines of grace, and some have sincere, godly leaders. Yet all of them are bound by traditions and do not meet in houses. All of them use instrumental music and even the best of them are corrupted by Charismatic songs. Virtually all of them follow the single leader model, which is unbiblical. Pretty well all of them follow an unscriptural clergy-laity split.

This is the best of what is out there!!! Is it any wonder that people have no sound church to attend?

Corruption of less evangelical churches

Outside of the conservative churches there is total mayhem. Amongst these I include Charismatic churches, Pentecostal churches, Emerging churches, Messianic churches, institutional denominations (e.g. Anglicans, Roman Catholics), sectarian churches (e.g. Adventists, Christadelphians), cults, heretical denominations (Methodists etc.) and so on.

These are filled with multiple heresies, wickedness and aberrations. If the reader does not understand this then he shouldn't be reading this paper, which is about what to do in the face of modern church apostasy. I have exposed these errors for decades, as have many others. They are filled with corruption. Some are filled with paganism while others are riddled with occultism. Most have no clue what the Gospel is and the sheer number of historic heresies that they teach is shocking.

Professing Christians

The reality today is that theology and the Gospel have been so corrupted that the majority of people in modern churches are, in my opinion, not really saved at all; joining such churches would not be fellowshipping with brethren but joining with the world.

For example: take a look at the published testimonies of people 'converted' through the Alpha Course. These are shocking. They affirm that they were converted as a result of feeling emotional after falling over in a mystical trance and such like. There is no evidence of conviction of sin, repentance, remorse for their past life; no talk about obedience to God and being morally changed; no talk of following the Lordship of Christ and so on. This is why many people supposedly converted in an Alpha Course later fell away. Is it any wonder that Roman Catholics endorse the Alpha Course just as much as supposed evangelicals?

Jesus warned us that this would occur and told us that many are called but few are chosen.

What we cannot do

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? 2 Cor 6:14-15

Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose *them*. Eph 5:11

If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another. 1 Jn 1:6-7

'Darkness' means: night darkness or darkened eyesight and blindness; thus metaphorically ignorance respecting divine things and human duties, and the accompanying ungodliness and immorality.

Darkness is not just referring to pagan and demonic things; it can refer to anything that is a twisting of God's truth. A lie is darkness. False doctrine is darkness. Unorthodox teaching is darkness. Abberational church practices are darkness. All the situations that prevail in the modern apostate churches are darkness because they are not of God and therefore not of light – they are darkness.

God's word is very clear that we cannot fellowship with darkness. Now darkness is anything that is not in the light; anything that is not the pure light of God in Christ is darkness. That means that anything that has deviated from the truth is darkness. Anything

that is not founded upon God's word is darkness. Anything that has been even slightly corrupted by demonic doctrines is darkness. Anything less than Christ is darkness.

Now some people are clear that they cannot associate with certain things and yet do fellowship with darkness. The average Christian's tolerance for darkness is astounding.

So, most Christians would not fellowship with known sin. Most would not associate with obvious heretical movements. Most would not be part of something fraudulent; yet many modern Christians associate with all sorts of darkness.

Examples of apostate denominations

There are many that claim to be born again Christians that are part of Anglican churches or Roman Catholic churches. Are these darkness? Yes they are. We cannot itemise all their heresies, but a few include, regarding RC's: worshipping Mary; having a mediator in the place of Christ; claiming that a man can be infallible (which is idolatry); re-sacrificing Christ in the mass and so on. Regarding Anglicans, even if your local vicar is supposedly evangelical he has committed himself to the laws of the synod by an oath before God. Anglicanism supports liberal theology (where some bishops have even denied that God exists), Gay marriage, Gay clergy, women priests, though male priesthood itself is a denial of the priesthood of all believers; and so on. These are all darkness. No Christian can be a part of these denominations.

Now most Christians would agree with this, but some sincere people still remain in these churches.

Other churches are not much better.

Examples of gross errors and heretics

If I were to explain the heretical positions of every denomination this paper would become a large encyclopaedia. I cannot do that here. I will just mention a few items to illustrate the point.

The Toronto Blessing

The Toronto Blessing was a movement of gross darkness and demonic activity that affected hundreds of UK churches. One of Satan's objectives is to bring paganism and occultism into the evangelical church to fill it with idolatry and iniquity so that it becomes paganised. The Charismatic Movement generally has been a vehicle for more and more paganism and occultism. I have written on this many times.

The Toronto Blessing was a massive deception, which overran Charismatic and other churches (ironically some classical Pentecostals rejected it) which brought overt paganism and occultism. The hideous behaviour phenomena were straight out of kundalini yoga, which is a radical Hindu practice that follows the same process: produce a passive audience; inculcate mystical hypnotic suggestibility, then release psychotic responses from aroused deep emotions. This is pure paganism. The results were clear evidence of a satanic deception: split churches; split families; broken marriages; people plunged into mental ill health; in some cases there were physiological traumas, such as broken bones from falling over chairs; guilt; falling for deeper heresies and so on. This is all deep darkness.

Despite this, there are sincere Christians that still attend churches that were fully given over to the Toronto Blessing, a proof that such churches were deceived for many years (in fact most are still in this deception today). This is a case of sincere believers attending an apostate work.

Todd Bentley

Todd Bentley is a classic case of a false prophet who is a purveyor of pure satanic deception and behaviour. I wrote an expose of him at the height of the Lakeland 'Revival' based upon his doctrine, his antecedents, his ministry, his character, and his behaviour. It was obvious that he was false; a wolf with bad fruit. Despite this hundreds or thousands of churches supported him. Many famous UK Charismatic leaders supported him, even in writing on their websites. Shortly after the revival peaked it was revealed that he had committed adultery and then left his wife. Despite this obvious sin, most Christians and leaders continued to support him until his fame gradually died away. Some gullible fools would watch his services night after night on their computers.

Now I have yet to see a church leader that supported him apologise for this and publicly repent. Despite encouraging their people to follow a demonic ploy, they have not repented and sought to repair their flock. Any leader in this position is also a false leader and you should have nothing to do with him. At the very least this indicates that the leader has no wisdom whatsoever and is unqualified to lead God's people. Yet thousands of people still follow such false leaders.

I know of one very famous Charismatic leader who not only endorsed Todd Bentley but also endorsed the Kansas City Prophets, when they were full of errors and some were guilty of sexual abuse. He also endorsed Paul Cain, letting him teach gross errors in his church and supporting him when he was a long-term homosexual and alcoholic. No one has challenged him to apologise and he has not publicly repented. This leader is a dangerous false teacher and hopelessly confused, despite his winsome appearance. Deception spreads and those who look to him for leadership are damaged when he endorses wolves.

Any leader that refuses to apologise for mistakes made in ministry is a false leader.

Examples of milder errors

Mild errors are still darkness because they are not in the light of God. Only what is the pure light of Christ is light; anything less is darkness.

Some would hold that local ecumenism is a mild error that they can tolerate but this is a mistake. A little leaven leavens the whole lump and all forms of ecumenism are corruption.

Thus when your pastor invites a known heretic, or a leader of an apostate church, to preach in your church this is ecumenism. When you are asked to join a regional celebration meeting that includes heretical churches, that is ecumenism. When your pastor sits in association with known heretics in a leader's fraternal, that is ecumenism. When your church is formally allied with a heretical para-church association, even if you never go to any of their meetings, that is ecumenism. When your church comes under the auspices of a denomination that is heretical, that is ecumenism.

I declare that all this is something that warrants leaving such a church. You cannot remain in something that is ecumenical. The first stages are but the thin end of the wedge; the ecumenism will develop. Yet I know of many people who stay in situations where this is going on, sometimes in famous churches that have a name for being thoroughly evangelical.

Leadership

Let me give you an example of a demonic doctrine that every church follows. [That demonic doctrines would plague the end-time church see 1 Tim 1:4.]

Jesus tells us that the leadership structures of the world are not to be followed:

But Jesus called them to *Himself* and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave -- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many'. Matt 20:25-27

Leading in the church is to be based upon service (bottom-up) and not formal authority (top-down):

And He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all'. Mk 9:35

Jesus also explains that all the works of the world are evil:

The world cannot hate you, but it hates Me because I testify of it that its works are evil. Jn 7:7

John tells us that the things of the world originate with Satan:

We know that we are of God, and the whole world lies *under the sway of the wicked one*. 1 Jn 5:19

Revelation explains that everything in the world is deceived by Satan.

The Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world. Rev 12:9

So we have worldly leadership and church leadership, which are opposites. Worldly leadership works on a pyramid hierarchy system, which emanates from the demonic hierarchy used by Satan. As a worldly system it is evil, according to Jesus. However, church leadership is based on service and the leader being at the bottom supporting everyone else. Furthermore, Jesus demands that we do not call church leaders by any formal titles of respect (Matt 23:8), because everyone in the church is a brother.

Leadership that follows the world's model is actually demonic. This leadership structure is seen in military groups,¹ commercial companies², government systems, public service bodies and every form of human activity. It is a demonic system that Satan has stamped on the world. On the contrary, church leadership, that of elder, is based on being supportive in a family.

Pretty much all modern churches follow worldly leadership templates based on authority, formal respect, and even formal names.³ According to God's word, this leadership structure is demonic and evil. It is darkness. Therefore, no one should be part of a church that has this authoritarian structure. Even more conservative churches that have this structure: minister or ruling pastor - elders - deacons - congregation, are following a worldly pattern.

This is how apostate modern churches really are: they meet in unbiblical buildings. They operate on an organisational dynamic instead of an organic family model. Their leadership structure is worldly, demonic and evil. They operate with an unbiblical clergy-laity split. Single leaders dominate the church while the gifting of ordinary members is crushed. And this is before we highlight severe errors of doctrine and practice. The very basic fundamentals of modern churches are ungodly.

¹ Commander in chief; major general, generals, down through colonel, major, captain etc. etc.

² CEO, MD, VP, Director, Group manager, middle manager, junior manager, supervisor etc.

³ 'Pastor', 'reverend', 'vicar', 'apostle', 'prophet' etc.

Other errors

Other forms considered being milder or acceptable errors are: Arminian theology; Dispensational theology; Jewish Root theology, Messianic Christianity; Amyraldism etc. Practices that are tolerated include: psychoheresy counselling, deliverance ministry, sacramentalism, worship leading, rock bands, women's ministry (at all levels) and much more.

The true position is that anything not formally condoned by God's word is wrong; absolutely anything. This is called the Regulative Principle and it was the basis of historic Reformed churches. All of the above would thus be forbidden on this principle.

Separate from darkness

God's word is very clear – we must separate ourselves from darkness. Thus it behoves every Christian to discover what is light and what is darkness and then take action.

In practice today it means that Christians must disassociate themselves from all apostate churches; and that effectively means almost every church in a locality. In most cases it includes every church in a locality.

Let me explain my local situation as an example. These are my options:

- Formal, traditional Anglican that is not evangelical.
- Semi-Charismatic Anglican community church with women leaders.
- Liberal Anglican.
- Traditional Roman Catholic.
- Methodist.
- Radical Charismatic of various sorts, e.g. Vineyard, New Frontiers etc.
- FIEC church that has no pastor, no life, no prayer meeting, no Bible study and is mostly people in their 80s.
- Liberal Baptist Union with woman leader.
- Supposedly evangelical Baptist Union that is semi-Charismatic and riddled with errors.
- Supposedly evangelical Baptist Union that is Messianic Christianity.
- Emerging Church.
- Elim Pentecostal.
- Various sects.

Most of these churches also hold an Alpha Course, which is an indication that they have no theological understanding, no knowledge of the Gospel nor any fear of God.

I cannot attend any of these and keep a clear conscience.

As I say I get queries from all around the world where godly people have also struggled with this and have examined all local options, only to find that there is nowhere they can attend and keep a clear conscience.

What are they to do?

What do we do?

Now we come to the purpose of this paper. In the face of the fact that the modern church has abandoned the word of God and apostasy is all around us, what do we do? It is the churches that have left God, not godly people leaving the churches.

Is there a decent evangelical church nearby, even if some things are wrong?

Now, radical as I am, I am not against attending a church that has minor things wrong; it is a question of priorities: what is wrong and what is good? Does the good outweigh the bad? Are the errors minor or major? Can you cope with them? Fellowship is so necessary and loneliness so debilitating that putting up with some minor errors is worth getting good fellowship.

If the church has a number of good brethren who fear the Lord, and a leader(s) who loves and obeys God, then it may be a good idea to join them, even if there are some faults with doctrine and practice and even if they meet in a dedicated building with pews.

However, if their underlying theology is wrong and their Gospel is corrupted (such as by Arminianism, Amyraldism, Pelagianism, Socinianism) then attending would be unrighteous. Also if their worship is Charismatic and mystical then attendance is impossible.

Is there a decent church that you can commute to?

Now, in general, I am opposed to travelling long distances to churches because they are meant to be local expressions of God. However, in apostate times like these, needs must.

If there is a good church, or even a moderately good evangelical church, within reasonable travelling time, then go to that.

Can you gather some saints together at home?

It is far more preferable, considering the church situation, to gather like-minded people in someone's house for private informal fellowship.

Now this need not be a church at first, but a social gathering to pray, support each other, and fellowship together, especially over a meal, and then to break bread together.

They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers. ... So continuing ... and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart. Acts 2:42-46

Now if a person comes among the group with a gift of teaching, the meeting can begin to formally consider itself a church since: it teaches apostolic doctrine, breaks bread, encourages prayer, edifies the brethren in common and has open fellowship. Who knows where this can lead in God's grace?

However, if there is no teacher, the group can continue to be an encouraging place of fellowship until God gives more opportunities.

If you can't gather anyone at all on Sunday

First, pray for like-minded, godly brethren.

Secondly, if there is absolutely nowhere you can fellowship, then meet with God alone in prayer and Bible study. Devote yourself to God on Sunday and seek to do good.

AW Pink was of the mind in his days (pre-1950s) that the church then was so apostate in the UK that he severed himself from churches and met alone with his wife. What he would think today is anyone's guess since the church is a thousand times more apostate than in his day; things have occurred that Pink would not have believed possible.

Now it is easy to criticise Pink and just say that he was wrong (which many do) but he took a difficult, principled stance, and continued with his writing ministry. Now it is a fact that God blessed that written ministry and Pink's works are amongst the very best that you can read. God blessed Pink's books (that were collated together by others from series articles) more than virtually any other modern person. There is no doubt that Pink's works are some of the most challenging, blessed, practical, godly and Biblical studies that you can find (apart from a few of his earlier works tainted with Dispensationalism before he rejected it). There is no way that God would have blessed the fruit of Pink's later ministry if he were doing something wrong regarding church life.

Until you can find like-minded brethren, spend a significant part of Sunday reading and praying. If you are married, then you can also celebrate the Supper together. Perhaps you could also invite people for dinner and use this as an evangelistic opportunity. Prayer, Bible study, the Lord's Supper and evangelism are all good works.

Biblical and historical examples

Times of Israel's idolatry

During periods of severe idolatry in Israel under a corrupted king, the whole worship system fell into pollution. It was not just a case of a few people sacrificing to Baal on hilltops, groves, or private shrines, but the offerings in the temple were sacrificed to foreign gods by corrupt priests following the king. Everything was polluted.

Therefore, saints that feared the true God could not sacrifice animals in the usual way by bringing a sheep or goat to the temple in Jerusalem. Even the annual feasts could not be attended due to the corruption by the priests. Multiple prophets describe and condemn this idolatry (Isa 1:11; Jer 6:20; Amos 5:21; Mic 6:7).

This was a case where true Israelites had to stay at home and not be part of the national worship system.

Under the reign of Ahab and his evil wife Jezebel, Elijah was raised up by God to challenge this syncretism and destroy the 450 prophets committed to Baal. Since godly people were not visible (they were not attending public rituals) Elijah thought that he was alone in following Yahweh. However, God explained to Elijah that there were 7,000 other true believers hidden away worshipping at home (1 Kg 19:18) including 100 prophets protected by Obadiah in two caves.

Dissenters

After Charles II outlawed Reformed religion in England, 2000 ministers were ejected from their churches and livings and Reformed believers were persecuted. In time this fuelled the emigration of believers to America to develop free religion outside of the King of England's direct control.

Very godly men, who had previously pastored churches, were led to form house churches outside of the national system. John Owen, the great theologian, was one of these; he pastored two house churches in his lifetime.

Before little house churches were formed, Reformed believers got their fellowship informally where they could in private meetings in homes.

Scotland's killing times

In this period Presbyterian believers, known as the 'Covenanters' (from signing the Solemn League and Covenant, 1643) were outlaws for their religion when Charles II and James VII enforced the episcopal system upon Scotland. Public meetings were forbidden on pain of prison, banishment or even execution. James Guthrie was just one leader executed for teaching the truth.

As a result, all Scottish Presbyterians could not attend church meetings and resorted to illegal gatherings in barns, woods, and caves. British troops searched for these illegal meetings and arrested anyone found, while travelling preachers, like Alexander Peden, had a price on their heads.

For such folk, meeting in an Episcopal church would have been apostasy. Their consciences demanded avoiding that and suffering great hardship and even death for their faith.

The Dark Ages

During this period Europe only had one formal church – the Roman Catholic Church under the pope. This was before the Reformation when Bibles became available in national tongues and great preachers explained the doctrine of justification by faith.

The original UK Celtic church was worn down after the Synod of Whitby (664) and the expressions of simple Christianity in Celtic towns gradually disappeared as the Roman Church took over.

For nearly a thousand years the only available church to most Europeans was something utterly apostate and, in many periods, grossly wicked. During this time many people gathered together in small house churches and some of these formed into movements.

One of the better known groups is the Waldensians who sought to meet in simple ways and teach the truth of the Bible. However, there were a number of other groups, most of whom have had their name sullied by their Roman Catholic conquerors who needed to condemn them as heretics after massacring whole populations.

Since these groups tried to meet as secretly as possible, we cannot delineate their history. What is clear, however, is that from the very beginning of Roman Catholicism there were faithful groups that met in homes or in woods, all over Europe, because they would not attend an apostate church.

Interim conclusion

The point is that there have been many times when apostate churches were in the ascendant and faithful believers were forced to meet outside of the formal church system in order to be faithful to God. Sometimes these formed house churches and sometimes these churches gathered into a unified movement through the leadership. At other times people just met in whatever way was possible, very informally, to fellowship as best they could.

The dark days that we are in today are no different. For most of church history many people have been forced to fellowship under very difficult conditions due to persecution, prolonged war, absence of leaders, absence of Bibles, and apostate churches prevailing. Only a few western nations have experienced peaceful conditions of religious toleration that lasted more than 200 years.

Conclusion

In our day we have two competing commands from God:

1. We must meet together as a local church.
2. We must not meet with apostate believers, under apostate ministry in an apostate church.

This means that, for many people, there is no local church to attend and this poses difficult problems.

Those who do not attend church for Biblical reasons should not be condemned and are not guilty of breaking God's law; they are obeying a higher law of God.

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