

A NEW CHRISTIAN'S GUIDE TO THE CHURCHES

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1: Introduction

Why are there so many different kinds of churches and groupings of churches ('denominations') in Britain today? In my home town of around 9,000 people, there are two Church of England churches, a Roman Catholic church, two Baptist churches, a United Church, a Community Church and a church which simply calls itself a 'family friendly Christian community'. There is also a Quaker meeting house. What, if any, difference is there between them? What do they each stand for? And if you were new to the town, or to the Christian faith, how would you choose between them?

This booklet aims to provide some introductory answers to questions such as these. It will explain briefly how the main denominations in England and Wales emerged and for what reasons and will then give some indication of what they each stand for today. (The church scenes in Scotland and in Northern Ireland are rather different from that in the rest of the United Kingdom, for historical reasons. This booklet focuses on the position in England and Wales.) The ultimate objective is to help Christian believers to choose a church near them which will provide genuine spiritual help – where reliable, biblical teaching can be found and true Christian fellowship enjoyed.

The only way to understand why we have so many denominations today is to approach the question historically. What follows is therefore a very brief overview of the history of the church, focusing in the later centuries on events in England and Wales. This will demonstrate what the distinctives of our main denominations are and what they stand for. Towards the end of the booklet, the various historical strands will be drawn together and some summary advice is provided about finding a reliable church to attend.

2: Why are there different denominations?

The New Testament

You will find no reference in the Bible to different Christian denominations. In New Testament times, there was just one church, united under the leadership of the apostles. The apostles had been appointed by Jesus Christ to govern, teach and direct the church. The unity which the early church enjoyed was thus rooted in the teaching of the apostles. The church was to remain faithful to this apostolic teaching, until the return of Jesus Christ at the end of this age. The church was not to add to or subtract from this teaching, or deviate from it in any way.

The apostles' teaching is now found in the various books of the New Testament: the four gospel accounts of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the letters written to various churches and individuals and the book of Revelation. These twenty-seven books preserve for us the entirety of the authoritative teaching of the apostles and, together with the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, make up the Bible. The Bible is the only authoritative document which is to govern both the life of the church and the content of its teaching.

It is the church's responsibility, therefore, to ensure that it abides by the entirety of the teaching (or 'doctrine') of the Bible. Sadly, this proved to be a cause of contention even in New Testament times and has continued to be so ever since. The New Testament itself tells us of people who tried to distort or contradict the apostles' teaching. We see in the book of Acts and in the letters of the New Testament clear evidence of such false teaching being introduced into churches and, in some places, enjoying considerable success. This gave rise to serious conflict between these false teachers and those who wanted to follow the teaching of the apostles.

False teaching

An example of this can be found in chapter 15 of the book of Acts, which recounts events occurring only a few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There we read that some men had come to Antioch, where there was by that time a flourishing church, and had started to teach that Jewish circumcision was essential for Christian salvation (Acts 15:1). They insisted that Gentiles (non-Jews) had to be circumcised according to Old Testament law if they were to be saved. The church leaders in Antioch had serious discussions with these teachers about what they were saying and, in the end, the church

sent two of their number – Paul and Barnabas – to Jerusalem to discuss the matter thoroughly with the apostles and the church there. The result of that debate was clear and conclusive: circumcision was not a requirement for being a Christian.

Yet some people continued to teach exactly the opposite. This can be seen from some of the letters written by the apostle Paul, where the same issue reverberates: what are the terms on which someone becomes a Christian and, specifically, does it require (for males) circumcision? Paul had to work very hard to make absolutely clear that the Christian answer to this question was, as settled in Acts 15 (above), negative: the only requirement for someone to become a Christian was faith in Jesus Christ. Those who taught a different message could not be recognised as true Christian teachers and were therefore to be avoided at all costs. They were not continuing in the apostles' doctrine and the churches had to reject them.

False teaching emerged in New Testament times on other subjects as well. The apostle John had to deal with people who were denying that Jesus Christ was a genuine human being. John had to be very blunt: anyone who does not teach that Jesus Christ has 'come in the flesh' (in other words, is a true human being) is 'not from God'; in fact, John says, he is 'antichrist' and one of the 'false prophets' (1 Jn. 4:1-3). James, leader in the Jerusalem church, had to deal with some who were arguing that if salvation is obtained simply by faith alone, then good works are of no consequence. In his letter in the New Testament, James argued in response that good works were indeed a necessary part of the Christian life, although they played no part in obtaining the forgiveness of sins and salvation (Jas. 2:14-26).

Warnings

The apostles, like Jesus Christ before them, therefore had to urge Christians constantly to be on their guard against error. Paul alerted his young assistant Timothy to the Satanic origin of false teaching, warning him about those who 'depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared' (1 Tim. 4:1-2, ESV). The apostle John warned the churches of the need to 'test the spirits', by which he meant they were to test whether the teaching that they were hearing conformed to the apostolic teaching or whether it was false teaching. If the latter, they were not to follow it (1 Jn. 4:1). In a subsequent letter, John warned that false teachers would sometimes be in a position even to take over a church and prevent true leaders from operating (3 Jn. 9-10).

Constant vigilance is necessary, therefore, to ensure that a church's teaching remains biblical. Every effort is to be made to resist and exclude false teaching. If that proves impossible, the Christian believer's duty is to seek out a church where biblical, apostolic truth is taught.

We see, then, that the church in New Testament times was a battleground where Christians had to be constantly vigilant in the defence of the truth. If that was the case while the apostles were alive, it is no surprise that it continues to be the case throughout church history and today.

It is because of this constant battle between truth and error that we have so many churches and denominations today. They are, in effect, the historical evidence of past battles over doctrine. In order to understand what they stand for and why they exist, therefore, we need to explore some avenues of the past two thousand years of church history. The rest of this booklet sketches out some of the key issues which have given rise to the church scene which we know today.

3: The age of the Church Fathers

During the period to about 500AD, the church had to resist challenges from false teaching of many different kinds, such as:

- the content and integrity of the whole Bible as God's Word
- the triune nature of God: that he is one God only, subsisting in three 'persons' – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit
- the full deity and true humanity of Jesus Christ
- the sinfulness of all humanity, as a result of Adam's disobedience in the Garden of Eden.

These are essential and foundational truths of the Christian faith. In those early centuries, pastors and theologians known as the 'Church Fathers' argued for biblical truth in these and other areas. They left behind a body of writings which still today help us understand biblical teaching on these and other vital aspects of Christian teaching. Many of the truths that they defended were encapsulated in creeds agreed by all sections of the early church – for example, the Apostles' Creed (not written by the apostles, but intended to summarise important parts of apostolic teaching), the Nicene Creed (on the deity of Christ) and the Chalcedonian Creed (addressing the manner in which Christ is both God and man). Those documents remain essential for defining central biblical truths of the Christian faith.

4: The medieval Church

In New Testament times, the church was neither wealthy nor powerful. It also had to endure periods of severe persecution. All this started to change in 312AD, when Constantine was victorious at the Battle of Milvian Bridge, just outside Rome, and became Emperor in the Western half of the Roman Empire. He was able to consolidate his power in 324AD when he became ruler of the entire Roman Empire. Constantine was converted to the Christian faith through a vision of the cross with the words, 'In this sign, conquer', which he claimed to have seen before the decisive battle of 312AD. As sole Emperor, ruling from his new capital of Constantinople, he brought persecution of Christians to an end and began to endow the church with funds to build impressive buildings, institute richly ornamented ceremonial and reward church leaders with power and prestige. Suddenly, it had become a positive advantage to be a Christian, with opportunities of advancement in one's career for those professing the Christian faith.

Although Christians were relieved that persecution had come to an end, the effects of Constantine's policies towards the church in the long run were disastrous for biblical Christianity. Over the centuries that followed, the church in western Europe accumulated more and more wealth and power until, by the high middle ages (c. 1050-1300AD), it was claiming to exercise more power even than kings. The church had become a pan-European institution ruled from Rome and under the authority of the Pope and his advisers. Hence it has become known as the Roman Catholic (in the sense of universal) Church. It was enormously wealthy and its influence reached into every corner of western Europe. Wealth and power have never done the church much real good and it was not long before their corrupting influence was felt in the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

Church services. Over the centuries, church services had become more and more elaborate. They were dominated by the clergy, leaving the ordinary people little to do except to stand, listen and watch. Even that was increasingly difficult, as screens were constructed between the part of the church where the clergy were performing and that part in which the people stood. Services were in Latin, which was originally the language spoken by many in the Roman Empire but was over the centuries understood by fewer and fewer in the congregation. Although the music and the ceremony could be very pleasing to eye and ear, services became devoid of anything that most people could actually understand, let alone participate in.

The Bible. These problems were compounded by the fact that the Bible officially recognised by the church through much of this period was in Latin. Few people outside the small body of educated clergy had the ability to check whether what was being done or taught in church was biblical. Increasingly, poor training and education meant that many priests had little more knowledge or understanding than the congregations to whom they were supposed to minister. The result was a church mired in superstition and unbiblical teaching and practices.

Doctrine. It was during the high middle ages that the church's teaching in a number of areas was formalised in a manner quite different from the teaching of the New Testament. Some of the unbiblical teachings and practices thereby endorsed and promoted were:

- prayers for the dead
- the veneration of, and prayers to, Jesus's mother Mary and the 'saints'
- the idea of purgatory as the place where most Christians go when they die
- the highly elevated status of the Pope
- the blasphemous notion that the very flesh and blood of Jesus Christ become physically present in the consecrated bread and wine at the Eucharistic mass.

Salvation. Under the influence of teachings such as these, salvation eventually came to be viewed as something which was available only through the institution of the Roman Catholic Church, via the official ministrations of a duly ordained priest and subject to the fulfilment of all kinds of ceremonies and other actions which are nowhere to be found in the New Testament.

This rather bleak picture is not the whole story. Throughout this period, there were undoubtedly many ordinary men and women who had a genuine, simple faith in Christ and who sought to live lives, as best they knew, in accordance with the teachings of Christ. At certain periods, more biblical groups such as the Waldenses in northern Italy or the Lollards in England became sufficiently influential to make their mark in the history books. Individuals like John Wyclif in Oxford and Jan Hus in Bohemia raised strong protests against significant aspects of the church's unbiblical teaching and practices. They were, however, unable to alter the overall ethos prevailing in the church as a whole. By the start of the 16th century, the church was ripe for reformation.

5. The rise of Protestantism

Most of the churches that you will encounter in Britain are Protestant – including the Church of England, Baptist and Methodist churches and Pentecostal and charismatic churches. ‘Protestant’ means protesting. So what are, or were, these churches protesting against?

For the answer, we have to return to the early 16th century and to a German friar named Martin Luther. Luther, a conscientious member of the Roman Catholic Church, was extremely troubled by his sins. He was not guilty of very great sins such as murder or adultery, but he was very conscious that in all kinds of ways his life was not what it ought to be in the sight of God. Accordingly, he used every means that the Church provided to find forgiveness. These included frequent confession of sin to a priest, which in Luther’s case used to go on almost interminably. It also included penance, which under the Roman Catholic system involves the performance of some religious act, such as an extended time of prayer or fasting, or some act of charity. Once the required penance was properly performed and so long as the penitent was truly sorry for his sin, he could obtain pardon from the priest. Luther’s problem was that he could never be sure that he had been sufficiently sorry for his sin, or that he had confessed all his sins or properly performed all the penances required. He found himself in a thoroughly miserable condition and could see no way out.

It was at this very low point that Luther came to a fresh understanding of a key section of the New Testament. In his letter to the New Testament church in Rome, the apostle Paul sets out in systematic fashion the message of salvation that he preached. In the course of this, Paul speaks about the ‘righteousness of God’. At first, this terrified Luther, for it was God’s righteousness, as he saw it, that condemned him for his sins. But then he came to understand more clearly what Paul was saying: that God’s righteousness was in fact the means by which God saved sinners - by faith alone, the righteousness of God is accounted to the sinner who puts his trust in Jesus Christ. Forgiveness is not something that the sinner can or should try to work for. It is a free gift of God, by his grace, to all who believe on Christ. For them, Jesus has died on the cross to bear the punishment for their sins, the punishment which they would otherwise have to bear themselves. But because Jesus has died, every believer in Christ is freed from all the guilt of their sin and is ‘justified’ – accounted perfectly righteous – before God, for all time. So, for the believer, there is no longer any condemnation: his or her sins are all forgiven. Salvation is by faith alone in Christ alone.

None of this was taught by the Roman Catholic Church of Luther's time: Luther had to discover this for himself, directly from his study of the Bible. Once he grasped it, however, his former fears were replaced by irrepressible joy in God and there was no stopping him. Through his preaching and writing, the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone spread throughout Germany and then the rest of Europe. It resulted in Luther's excommunication from the Catholic Church. Those who followed Luther in his rediscovery of the biblical teaching of justification began to meet to listen to the preaching of this and other biblical truths. The movement of Reformation which Luther thus unleashed spread rapidly across Europe and became known as Protestantism.

6: The Reformation comes to Britain

The effects of the Reformation (as this movement became known) varied, however, across Europe. In Spain, Portugal and Italy, for example, Protestantism was effectively quashed early on by the Roman Catholic Church and governments sympathetic to it. Those countries remain predominantly (though not exclusively) Roman Catholic as a result. In Britain, by contrast, the Reformation took deep root. How did this come about?

The Protestant Reformation in England and Wales was advanced at first for political reasons: **Henry VIII** wanted to find a legitimate way to rid himself of his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, who had borne him no male heir. Henry wanted instead to marry the lady at court with whom he was smitten, Anne Boleyn. Catherine was a deeply devout Roman Catholic and, moreover, aunt of the powerful Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Despite all Henry's efforts, there was no way in which he could persuade the Pope to proclaim his marriage to Catherine null. He found, though, that some Protestant clergymen and civil servants were more ready to validate his marriage plans and support him in a total break from the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. This is the direction he accordingly took, persuading senior clerics as well as Parliament to recognise him as the supreme head of the English church, answerable to no authority outside his realm. So the Church of England was born.

This is why, in practically every part of England and Wales, a parish church building can be found, often dating back to medieval times. Originally, the building would have belonged to the Roman Catholic Church and the services and personnel belonging to it would all have been thoroughly Catholic. As a result of Henry VIII's actions, however, they have for almost 500 years belonged to the Church of England (or, in Wales since 1920, the Church in Wales). Under the leadership of Henry's Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, the services conducted in Church of England churches began to be thoroughly transformed and Protestant forms of service introduced. The doctrine and practice of these churches were now to be conformed to and governed by the great biblical truths rediscovered at the Reformation and Roman Catholic errors were to be discarded.

7: Puritans and Dissenters

If the Church of England was to implement the Protestant Reformation in England and Wales, why are there so many Protestant churches in our cities, towns and villages which are not Anglican – Baptists, Methodist and others? To answer this question, we need to continue to track the history of the church in this country. For while there were many in England and Wales who were happy to see a Protestant Church of England established under Henry VIII, they saw this as merely a starting point, rather than a desirable goal. Although a good beginning had been made under Henry, there was, in the eyes of many Protestants in this country, much further to go if a Church of England that was truly faithful to the biblical pattern was to emerge.

The accession of Henry's son, **Edward VI**, in 1547 was therefore greeted with joy by reformers. Though a young man, Edward was personally committed to the Protestant faith and he gave great encouragement to further reformation in the church. In this, he and his advisers were influenced significantly by the ongoing work of Protestant reformation carried on by John Calvin in Geneva and by other European reformers. These men were seeking to build on the foundations that Luther had laid and to carry through a thorough biblical overhaul of all aspects of Christian doctrine and practice.

Tragically, Edward's life was cut short by fatal illness and in 1553 his half-sister **Mary**, daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, succeeded. Mary had no love for Protestantism. She reinstated Roman Catholicism as the religion of the nation and instituted a violent persecution of Protestants. Her reign proved no longer than that of Edward, however, and in 1558 the daughter of Henry and Anne Boleyn came to the throne. **Elizabeth I** was to rule for almost 45 years and brought a much-needed stability to the nation.

The church under Elizabeth

Elizabeth was determined that her realm should be firmly Protestant, but it would be Protestant on her terms. Those who believed that further reformation was needed in the Church of England (often called 'Puritans') would be deeply disappointed. Despite repeated attempts by clergymen and others to persuade Elizabeth to allow further change in the Church, she remained unmoved. As a result, elements of the services of the Church of England retained aspects of Roman Catholic ceremonial and liturgy to which many objected. Perhaps most seriously of all, Puritan ministers found that the detailed liturgy prescribed was

so lengthy that it left insufficient time for the preaching of God's Word. As Puritans considered preaching to be the central feature of worship, Elizabeth's policy caused considerable unrest.

Discontent over these issues had two consequences which were of great significance for the future church scene in England and Wales. Firstly, considerable numbers of clergymen in the Church of England simply refused to comply with those aspects of the liturgy with which they disagreed. Although they were sometimes harassed and occasionally punished by the authorities, there were many who operated in this way: they became known as 'nonconformists'. Others, however, came to the view that they must pursue reform outside the confines of the national church altogether. This was a high-risk route, as it was illegal to meet for church other than in the Church of England. Nevertheless, significant numbers began, towards the end of the 16th century, to meet in secret to worship in what they understood to be a biblical manner. They were known as 'separatists'. Frequently, these groups were discovered and penalised by the authorities, but they persisted.

The 17th century

After Elizabeth's death in 1603, these various pressures resulted in a much more openly varied church scene in this country. Groups known as Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists began to emerge. Initially, their status under the law was at best unclear and they were often harassed by the authorities. The 17th century, however, saw huge political, social and religious changes in the nation, including civil war, the beheading of the king, the proclamation of a commonwealth and then the restoration of the monarchy. By the end of the century, the Church of England was no longer the only Protestant church in the land and many people were meeting for worship, not now as nonconformists in the Church of England or secretly outside it, but openly and legally in formally established Baptist, Congregational and Presbyterian churches.

What do these terms mean and why did they become so significant? They have principally to do with the manner in which the church is governed.

The Church of England is governed by bishops, with each bishop being responsible for the churches within a geographic area (a 'diocese') of considerable size. Above the bishops are two archbishops – of York and of Canterbury – and above them is the monarch, who is supreme governor of the church. This means that the State, in the form of Parliament, has some

say in the laws and policies which govern the established church. The Church of England holds regular synods, where representatives meet to discuss and agree policy and laws governing the church as a whole. The Church of England is the established church of England, which means that it enjoys certain privileges not available to other churches and is regarded, at least in theory, as the church to which everyone in England belongs, unless they opt out.

Presbyterians believe that the churches should be governed by elders – usually a combination of lay elders and ordained ministers. They hold regular assemblies at which individual churches are represented, where questions of policy, doctrine and practice are discussed and decisions made which can be binding on local congregations.

Congregationalists believe in the absolute independence of each local church, which is governed ultimately by the decisions of its own congregation (though on a day-to-day basis the minister or other church officers will generally take routine decisions). Though representatives of the churches may meet to discuss matters of common concern, such meetings have no authority over individual congregations.

Baptists have similar beliefs to Congregationalists on the subject of church government. They differ, however, (as their name suggests) from all the other denominations discussed above on the question of baptism. Whereas other churches will generally baptise infants of church members, Baptists consider that a person should be baptised only when they themselves profess personal faith in Jesus Christ and show evidence of a truly repentant life. While most of the churches named above will baptise either by sprinkling water on the person's forehead or pouring water over them, Baptists tend to baptise by immersion – lowering the person into a pool of water and bringing them up again.

While these matters of baptism and church government are issues of secondary importance, compared with the central truths of the Christian faith, they are nevertheless important questions for those who believe that the Bible has specific teaching in these areas which should be obeyed.

By 1700, then, the church scene in Britain was beginning to look quite similar to what we see today in our towns and villages: there was the parish church, belonging to the Church of England; then there were chapels belonging to

Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Baptists (collectively known as 'Dissenters'). Until the end of the 17th century, these Dissenting chapels (as they were known) could generally be relied on to teach biblical truth. The differences between them were, in the main, the questions of baptism and church government summarised above. Biblical teaching could also be found in many Church of England churches. However, the 18th and 19th centuries were to bring important changes: unbiblical teaching of various kinds spread through both Anglican (Church of England) and Dissenting churches and, once again, new churches and movements arose to champion the biblical, apostolic faith.

8: Revivals and Downgrades: 1700 - 1900

Error and revival

Over the next two hundred years, Christianity in Britain experienced movements in two different directions. Firstly, serious error began to infiltrate and, in some cases, take over churches. Some started to question the reliability of Scripture. There was a serious movement in some quarters to undermine and then deny the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of original sin came under attack and some people questioned the full deity of Christ. As a result, over the course of the 18th century, Christians became far more aware of the need to search out churches and chapels where they would find good, biblical teaching. It was no longer sufficient simply to look at the name over the door.

But, secondly, the 18th century saw a remarkable resurgence of biblical Christianity. Through the preaching of men like George Whitefield and the brothers John and Charles Wesley, thousands of people across the country were converted to Christ and began to attend meetings regularly and enthusiastically. To begin with, they tended to meet in informal groups and were encouraged to continue to attend the Church of England services as well. Increasingly, however, they found that they were not hearing in the Anglican churches the kind of preaching which had drawn them to the Christian faith and which sustained them in that faith. Inevitably, then, they began to form their own churches, separate from the Church of England, and so the Methodist movement (as it became known) was born. Although today there is a variety of different kinds of Methodist (Wesleyan, Calvinistic, Reform, Primitive), they trace their origin ultimately to these 18th-century preachers and the groups that grew up around them. As a result, in most towns and many villages in England and Wales today can be found a Methodist chapel.

Downgrade and renewal

A similar pattern of error and renewal developed in the 19th century. Beginning in Germany, the higher criticism movement began to question the reliability of more and more of the Bible. Christianity came to be seen as something merely subjective and internal to the believer, rather than the objective work of the triune God acting in his Son Jesus Christ to save sinners from the reality of hell. Although the movement's effects in England were not as significant as they were in Germany, the churches in this country were nevertheless affected and, again, Christian believers had to be on their guard against this liberal theology (as it became known). Confidence in the Bible was undermined also by the spread of

Darwinian teaching on evolution.

These unbiblical ideas began to infect many churches in Dissent, as well as many within the Church of England. At the same time, many Dissenters, as well as some within the Anglican church, experienced a resurgence of strong, biblical teaching. One movement which promoted clear biblical teaching, though with some unusual features, became known as the Brethren: this consisted largely of people who had become disillusioned with the unbiblical teaching and practices of much of the Church of England and who began meeting separately as a result. The movement spread quickly across the nation and then to continental Europe and further afield.

9: Pentecostals and charismatics

At the start of the 20th century, there began to emerge groups of Christians who believed that God was restoring to the church the gifts of the Holy Spirit which had been conferred in New Testament times and which most people had since assumed had come to an end. These included the gifts of speaking in tongues and of prophecy. The Pentecostal churches which as a result began to be established across the globe claimed to exercise these gifts on a regular basis in their meetings, alongside the more usual activities of singing, praying and preaching. Their meetings tended to be somewhat less structured than those of other churches, with a more popular style of music and a higher level of participation from the congregation. Pentecostal denominations grew rapidly in the first part of the twentieth century. Two of the largest groupings of Pentecostal churches in Britain today are the Assemblies of God and the Elim Pentecostal Church.

In the middle of the 20th century, a phenomenon usually known now as the charismatic movement developed from Pentecostalism. This movement adopted many of the same practices and sought to introduce similar elements in its worship to the Pentecostal churches, but did not necessarily set up separate churches, at least initially. To begin with, the aim of many charismatics was to introduce their distinctive beliefs and practices into the mainline churches. As a result, many such churches experienced tensions and splits. The consequence, over the latter part of the 20th century, was the establishment of separate charismatic groups, often meeting in homes rather than in church buildings and organised on a very flexible and informal basis. Many of these meetings eventually became established as churches, with their own buildings and a clear governance structure. One long-term effect of the charismatic movement, however, was to introduce charismatic thinking and practices, to a lesser or greater extent, into the beliefs and practices of older-established churches which would not have described themselves as Pentecostal or charismatic.

10: Where we are today

Any town in Britain today will contain some, at least, of the churches which we have discussed: Roman Catholic, Church of England, Baptist, Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, Brethren, Pentecostal and charismatic. Confusingly, though, they may not all appear under these names. This is because some groups have merged and are known by a different title. The United Reformed Church, for example, was formed in 1972 from a merger of Congregational and Presbyterian churches, though not all such churches have participated in the merger.

There is also a large number of churches today – mostly recently established – which do not use any of these names, as they fear that they will not mean very much to most people, or because they want to emphasise some particular distinctive which they hold to be more important than the traditional names. With such churches, it is necessary to investigate further to discover exactly what it believes and practises.

11: Do all these churches teach a Biblical message?

Sadly, the answer to that question is no. The doctrinal downgrade which occurred in the 19th century, mentioned above, affected all the denominations and so it cannot by any means be guaranteed that every church from any of the denominations mentioned above will deliver and practise biblical teaching. The only way of being sure is to find out what a particular church does actually believe and teach. How is this to be done?

The best way is to ask the advice of experienced, Bible-believing Christians, especially those who have knowledge of the churches in your area. They are best placed to aid you in your search for a reliable church. Ask them to help you find a church which teaches and practises genuinely biblical Christianity.

It is also worth making your own enquiries. Most churches have a statement of faith, setting out briefly the main points of doctrine that they believe and teach. This can usually be found on the church's website: the lack of such a statement on the website is not an encouraging sign, as it may indicate a lack of interest in doctrine. Beyond this, it is helpful to speak to the pastor or other leader in the church and to attend one or more of their Sunday meetings, to find out more precisely what is taught at the church.

Here are the key points to look out for.

1. *God*. There should be statements that God created everything, that he continues to sustain everything in being and that he is sovereign in all things.

There should also be statements about the triune nature of God – that he is one God in three co-equal and co-eternal persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This doctrine of the Trinity (as it is known) is absolutely foundational to the Christian faith.

2. *The Bible*. There should be statements that the church believes the Bible to be the inspired Word of God, without error, and that it bases all its teaching and practice on the Bible. Particular care must be exercised here with Pentecostal and charismatic churches, where 'prophecies', 'tongues' and other 'words' given in meetings or privately can be given an authority rivalling that of the Bible – such churches should be avoided.

3. *The gospel*. Are there statements to the effect that all people are sinners, have

disobeyed God's laws, and are therefore subject to God's condemnation and liable to eternal punishment in hell? Are there statements that Jesus Christ died on the cross as a substitute for sinners, to make atonement for sin, and was raised from the dead on the third day; and that the only way to be saved from hell and gain eternal life is through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone? These are all essential teachings of the Christian faith.

4. *Jesus Christ*. What exactly does the church teach about Jesus Christ? Do they believe that he has always been and will always be fully God; that he was born into this world of a virgin and is truly a man? Do they state that he lived a sinless life and that, after his death and resurrection, he ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father, from where he will return at the end of the age to judge all people? Without statements of this kind, particularly on the full deity and humanity of Christ, the church may not be regarded as a biblical church.

5. *Ordinances*. Does the church practise both baptism and the Lord's Supper (Communion)? Biblical churches will do so, despite differences over precisely how these ordinances should be administered.

Churches which clearly affirm these various points are usually known, informally, as 'evangelical', which simply means 'to do with the gospel', though they may or may not have 'evangelical' in their name. A truly evangelical church will have clear statements on the above points – God (including the Trinity), the Bible, the gospel, the person of Christ and the ordinances – not just vague statements.

Sadly, in our day of confusion over issues of gender and sexual orientation, it is also necessary to be sure that any church you are considering takes a biblical position on such matters – that is:

- the sinfulness of all sexual relationships outside heterosexual marriage
- that humans are either male or female (determined by physical characteristics, not inward feelings)
- that a person's gender cannot change.
- preaching and leadership are reserved for men.

An evangelical church may well be affiliated to one or other of the various evangelical groupings that exist in this country, in particular:

- the FIEC (Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches)
- EMW (Evangelical Movement of Wales)
- an Association of Grace Baptist Churches
- AECS (Associating Evangelical Churches of Wales)
- the EFCC (Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches)
- EPCEW (Evangelical Presbyterian Church of England and Wales)
- IPC (International Presbyterian Church)
- Affinity (formerly the British Evangelical Council)
- AMiE (Anglican Mission in England)
- a regional Gospel Partnership.

There are also evangelical churches which are not affiliated to any of these groups and so further enquiries will be needed, along the lines suggested above.

12: A word about cults

There are other societies and organisations which may look like churches but which have little or nothing to do with Christianity. Without going into any detail, the following, for different reasons, cannot claim to be Christian churches in any remotely biblical sense of the word and should be avoided: Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (or 'Mormons', as they are more informally known), Christian Science, Christadelphians, Church of Scientology.

There are other groups which can validly claim a closer connection with Christianity but where truly biblical teaching is highly unlikely to be found on any consistent basis. These would include the Quakers (a group which emerged in the 17th century, but which does not base its beliefs exclusively on the Bible); and those who teach what is informally known as a prosperity, or 'health and wealth', gospel, which derives from positive thinking movements and has more to do with prosperity and success in this life than salvation from sin for eternity. All these groups are to be avoided.

13: Conclusion

The church scene in Britain today is undoubtedly confusing. You may wonder why God has allowed so many varieties of church to emerge and survive, especially if many of them no longer teach biblical truth. The explanation given by the Bible itself is that this is how God works out his plan: he allows error to creep in and sometimes to gain considerable influence in a church. He does this, at least in part, to test his people, to see whether they will remain faithful to the truth and to sift out those who do not really belong to his people at all.

This booklet has attempted to provide a brief explanation of why there is such variety of churches today and to suggest a way to trace those churches which consistently teach a reliable biblical message. These are the churches which we must seek out. They will not be perfect – no church on earth is. But if they both teach and practise the essential truths of the Christian faith, as summarised above, and are seeking genuinely to understand and apply the Bible in all aspects of their life, then it is likely to be a church worth joining and supporting wholeheartedly.

Finally, it is worth noting how much good, biblical teaching is available today. It is possible to find an evangelical church of some kind in most towns and cities of England and Wales. It can be more difficult in rural areas, but even there it is usually possible to find somewhere reasonably close, at least where transport by car is available. We should be very thankful to God for this, as much of the rest of the Western world does not enjoy such privilege. Nevertheless, many more churches teaching biblical truth are needed in our country and for this we should pray.