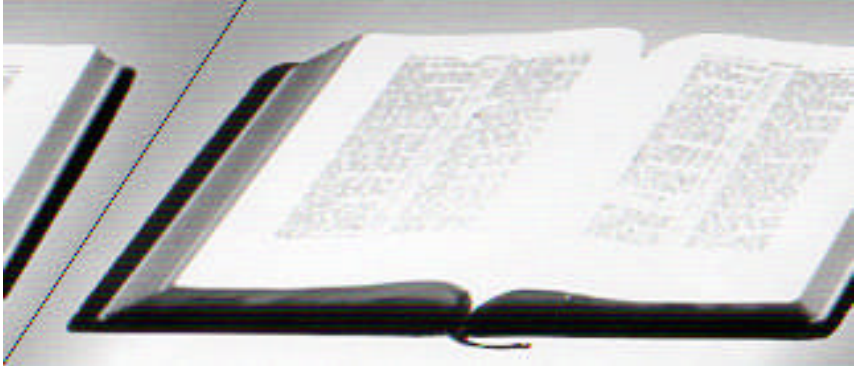


ONE BIBLE



MANY CHURCHES



WHY?

ONE BIBLE, *many churches*

(By one Bible we mean the original inspired Word of God consisting of the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek)

“PEACE ON EARTH-GOODWILL TOWARD MEN.” For many this phrase contains the essence of the Christian message, the objective of every Christian worthy of the name. And yet the history of Christendom is a history of disunity, dissension within the church, and widely divergent and contradictory versions of the Christian message. The almost unbelievable animosity between different sections of Christendom which is a recurring feature of Western history, has provided excuse for attacks on the whole foundation of Christianity, and poses for the unbeliever a demanding question-mark over everything associated with the name of Christ.

For the committed Christian the problem, though different, is no less insistent. Why is the Christian body divided? Are the differences between denominations significant, or are they merely superficial variations of emphasis, with a fundamental unanimity of purpose and direction? Should the attempt to unify the church, and to present a united front to the non-Christian world, override any other consideration and the cherished independence of sectarianism? Can the Christian opt out of organised religion, reject association with any single sect, and serve Christ in a way which is entirely personal and individual?

These are some of the questions with which this booklet is concerned.

A CHANGING CHURCH-PROGRESS OR DECLINE

The present state of Christendom is the result of two millennia of change-change not only in the practice and ritual of religion, but in fundamental doctrines and attitudes. Few would deny the fact of this change-historically there can be little doubt that most forms of Christianity today are far removed from that of the first century. But there is the widest difference of opinion about the cause and quality of this change. Has it been the inevitable and desirable result of adaptation to changing conditions and needs, or has it been the unjustified result of compromise with human weakness and the forces of evil that have assaulted the

church in every age? The established churches-the Roman Catholic and the Anglican churches-have taken the former view, that Christ himself has directed the course of change through his church: the church has been the medium of a progressive revelation of God's will. Many of the minority groups and dissenting sects throughout Christian history have taken the opposite viewpoint, attempting in varying degrees to return to the primitive practices and ideals of the early church, and claiming the Bible as the only authoritative guide to the Christian life. In doing so they have often been branded as heretics and reactionaries. Several fundamental issues are involved: the authority and infallibility or otherwise of the church; the role of the Holy Spirit in the church's history; and the right of the individual to read and interpret the scriptures independently of the church's authority.

ANOTHER GOSPEL

This process of change within the Christian community had already started while the apostles were alive. Many of their letters contain not only practical advice on the meaning of the Christian life, but also authoritative definitions of doctrine which had become necessary because innovators were attempting to change the apostolic gospel. The apostle Paul opens his letter to the disciples in Galatia with a sharp attack on some who had distorted the message he preached: **“I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ”** Galatians 1:6,7

The essential feature of this *‘other’* gospel, according to Paul, was the fact that it originated with man and was designed to please man, whereas the true gospel was received by Paul **“by the revelation of Jesus Christ”**. Galatians 1:12

Elsewhere Paul contended with those who were saying that there was no resurrection of the dead, 1Corinthians 15:1-23. with others who were attempting to impose Jewish law on Gentile Christians, and with some who were interpreting the coming of Christ in some mystical sense which in fact denied its reality. As he was leaving the leaders of the Ephesian church he said: **“I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.”** Acts 20:29,30

He warned his close friend and follower Timothy of the dangers that lay ahead, when men would be **“reprobate concerning the faith”**, **“having a**

form of godliness but denying the power thereof . . . ever learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth.” 2 Timothy 3:7,8 The time was to come when men would **“not endure sound doctrine”** . . . and would **“turn away their ears from the truth, and . . . be turned unto fables.”** 2 Timothy 4:3,4 In another letter the same apostle predicted the development of a false and God-dishonoring system of religion that would deceive many, and he encouraged his readers to **“stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught”**. 2 Thessalonians 2:15

Paul's concern to preserve the original gospel entirely unchanged was not a personal obsession. Jesus himself had predicted that many false, deceiving prophets would come , Matthew 24:11 and by the time the apostle John wrote his first letter this had already happened. 1 John 4:1 In both of his first two letters John warned his readers of the many deceivers and anti-Christian elements already in the Church. 1 John 2:18,

2 John 7 Peter predicted the appearance of false teachers bringing in heretical doctrines, saying, **“and many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of’.**”

2 Peter 2:12 Jude's letter warned his readers against perverse influences which had already infiltrated into the church.

There is one major premise underlying all these references. It is the conviction that the message preached first by Jesus and subsequently by his apostle was the result of direct, divine revelation-that it contained all that man needs to know about God and His intentions with the earth; that it was complete, unchanging and unchangeable. Jude referred to the **“for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.”** Jude 3,4 Two of Jesus' messages to the seven churches of Asia urged them to cling to the gospel they had originally received: **“Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.”** (To Sardis. Rev. 3:3) **“But that which ye have already hold fast till I come.”**. To Thyatira. Rev. 2:25 All seven letters warn of the dangers of corrupt versions of Christianity, which were already appearing.

It is indisputable that both Jesus and his immediate disciples expected and predicted a degeneration in the ranks of those claiming to be his followers. While the apostles were still alive, their authority weighed the scales heavily in favour of the preservation of the original message. With their death the Christians faced a crisis, described by the church historian Neander:

‘With John the apostolic age of the church naturally closes. The doctrine of

the gospel which by him had been still exhibited in its original purity was now exposed, without the weight of apostolic authority, to a conflict with a host of opponents, some of whom had already made their appearance'. (Planting of Christianity and Antignostikus Vol. 1, p. 413)

THE IMPACT OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY

The second generation of Christian believers was significantly different from the first. The earliest converts were, with few exceptions, from the lower ranks of society: Paul had written to the Corinthians: **“For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called”**. 1 Corinthians 1:26 But the second century saw a notable change in the social and intellectual standing of those adopting the name of Christ. In particular the new religion achieved a substantial following from the Greek philosophers of various schools, notably the followers of Plato. The ecclesiastical historian Mosheim describes the addition of this new intellectual element to the ranks of the Christians:

‘The philosophers and learned men, who joined the Christians in this (second) century, were no inconsiderable protection and ornament to this holy religion, by their discussions, their writings and their talents. But . . . the noble simplicity and the majestic dignity of the Christian religion were lost, or at least impaired, when these philosophers presumed to associate their dogmas with it, and to bring faith and piety under the dominion of human reason.’ . (Mosheim, Ecclesiastical History Cent. II, pt. 1, ch. 1, sect, 12)

So began one of the earliest and most far-reaching crises in the history of Christian teaching. What was the relationship between philosophy and religion? Was either of any value to the other? There were many who profoundly objected to the influence which this new and alien element began to exert on Christian theology. Thus Tertullian wrote:

‘It is this philosophy which is the subject-matter of this world’s wisdom, that rash interpreter of the divine nature and order . . . What is there in common between Athens and Jerusalem? What between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? . . . Away with all projects for a "Stoic", a "Platonic" or a "dialectic" Christianity! After Jesus Christ we desire no subtle theories, no acute enquiries after the gospel . . (Tertullian, 'De praescriphene haeveticonum' c. 200 But in spite of such opposition the conflict was resolved in favour of the 'liberal' viewpoint-in favour of the value of human learning and reason:

'The friends of philosophy and learning gradually acquired the ascendancy. To this issue Origen contributed very much; who, having early imbibed the principles of the New Platonism, inauspiciously applied them to theology, and earnestly recommended them to the numerous youth who attended on his instructions'. (Mosheim, 'Ecclesiastical History' Cent. III, pt. 2, ch. 1 sect.5)

This development profoundly influenced the subsequent history of the church. In particular it was responsible for the emergence, over the next two or three centuries, of a number of novel doctrines bearing the obvious hallmarks of Greek thought. It must be viewed with the gravest concern by anyone having any familiarity with and respect for the teaching of Holy Scripture.

PHILOSOPHY AND VAIN DECEIT

"The wisdom of this world is foolishness with God," 1 Corinthians 3.19 wrote Paul to the Corinthians. The apostle was undoubtedly one of the best educated Jews of his age, steeped in the Jewish rabbinical tradition, and familiar with the Greek thinking which permeated the Roman world in the first century. Yet he could hardly be more explicit in his assertion that all worldly learning is valueless in relation to the revealed message of Christ: **". . . hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: but we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, unto the Greeks foolishness; . . . because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men".**

1 Corinthians 1:20-25.

One of the themes of New Testament teaching is that man has become alienated from God, and all his faculties and aspirations tend in a direction which is away from God; as Paul continues later in the same letter: **"the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit' of God: for they are foolishness unto him."** 1 Corinthians 2:14 This theme is no less explicit in the Old Testament: **"There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death"** Proverbs 16:25 **"It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps"**. 24 Jeremiah 10:23.

This teaching is not very flattering or palatable to man, but cannot be evaded by anyone prepared to accept the word of Scripture. Paul himself was particu-

larly aware of the pitfalls of human thinking in relation to spiritual truth. From his childhood he had been immersed in the traditional teaching of Judaism, a tradition which had blinded him to a recognition of Christ as the Messiah, and which had been in no uncertain terms condemned by Christ himself. Paul's words to the Colossians have a very personal urgency: **“Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.”** Colossians 2:8

PLATO AND THE SOUL

The acceptance of Greek philosophers into the church quickly bore its evil fruit. The most characteristic concept of Platonic thought, man's innate immortality, emerged as the orthodox Christian concept of the *'soul'*, an eternal spark of the divine in every man. Many churchmen have admitted that this concept is foreign to the original message of Christ, and is opposed to Christ's teaching about reward and punishment. Yet it has remained one of the cardinal doctrines of the Catholic Church and its offshoots. The following quotations confirm the non-Christian origin of this doctrine:

‘No doctrine of the natural or unconditional immortality of a part or nucleus of the human organism, called the soul, has any right of place within the precinct of revealed Christian truth. It is a philosophic doctrine or theory, older than Christianity, often very ingeniously sustained and as often very effectively contested’. (Dr. F. S. M. Bennett, Dean of Chester-"The resurrection of the dead" 1929.)

‘The Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul is a curious example of an opinion destitute of any foundation in the Bible, and in some measure contradicting it, derived only from Greek philosophy, yet held firmly by a large number of educated and intelligent Christians and Christian teachers and writers on the mistaken supposition that it is taught in the Bible.’ (Dr. Agar Beet-"The immortality of the soul, a protest".)

In his preface the same writer says:

‘My protest against it is an appeal, which no Protestant can disallow, from the traditional teaching of the Church to the supreme authority of the Holy Scripture’ (For a more detailed scriptural exposition on this subject send for the booklet “Eternal life”).

HAS THE CHURCH GONE WRONG?

Here is one of the basic questions raised at the beginning of this booklet. How authoritative is the Church? How does one explain a contradiction between the teaching of the church and that of the Scriptures? The traditional Protestant view has always been that the final court of appeal must be the Scriptures, yet in general the Protestant churches, no less than their Catholic Mother, have recognised the claim of the Church, not only to be the custodian of divine revelation, but to be the medium through which that revelation has continued and been elaborated down the centuries. Essential to this attitude is the claim to apostolic succession: the concept of a continuous line of authority, given first by Christ to his apostles, and handed on by them to their successors.

These ideas emerged early in the Church's history, with the flimsiest of foundations. The apostles' authority was unique—they had lived daily in Christ's company for three years, had listened to his words, witnessed his miracles and his way of life. There is not the slightest evidence that this unique authority was, or was ever intended to be, handed on to successors. The elders of the individual churches could never experience this unique relationship with Christ, and the distinction between clergy and laity, a radical departure from the practice of primitive Christianity, had not yet emerged. The Churches' claim to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in conducting its affairs and defining its doctrines does not bear close examination. It finds no support in the New Testament, and confidence in it is not strengthened by even the most uncritical examination of Church history; a church that has changed its mind, or resorted to un-Christian methods of maintaining its authority and promulgating its doctrines, cannot seriously claim divine guidance. Certainly Christ promised the disciples that the Spirit would guide them into all truth, (John 16:23) a promise that was fulfilled after the resurrection, when the eleven who had previously failed to understand Jesus' work went out into the Roman world fully equipped to preach the gospel. Certainly he promised strength and guidance (**'lo, I am with you alway'**) to all who would genuinely attempt to serve him; but never did he give them that unique authority which he conferred on the apostles. All the New Testament prophecies point to a rapid departure from the true faith after the apostles' death. The dramatic changes affecting the church in the first few centuries after Christ illustrate the conflict between human thinking and divine, and show just how far man was prepared to go in compromising divine standards.

THE FIRST LIE

No doctrine could illustrate this contrast more graphically than that of the immortal soul. Old and New Testament alike teach that man is mortal, destined for oblivion and extinction apart from the grace of God. The Greek Platonists and the main body of the Christian Church teach that man possesses immortality as an innate part of his being, a doctrine profoundly flattering to man's ego, and nothing less than a perpetuation of the first lie recorded in the Bible, **“Ye shall not surely die”** Genesis 3:4

THE DOCTRINE OF THE MILLENNIUM REJECTED

It was this anti-Christian doctrine of the immortality of the soul which undermined another vital Bible doctrine, namely that of the Millennium. The expectation of the Millennium, a divine political kingdom on earth to last for a thousand years, was the corner stone of the first-century faith. As the historians record:

‘That the Saviour is to reign a thousand years among men before the end of the world, had been believed by many in the preceding century . . . In this (third) century the Millenarian doctrine fell into disrepute through the influence especially of Origen, who opposed it because it contravened some of his opinions’. (Mosheim, Cent. 3, Pt. 2, ch. 3, sect. 12).

‘The ancient and popular doctrine of the Millennium was intimately connected with the second coming of Christ. Though it might not be universally received, it appears to have been the reigning sentiment of the orthodox believers . . . But, when the edifice of the church was almost completed, the temporary support was laid aside. The doctrine of Christ's reign upon earth was at first treated as a profound allegory, was considered by degrees as a doubtful and useless opinion, and was at length rejected as the absurd invention of heresy and fanaticism’. 31 Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ch. 15

This doctrine, known as millenarianism or chiliasm (from the Latin and Greek words for one thousand respectively) has cropped up again and again throughout western history among minorities condemned by the church as heretical, notably among the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century. Churchmen

have admitted its explicit New Testament foundation (*‘. . . the expectation of the New Testament is still that of a return of Christ to the earth, a heavenly kingdom to come on earth . . .’* Bishop Gore, ‘Belief in Christ’) and dismissed it as *‘part of the hocus pocus of Christian doctrine’* (Bishop Barnes). Intimately connected with the hope of resurrection, the doctrine of the millennium cannot be reconciled with the concept of immediate reward at death, in some extra-terrestrial sphere. Significantly enough, Mosheim attributes the initial decline of this doctrine to *‘the influence especially of Origen’* (the champion of Platonism) *‘who opposed it because it contravened some of his opinions.’*

CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE FIRST CENTURY

These changes in doctrine, of which the above are only examples, were accompanied by no less radical changes in the practice and organisation of the Christian Church. The earliest Christians were unique in their lack of worldliness, their withdrawal from social and political life, their democratic and egalitarian organisation in which wealth or social distinction counted as nothing, and their unusual concern for the poor and oppressed:

‘The primitive Christians were dead to the business and pleasure of the world.’ ‘The defense of our person and property they knew not how to reconcile with the patient doctrine which enjoined an unlimited forgiveness of past injuries . . .’ Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

This state of things was short-lived. As the original simplicity of doctrine and practice was lost, so the Christian community’s relationship to society changed dramatically:

‘Should the church take the decisive step into the world . . .? Or ought she, on the other hand, to remain, as she had been at first, a society of religious devotees, separated and shut out from the world by a rigorous discipline and working on it only through a direct propaganda? . . . It was natural that warning voices should be raised in the church against secular tendencies . . . that demands should be made for a restoration of the old discipline and severity, and for a return to apostolic simplicity and purity. The church as a whole, however, under pressure of circumstances rather than by a spontaneous impulse, decided otherwise. She marched through the open door into the Roman state . . .’ Harnack, article ‘Montanism’, *Encyc. Brit.*

In this process was born one of the earliest sects known to Christian history,

the Montanists, a group which isolated itself from the main body of the church because of the latter's increasingly secular tendencies. The adoption of Christianity by the Roman State under the first Christian Emperor, Constantine, marked the culmination of this process of secularisation within the church. Henceforth the Christian Church was a political force to be reckoned with, bestowing or withholding its blessings on the laws and wars of the state, sharing its prosperity and material wealth:

'Passing rapidly from a condition of distress and persecution to the summit of prosperity, the church degenerated from her ancient purity, and forfeited the respect of future ages, in the same proportion as she acquired the blind veneration of her own'. Hallam, 'Europe during the middle ages'

CHRISTIANITY VERSUS THE WORLD

Where now was the distinctive way of life of the first Christians? What now of the authoritative, unanimous voice of Jesus and his immediate followers:

"Be not conformed to this world". Romans 12:2

"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." 1 John 2.15

". . . know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God." James 4.4

" . . . what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? . . . Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will . . . be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters . . ." 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

Here is the crystal-clear message of original Christianity here is the foundation of the first Christians' withdrawal from the world: This withdrawal was symptomatic of their all absorbing interest in the future rather than the present, their constant anticipation of Christ's second advent. As the doctrine of the Second Coming and the literal view of the Kingdom were slowly spiritualised out of existence, it was inevitable that the ambitions of the Church became focused on the present rather than the future. Augustine completed the

process by identifying the Church as the visible embodiment of the Kingdom of God:

'Augustine . . . identified the Millennium with the history of the Church on earth, and declared that, for those who belonged to the true Church, the first resurrection was passed already. With the acceptance of this identification by the Roman Church, the power of Chiliasm was permanently broken.' (Dr. A. Robinson, *Regnum Dei Lectures on the Kingdom of God in the history of Christian Thought* 1901)

No greater change in the whole purpose and direction of Christianity could be imagined. From a small minority that had separated itself from society, totally renouncing all present ambition, status and wealth in favour of the hope of a better life under the future rulership of Christ, the Church had become an integral part of the state, framing its laws, sharing its wealth and favours, and regarding itself as the spiritual embodiment of the Kingdom of God, the medium through which Christ already ruled on earth.

DECLINE AND `REFORMATION'

As the Church ascended the heights of secular splendour and material wealth, it sank to the lowest depths of corruption and spiritual squalor. The eventual reaction was inevitable. The blasphemies of the Pope's emissary Tetzl, selling instant salvation to pay for St. Peter's (at the very instant the money rattles at the bottom of the chest, the soul escapes from Purgatory and flies liberated to heaven) were opposed by an obscure monk, Martin Luther. Luther himself was essentially a churchman, concerned to reform the church of its worst abuses from within. A reluctant revolutionary, his hand was forced by circumstances, and the Reformed Churches continued to retain many of the characteristic attitudes and doctrines of the Catholic Church. In contrast, the Anabaptists consciously endeavoured to return to the teaching and practice of the first century. They revived the primitive practice of adult baptism; they were opposed to the use of force in all circumstances; they drew a distinction between the church, which was the community of the redeemed, and the state, which existed for the punishment of sinners:

'They were not attempting reform of the medieval church. They were determined instead to restore the institutions and spirit of the primitive church in their utter confidence that they were living at the end of all ages.' (Article: Anabaptists, *Encyc. Brit*)

With the removal of the despotic power of the Catholic Church and the widespread distribution of the Bible in printed form, the centuries since the Reformation have seen the complete fragmentation of Christendom and the emergence of a wide variety of sects. The nineteenth century was particularly productive in this respect, with most of the major sects—Christian Scientists, Mormons, the Salvation Army, Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists—emerging during this period, some claiming new revelations and manifestations of the Spirit, some genuinely attempting to recapture the spirit of primitive Christianity. But influences entirely alien to original Christianity have often been instrumental in shaping the characteristic doctrines and attitudes of the sects. Metaphysics features prominently in Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science, and nationalistic feeling has had an obvious role to play in the teaching of the Mormons and British Israelism. Few have shrugged off completely the legacy of Plato.

THE NARROW WAY

This very brief examination of the origin of present-day Christianity in all its diverse forms prompts the most searching questions about the nature of Christianity itself. It implies that the established Churches, far from being the repositories of divine truth, have more often been the shrines of error, of fleshly and anti-Christian teaching; that the majority of Christians throughout western history have been ignorant of the true Christian hope; that the small groups that have splintered away from the church at various times, far from being heretical, have often been prompted by a genuine desire to return to the distinctive spirit and teaching of original Christianity; (There are, of course, exceptions: notably the comparatively recent emergence of groups such as the Mormons, Christian Scientists, Jehovah's Witnesses, etc., holding novel doctrines with no historical precedent.) that the true Christians have always been and still are in the minority, more often than not a very small minority indeed. Can such a view, so totally opposed to most present-day Christian thinking, be sustained? Is it consistent with the message of divine love for mankind that Christ came to preach? Does such a view find any support in the New Testament?

Jesus recognised that the distinctive way of life which he practised and advocated for his followers was a difficult one, and one that would prove quite unpalatable to the majority of mankind: “. . . **wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, that leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it**”. Matthew 7:13,14 He knew that

faith in him would not increase, but would rather deteriorate, the nearer Christ's second advent became: **“When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?”** Luke 18:8 **“As the days of Noe (Noah) were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be. For as in the days that were before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and knew not until the flood came, and took them all away; so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.”** Matthew 24.37-39. At the time of the flood only eight people were saved by God; this is the measure of those who will be saved at the coming of Christ. The justice and severity of God revealed in this Old Testament incident, whilst entirely consistent with New Testament revelation, have conveniently been lost sight of by most churchmen.

The standards of behaviour set by Christ were the complete antithesis of all man's natural inclinations, and were certainly quite inapplicable in the context of society at large. Christ's law makes no provision for the recognition of legal rights, defence of property, judicial punishments, etc. Jesus himself said on one occasion, with particular reference to his teaching on divorce, **“All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given . . . He that is able to receive it, let him receive it.”** Matthew 19:11,12. He knew that the mass of humanity would never respond to a teaching which demanded total dedication to an ideal which offered very little reward in this life. The alliance of Church with State and the mass conversion to Christianity were achieved only at the cost of sacrificing virtually everything that was specifically Christian.

The consistent theme of the Old and New Testaments is the calling and selection by God of a small minority of the world's population as His witnesses and instruments in a future age when the whole world will serve Him. The Old Testament records God's choice of the Jews, an insignificant racial minority, not for any particular merit of their own, but simply as witnesses to and instruments of His purpose with the earth .Deuteronomy 7:6-8. Of the Jews themselves, the majority forsook him in favour of other gods, other religions. When Christ came most of his people, though eagerly anticipating the promised coming of the Messiah, spurned him: he was not the political revolutionary they desperately wanted. Later Peter described how **“God . . did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name,”** and the Christian converts remained a small and oppressed minority until the third and fourth centuries. It was only after the dramatic changes outlined above, and after the Church had taken over many of the forms and practices of the paganism which surrounded it, that a debased Christianity became a majority,

not a minority, religion.

PEACE ON EARTH

In his teaching Jesus foresaw that, whilst his message of love and humanity was ideally suited to bring peace to the world, in fact it would lead to strife, dissension and suffering: **“Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the, daughter-in-law against her mother-in law aw. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household”** Matthew 10:34-36.

Augustine's fallacious *“City of God”* concept has led the church to expect the total conversion of the world through the efforts of the Christians themselves. No such expectation was part of Christ's original message; certainly as we move into the twenty-first century since Christ, such hopes seem as far from fulfilment as ever. The angel's promise, **“on earth peace and goodwill toward (among) men”** (Luke 2:14) will not be realised until Christ returns to complete his work, not this time as the all-suffering Lamb of God but as World King, wielding divine authority, executing summary justice amongst the world's population. (See 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10). Only then will the Old Testament ideal described by the prophet Micah become a reality:

“. . . many nations shall come, and say, Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths; for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among many people, and rebuke strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks : nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.” Micah 4:2,3

It is an ideal rejected by the Church as far too mundane and literal-minded, but entirely consistent with the hope of Christ's immediate followers. (See Matthew 19:28; Acts 1:6-11; 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10; Revelation 2:26,27; 5:9,10; 11:15)

WHAT IS TRUTH?

The most urgent task facing the Christian today is the achievement, not of Church unity, but of Christian purity.

True Christian unity can only be achieved on the basis of total identification with the doctrine and way of life which Jesus taught and demonstrated. This is *'the truth'*, the emphatic, constantly recurring theme of the apostles' teaching. They spoke of knowing the truth, (Hebrews 10:26) believing the truth, (2 Thessalonians 2:13) obeying the truth. (1 Peter 1:22) being established in the truth. (2 Peter 1:12) They feared the dangers of resisting the truth, (2 Timothy 3.8) erring from the truth, (James 5.19) turning from the truth, (Titus 1:14) fears that have been all too amply justified.

The apostles, who were inspired by God, made it clear that there was only one authentic definitive form of Christianity. Present-day liberal Christianity, in common with most philosophy, regards truth as essentially personal and subjective; what is valid for one individual may not be so for another. It is a view which rejects or ignores the inspiration of Scripture, and essentially rejects the most dramatic and far-reaching claim of Christ himself-to be God's revelation, God's unfolding of himself to man. There can be no unanimity, no possibility of Christian unity, whilst such fundamental issues are at stake and the underlying authority of Christianity is in dispute.

The first and only possible step toward regaining the truth is to recognise the Bible, Old and New Testaments, as what it claims to be, the Word of God. This recognition does not entail the sacrifice of reason or intellectual integrity; there has never been such a mass of historical, archaeological and scientific evidence confirming the authenticity and reliability of the biblical documents. To recognise its innate wisdom and authority, one must read it. It is often asserted that *'you can prove anything from the Bible'*. Certainly some of the more extreme sects today interpret Scripture with scant regard for context or historical background. The fact remains, however, that whenever throughout Christian history men have returned to the Bible as the only authoritative divine witness, there emerges a remarkable unanimity on all the essentials of the Christian message. The fundamentals of first century Christianity can be established beyond reasonable doubt from the historical evidence and the clear teaching of the New Testament. The following is the briefest possible summary (for more detailed treatment of individual subjects request further material):

1. God is a unity, and created all things by his Spirit (or power);
2. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and died as the representative of the human race to make possible salvation from sin;
3. Man, because of sin, is destined only to complete oblivion apart from

the love of God and the saving work of Jesus;

4. The reward of righteousness will be eternal life spent on the earth after bodily resurrection;

5. The Kingdom of God has already existed in the past as the Kingdom of Israel, and will be re-established on earth in the future under the rulership of Christ when he returns in person to the earth;

6. Belief in the gospel ('good news') and baptism by immersion in water are essential to salvation.

Every one of these simple, logical propositions has at some time in the course of the last nineteen centuries been distorted, corrupted, denied or elaborated beyond recognition in the name of Christianity.

Having established "**the truth**", the demands of Christ are simple but comprehensive: "**he that believeth and is baptised shall be saved.**" Mark 16.16. Again the example of the earliest Christians shines as a beacon through the muddle and obscurity of contemporary Christianity: "**they that gladly received his word were baptised . . . and they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers**". Acts 2:41,42. Submission to one of the simplest but most humbling commands of Jesus, followed by a "**patient continuance in well-doing**" Romans 2:7 - these are the hallmarks of the true Christian. "**If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed: and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free**" John 8:31,32.

In "**the truth**" alone lies the hope of true freedom for the individual, freedom from sin and death, freedom from the imponderable dilemmas which face mankind. Only on the basis of such belief in and obedience to "**the truth**" can Christian fellowship exist, and genuine peace become a reality. For all man's cynicism and vaunted self-sufficiency, never has he needed the voice of Authority more than he does today. Read and re-read the Bible, and then read it again. There alone is the authoritative, unchanging witness of God himself. There alone, undistorted by human prejudice and speculation, uncompromised by intellectual arrogance, is the real Christ, "**the same yesterday, and today, and for ever.**" Hebrews 13:8.