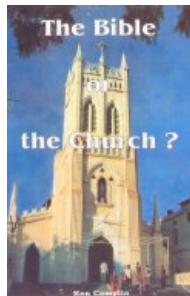


The Bible or the Church?



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Preface

In recent years the writer has been involved in discussions with Roman Catholics and has been struck by the strong views expressed, particularly by some older members, about changes in the church's teachings and practices during their own lifetime. Some of the discussions have been with individuals whilst others have been in groups.

One lady was somewhat distressed when relating how she had been terrified as a child by teachings about the devil and hell fire, and subsequent nightmares. In looking at the lives of her teenage children she was pleased that they did not have that experience. At the same time, she was confused and concerned that the Church should change its teachings so markedly, often without satisfactory explanations to the parishioners. Other points brought up referred to matters of practice, such as not eating meat on Fridays, the wearing of hats by ladies in church, and particularly to degrees of abstinence during Lent.

Another lady who had recently suffered tragic bereavement recounted how she found the priest unwilling to discuss the whereabouts of her loved one in the weeks immediately following decease. This priest did not want to talk about the church's teaching on Purgatory and Limbo. Such reluctance on the part of priests to speak about this topic had not been apparent in earlier years. However, it must be stated that

there have been occasional reports recently of some priests making references to hell fire in their sermons.

It would seem obvious that there is a need for a supreme and unchanging authority in order to answer questions of belief and practice. The Bible presents an “everlasting gospel” in a changing world.

THE BIBLE OR THE CHURCH?

The Question of Supreme Authority What is the Bible?

The Bible is a collection of books contained in two main parts - Old Testament and New Testament, sixty-six books in all, bound in one volume. By the time of Jesus Christ the books of the Old Testament were generally recognised as Divine by the Jews, but the growth of the Old Testament had begun much earlier. Over many centuries the books grew to be accepted as Holy Scripture. The Bible was produced for ordinary common people and was written in the language spoken by Hebrews and Greeks in their homes and public place. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. Shortly before the coming of Christ the Old Testament was translated into Greek in Alexandria. (This translation is known as the Septuagint-there were seventy translators).

In the Fourth Century A.D. Jerome made a Latin version, and in the original translation the Apocrypha was excluded. Jerome’s Vulgate Version was the Bible of Western Europe for over a thousand years. The Roman Catholic Church jealously guarded this Latin version and forbade translations into common tongues. Before the Reformation the Bible was regarded as a book for priests only. In the Fifteenth Century, Luther and other reformers brought about a tremendous change. The Holy Scriptures were soon translated into many European languages. Tyndale produced the first printed New Testament in English in the face of great hostility from the Catholic Church. He paid with his life for his devotion to the translation and distribution of the Bible. As he was dying at the stake, Tyndale uttered the cry: “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes”. After Tyndale’s death it wasn’t long before King Henry VIII gave orders that every parish church in England should have a copy of the English Bible.

Inspiration

The Scriptures assert that they were ‘God-breathed’ or inspired. The Bible’s claims to be God’s Book are attested by the Apostle Peter:

“It was not any cleverly invented myths that we were repeating when we brought you the knowledge of the power and the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ ... Because no prophecy ever came from man’s initiative. When men spoke for God it was the Holy Spirit that moved them” (2 Peter 1:16 and 21).

The Bible is God's direct revelation to men and women concerning His plan and purpose with His creation. The structure of the Bible and the themes running through its pages demonstrate a unity of purpose. The dominant and unifying theme of the Bible concerns the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. This can only be explained satisfactorily in terms of its Divine origin. The writers were inspired by God to write, but miraculously their individuality is readily recognised. The prophet Amos was a herdsman and it shows. Luke the gospel writer was a doctor and well educated man, and it shows. The Spirit of God was the power and authority behind the words, the message came from God. The writers of the books of the Old and New Testaments were the instruments of this revelation.

The Canon

The word Canon was used to describe those books recognised as being of Divine origin. The Canon was produced gradually, but each book was promptly accepted as the Word of God. The distinctive character and authority of each book ensured that it was accepted as Divinely inspired. The Apocryphal books were written after the time of Malachi, the last of the Hebrew Prophets, and before the birth of Christ. There is no mention of these works in the list of Hebrew Scriptures recorded by the Jewish historian Josephus (A.D. 30 - 100), and they are not to be found in the Jewish Talmud (a commentary on the Old Testament). The Jews do not accept these writings as part of the Hebrew Old Testament. There was considerable debate regarding the Canon after A.D. 70. Questions were raised about the inclusion of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and The Song of Solomon. At the Council of Jamnia in A.D. 110, after much careful discussion, these books were accepted. No books previously in the Canon were expelled and those books which they declined to accept had never been seriously considered as part of the Canon. All books that were included in the Old Testament were already acknowledged to be 'God-inspired' and authoritative. Some of the books not accepted into the original Old Testament Canon came to be called the Apocrypha. It is significant that Jesus and the New Testament writers do not quote from the Apocryphal books, especially in view of the fact that the New Testament contains over two hundred direct quotations and more than three hundred allusions to the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul quoted Greek poets, but did not quote any words from the Apocrypha.

Contrast the books of the Old Testament with those in the Apocrypha, and likewise contrast those in the New Testament with the writings of the Apostolic Fathers; the distinction is clear cut - there can be no doubt as to which are 'in' the Bible and those which are 'outside'. The Early Church Fathers rejected the inclusion of the Apocryphal books in the Old Testament Canon. Jerome (A.D. 374 - 410) did not include these works in his original Vulgate Translation. He regarded them 'as suitable only for devotional reading, but not appropriate for confirming Church doctrine'. It wasn't until the Council of Trent in 1546 that the Roman Catholic Church gave formal canonical status to the Apocrypha. In Catholic Bibles the Apocryphal writings are

usually incorporated within the Old Testament scriptures on the basis of their historical relevance. Luther collected Apocryphal Books together, and presented them as a unified supplement at the end of the Old Testament. It has been the practice of Protestants since Luther's time to separate Apocryphal writings from those regarded as Divinely inspired, and in some non-Catholic Bibles the Apocrypha is inserted between the Old and New Testaments.

The Authority of the Scriptures

The Canon of the Old Testament was endorsed by the Lord Jesus Christ. He quoted extensively from all parts of the Holy Scriptures (the Old Testament) and accepted its authority. After His resurrection he told the disciples that everything that had happened to Him was a fulfillment of prophecies recorded in the Old Testament - Luke 24:25-27, 44.

The New Testament had not yet been written, so Jesus could not endorse it in the same way as he attributed Divine authority to the Old Testament books. We must remember that the Roman Catholic Church did not exist at that time, (nor did the New Testament as we know it). Did the Almighty make different arrangements for the collection and authorisation of the Books of the New Testament? No. The principles underlying the Canon of scripture apply equally to the Old and New Testaments.

The New Testament Canon came into being when the earliest portions of these Divine scriptures were circulated in the early churches during the first century. The Synod of Hippo in A.D. 393 listed the 27 books of the New Testament, but it did not confer upon them any authority which they did not already possess. It plainly recorded the fact that their Divinity had long been recognised.

If we accept that the Scriptures were produced by men who were inspired by God, then it is unreasonable to suggest that there was a process of selection and endorsement which was left entirely to humans. If men had the last word, then it follows that there would be the real possibility of some inspired books being left out. Some which were not inspired would be included in the Bible. If the compilation of the Holy Bible did depend on human judgement, then members of each generation would have the right to exercise their own judgement. Such a foundation would be untenable.

The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments assert their own authority. The books in the Old Testament make persistent claims to be Divinely inspired by the use of such phrases as; "Thus says Yahweh ...". "Listen to the word of Yahweh ...". Such claims are not to be found in the apocryphal books, and some appear to disclaim divine inspiration (see the Prologue to Ecclesiasticus, and I Maccabees 9:27, also I Maccabees 14:38-41).

God revealed Himself to men over the centuries. One of the important principles of this revelation was that once the Divine message had been received it was not to be added to, and no part of it was to be discarded. “You must add nothing to that I command you, and take nothing from it, but keep the commandments of Yahweh your God just as I lay them down for you,” Deuteronomy 4:2. (See also Proverbs 30:5-6).

It should be noted that these words were written many centuries before the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church.

Reading the Bible

Some Catholics are under the impression that it is wrong to read the Bible themselves. This is due to historical factors. In late mediaeval times the Catholic Church excommunicated and occasionally burned persons who undertook to provide the Bible in a language which the laity could read and try and understand themselves. The Council of Toulouse in 1129 decreed that the Bible in the common language of the people was to be listed on the Church’s Index of forbidden books. Thus it was officially indicated that ordinary people were to be prevented from reading the Bible. The New Catholic Encyclopedia refers to the Church’s decision at the Council of Trent:

“... the Council declares that no-one, relying on his own ingenuity, in matters of faith and morals pertaining to the development of the Christian doctrine, should distort Sacred Scripture to suit himself, contrary to that sense which the Holy Mother Church has held and continues to hold, whose place it is to judge concerning the true sense and interpretation of Holy scriptures”. (Denz 1507).

It is true that the First Vatican Council in 1870 stated that:

“The Bible is held as sacred and canonical, not because approved by the Church’s authority, but because written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, having God for author, and delivered as such to the Church herself.”

This declaration asserts that God impressed His authority on the Scriptures including the Apocryphal books. It is accepted by Roman Catholics that the Church itself speaks authoritatively on issues of faith and morals. The First Vatican Council decreed that when the Pope speaks *ex cathedra* he is ‘beyond the reach of error’, and his pronouncements have to be accepted. In such circumstances is it not likely that any Roman Catholic would wonder what the Church’s interpretation of the Bible would be? He would be reluctant to accept the responsibility of making up his own mind. On the other hand the Protestant attitude is that the Bible was written for the common people and that everyone should be able to read the Bible and seek to understand its message for him or herself.

In the early Church the preachers and teachers directed interested people and believers to read the Scriptures and verify their teachings for themselves. Cyril of Jerusalem declared: 'Do not believe me simply, unless you receive the proof of what I say from Holy Scripture'.

The Living Voice

It is sometimes claimed that in order to really understand the true message of the Bible there is the need for an authoritative 'Living Voice'. The Council of Trent emphasised the importance of recognising that true Christianity is contained in the written books of the Old and New Testaments and in the unwritten 'Tradition'. On this basis it is argued that we cannot rely on our own judgement when reading the Bible but require the guidance of authoritative Church leaders to determine the Truth. It is claimed that they have acquired such authority by receiving the oral tradition handed down by Christ and the Apostles.

This body of knowledge is in addition to the written Word. It also finds expression in pronouncements of Church Councils and in Ecclesiastical Decrees. This 'Tradition' takes precedence over the written word and interprets it. In effect, 'Scripture means what the Church says it means'. By contrast others who accept the supreme authority of the Bible regard it as the touchstone for determining claims to the Truth, and see the Holy Scriptures as independent of any church or system.

The Pope, regarded as God's representative on earth, can legislate, it is claimed, on issues additional to the Bible as new situations arise. There are very distinctive doctrines in the Roman Catholic Church which have developed from 'Tradition'- a few are supported by quotations from the Apocrypha, but others do not have scriptural or Apocryphal support. These doctrines include the Mass, Worship of the Virgin Mary and the Doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, Indulgences on the basis of the Treasury of Merits, the Celibacy of Priests, and the Infallibility of the Pope.

Do we find confirmation of these teachings and certain other current practices of the Catholic Church in the Bible? No. The Holy Scriptures are silent on these matters. Has the Church the right to formulate new teachings which are not supported by the Scriptures? How do we know whether or not a particular church or system is setting forth true Christianity? Surely it is only by comparing its teachings with a recognised authority- the Bible. It is surely evident that either the Bible or the Church must be the ultimate authority-it cannot be both. Serious warnings forbidding the adding to, or subtraction of, words from the revelation given by God have been noted already.

It is clearly stated that the written word is sufficient for salvation.

"... you have known the holy scriptures - from these you can learn the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

Consider the example of those people at Berea who were interested in the Apostles' teachings.

“Here (Berea) the Jews were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they welcomed the word very readily; every day they studied the scriptures to check whether it was true. Many Jews became believers ...” (Acts 17:11-12).

Here was a situation where the Apostles were preaching from the Old Testament scriptures with Spirit-guided authority, and yet these ordinary people in Berea are commended by Luke for going to the trouble to check whether what Paul and Silas were saying agreed with the written word! These common people were acting responsibly. The Bible is to be accepted as the only authoritative basis of faith and practice. As one writer has said: “The voice of heaven is heard in the printed sentences of God’s word in the Scriptures, and nowhere else”.

Jesus and the Bible

Jesus quoted from all parts of the Old Testament and endorsed its authority. He repeated emphatically that the Old Testament forecast the very details of his life and death. Everything that happened to him was fulfilment of these prophecies. These predictions were scattered throughout the Old Testament scriptures - Luke 24:25-27.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus quotes extensively from the Old Testament and emphasises the principles underlying the various commandments - Matthew chapters 5-7.

Throughout the Gospels there is a record of Jesus acceptance of the Jewish Scriptures. He emphatically proclaimed the infallibility of the written word, for He stated ‘scripture cannot be rejected’ - John 10:35.

Jesus did not rebuke men for knowing the Scriptures, He criticised them for not allowing the words to influence their everyday lives.

Throughout his ministry he quoted from the Old Testament. During the series of temptations in the wilderness Jesus answered the tempter three times by quoting directly from the written word, prefaced by ‘Scripture says ...’ Matthew 4. At the end of his Gospel the Apostle John has these remarkable words:

“There were many other signs that Jesus worked and the disciples saw, but they are not recorded in this book. These are recorded so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing this you may have life through his name”. John 20:30-31.

What a testimony to the supremacy of the written Word! It contains all the information that is necessary for salvation.

Later the Apostle John received a revelation from Jesus Christ and noted:

“John has written down everything he saw and swears it is the word of God guaranteed by Jesus Christ, ...” Revelation 1:2.

These words are extremely significant, for at the end of the Revelation John records these words of Jesus:

“This is my solemn warning to all who hear the prophecies of this book; if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him every plague mentioned in the book; if anyone cuts anything out of the prophecies in this book, God will cut off his share of the tree of life and of the holy city, which are described in the book.” Revelation 22:18-19.

What is Truth?

There was a multi-racial assembly at the trial of Jesus. Pilate asked the question - “What is truth?” It appears that it was not just an ‘off the cuff’ enquiry. Pilate was cunning. He knew that there would be a marked but contrasting response to his query from the Jews and Greeks who were present at this trial. The Jewish people believed that “Truth” was revealed to men and women by the God of Israel, Who had made Himself known by inspiring men to write down the truths which He revealed. The Greeks, on the contrary, believed that Truth’ was acquired by the development and refinement of men’s minds. The use of reason and logic would enable men to arrive at ‘The Truth’. So when Pilate raised this question it is more than likely that bitter disputes broke out amongst the assembly. There would be those who accepted inspiration and revelation, and others who professed the superiority of human philosophy.

In the context of our present discussion, what is the response today to Pilate’s question? The one who believes in the authority of the Word of God follows the fundamental Jewish idea and accepts that Truth can only come by revelation from God Himself. The Roman Catholic position appears to combine the Jewish and Greek ideas. There is a revelation from God the Creator, but there is also the work of men of the church through theology and philosophy to interpret the Bible. These works of men have been elevated by the Roman Catholic Church and are highly regarded as ‘Tradition’. We are confident that Jesus and the Apostles of New Testament times followed the practice of the Jewish prophets and accepted the sole authority and superiority of the Scriptures.

The Authority and Power of Jesus

In the Gospels we read of Jesus having power and authority, but the Jewish leaders questioned the way in which Jesus was able to perform miracles:

“Tell us” they said “what authority have you for acting like this? Or who is it that gave you this authority?” - Luke 20:2-6

The phrase ‘power and authority’ is used in the Scriptures in a particular way. It is employed in the sense of one having the ability and approval to do certain things. The various miracles which Jesus did were demonstrations of His power. These acts impressed the ordinary people, who were also astounded by His teachings. However, it is one thing to have the ability and power to perform particular acts, but one may not have the right to behave in that way. (We may have the power to stop traffic by placing obstacles on a main thoroughfare, but most of us don’t have the right to cause such havoc). Jesus had right on His side. In the Gospels it is recorded that God the Father granted authority to Jesus to forgive sins and execute judgement. Supreme authority was invested in the Son. Luke 5:21-25, John 5:19-23.

Consider the various aspects of authority. One may exercise authority over another person. During his first advent Jesus did not exercise this type of authority in any formal sense. The second advent will be the time for Jesus to rule as King over all the earth from Jerusalem. Secondly, profound knowledge of a specific subject by someone may be described as ‘Mr. A being an authority on butterflies or gymnastics’. Then there are those who are authorities at certain activities, that is, they demonstrate a practical ability.

These aspects may be completely separate. (For example, someone who is an authority on gymnastics may be confined to a wheelchair and unable to do any physical exercise). Jesus was a superior authority for he was capable of demonstrating all three aspects of perfection. God gave him authority and power over men. He was an authority on the Old Testament scriptures. The Jewish leaders were astonished when as a twelve year old boy he was able to talk authoritatively about the Jewish Bible. He was also a brilliant preacher who followed the line of the Old Testament prophets, and it is reasonable to assume that, in his earlier life, he had been a good carpenter. At the crucifixion Pilate put a name plate above his cross - ‘Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews’. The ‘right and authority’ of Jesus as King was acknowledged by a Roman ruler! In the future Kingdom of God on earth Jesus will reign until he has put down all other authorities and powers - 1 Corinthians 15:24-28.

Peter’s Confession

The miracle and teachings of Jesus aroused great interest and controversy. Jesus asked

his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They recounted that some thought that he was John the Baptist, others that he was Elijah or another of the Old Testament prophets. There were various hunches and opinions which indicated that the public recognised that he was someone greater than the humble carpenter of Nazareth. Jesus then turned the question directly on to his disciples, “... Who do you say I am?” Peter immediately made the dogmatic statement.

“You are the Christ... the son of the living God”. (Mathew 16:13-20)

This confession of Peter has given rise to claims and counter claims. However, it is beyond question that the Lord’s reply is a significant play on words.

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church”.

If we inserted the Greek words we would read

“You are Petros and upon, this Petra I will build my church”. Petros is the name of a person and it is a masculine word. Petra means rock (i.e. a strata or mass of rock) but it is a feminine word in Greek. (See “Young’s Analytical Concordance to the Bible”). A crude paraphrase of the statement could read - ‘You are Mr. Boulder and upon this Miss Rock I will build my church’. Seen in this way it is clear that the Lord is stating that it is Peter’s confession of faith: “You are the Christ”, that is the foundation on which the Christian Church is established.

It is significant that Mark, who was a close associate of the Apostle Peter does not record in his Gospel account the remark about the rock. In Mark the confession is followed by a rebuke, not a commendation. If Peter is claimed to be ‘The Prince of the Apostles’ on the basis of Christ’s statement, why is he rebuked by his Lord? Peter was described by Jesus as Satan - an adversary or stumbling block, because he denied that Jesus could die- Mark 8:27-33. Peter’s judgement was not infallible.

Peter and the Keys

Jesus promised the keys of the Kingdom to Peter. Does this indicate that he was favoured above the other disciples? If we look closely at the account in Matthew 18, we see that when Jesus was talking to the disciples this same privilege is conferred on them also - verses 1 and 18-20, so how can it be said that Peter was superior to the others? And it is surely striking that in chapter 23:2-4 and 12 we read that the Scribes and Pharisees also had this power.

So what was this power? It was the ability and right to announce the news of God’s coming Kingdom and how men and women could be prepared for Christ’s reign on earth. The Scribes and Pharisees had the Word of God and they knew God’s plan of salvation, but they misused the sacred knowledge - they did not turn the key to the

advantage of the people. They withheld truth from the people and in effect shut the gates to the Kingdom in the faces of men and women. “Alas for you lawyers who have taken away the key of knowledge! You have not gone in yourselves, and have prevented others going in who wanted to”. Luke 11:52.

When Jesus responded to Peter’s confession of faith and made his renowned remark - “You are Peter” and promised him the keys, he said to Peter, and later to the other disciples, that ‘things’ (not persons) were to be bound or loosed - ‘whatever’ not whomsoever. Mathew 16:19. The keys were symbolic of authority.

Upon Peter and the other disciples was conferred the authority to preach the Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven. The power of the keys is very closely related to the idea of ‘binding and loosing’. The Jewish Scribes loosed or bound when they declared a thing permitted or forbidden, lawful or unlawful. Mathew 18:15-18 shows that the power of binding and loosing included those of excommunication and reconciliation. (N.B. By the time this gospel was written Gentiles had already been admitted as disciples).

Apostolic Succession

Some claim that there is a clear line of descent from the Apostle Peter to the present Pope. However, the first Apostles were special, and could not be succeeded by others, whoever they might be. The early Apostles saw Jesus and conversed with him. They were witnesses of our Lord’s crucifixion and resurrection - 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. The Apostles were chosen and ordained by the Lord, and authorised by him to forgive and retain sins, and demonstrate great power. John 20:19-23.

Therefore it is reasonable to assert that after the ascension of Jesus no man could qualify for apostleship unless the Lord appeared to him. The Lord appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. In later years Paul wrote: “You have seen done among you all the things that mark the true apostle, unfailingly produced: the signs, the marvels, the miracles.” 2 Corinthians 12:12.

It is also reasonable to ask: “What evidence is there today of the exhibition of these tremendous powers by those who claim to be the true successors to the Apostles of the First Century?” There is no evidence in the New Testament of Apostleship being handed on to the next generation. However, it is reasonable to recognise that the notion of Apostolic Succession may be viewed essentially as a succession to the original teachings and practices of the Apostles. Once there is a departure from the original faith then succession breaks down. Originally there were several presbyters (elders) in a local Christian Community, but later it became the practice to have one bishop who presided over the church in an entire region. The separation of clergy from laity became definitive - but this development did not have scriptural support.

What evidence is there to support the view that Peter was the superior and unquestioned leader of the early Church in respect of both doctrine and morals? It has already been noted that Peter's judgement on the basic tenet of Christian faith - 'the sacrifice of Christ' - was fallible. In the proceedings at the Council of Jerusalem the Apostle James takes precedence over Peter - Acts 15. The Apostle Paul rebuked Peter over Peter's attitude to Gentile believers - Galatians 2:11-14. Most important of all are Peter's own words in his First Letter. In chapter 2 he declares that Jesus Christ is the foundation stone of the Church, and in the last chapter he disclaims any unique authority for himself, decries dictatorship, and encourages humility - 1 Peter 2:1-8, and 5:1-7.

The practice of laying on of hands is often associated with the maintenance of a link from New Testament times. The term is used in both the Old and New Testaments with several associations and related meanings. In general, it is associated with the bestowal of blessings, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the commissioning of disciples for special tasks, and in healing.

The Foundation of the Early Church

The Church is often associated with the idea of being an earthly dwelling place for the God of Heaven. In this respect many people think of a Church as a special building dedicated to the worship of God. In the Old Testament there is evidence of buildings being used as a meeting place for worshippers to meet with their God. The tabernacle was a moveable tent which was designed by God and was used by the Israelites in their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. The first Temple was built by Solomon in Jerusalem according to God's design.

In the time of Jesus, Herod's Temple in Jerusalem was the centre for the Jewish religion and there were numerous synagogues in Palestine and elsewhere. To the ordinary Jew the massive and ornate Temple building would be regarded as indestructible, but Jesus said that the Temple would be razed to the ground - Luke 21:5-6. In connection with Jesus' prophecy, we note the words of Stephen and Paul "... the Most High does not live in a house that human hands have built" and "God ... does not make his home in shrines made by human hands" (Acts 7:48; 17:24).

The important principle which operates throughout history is that God determines how and where He will be worshipped by man. In the time of Christ, under the apostles, and for a long period afterwards - probably until well into the third century - the early Christians did not have church buildings.

In the New Testament the original Greek word *ecclesia* is translated church in most English versions of the Bible. It always means an assembly of people - a fellowship, and cannot mean a building. And yet there are several references in the New Testament to a house and temple as God's dwelling place, but we can understand

that some of these references are not meant to be literal. Consider the Apostle Peter's own statement about the Ecclesia. He portrays the Church as being made up of living stones, and obviously he is referring to believers. He describes Jesus Christ as the keystone of this building (1 Peter 2:4-8). In his letter to early Christians at Ephesus the Apostle Paul contrasts their association with God and Christ before and after conversion. He speaks of the privileges accorded to Christians – "... you are citizens like all the saints, and part of God's household. You are part of a building that has the apostles and prophets for its foundations, and Christ Jesus himself for its main cornerstone. As every structure is aligned on him, all grow into one holy temple in the Lord: and you too, in him, are being built into a house where God lives, in the spirit." (Ephesians 2:19- 22).

The church was an association of believers. How did men and women come to believe? By the word of God. (See Isaiah 55 and Romans 10). The preaching of the apostles was a fulfilment of the teaching of the Old Testament. It is very significant that the emphasis in the New Testament witness is upon the authority of the scriptures rather than on Apostolic authority. The scriptures were provided by God who employed inspired men. Note that in Revelation 1:1 the Divine message came from God to Christ and from Christ himself to the Church via the Apostle John.

Warnings about false teachers

One of the most important features of Jesus' ministry, which must not be overlooked, was his scathing condemnation of the religious leaders of his day. He was very critical of the way in which so much attention was devoted to tradition and to the ritual aspects of religion. In New Testament times the Jews had a great body of tradition - a vast collection of human teachings and commentaries on the Holy Scriptures - especially on the Law of Moses. These works were highly prized by the Jewish authorities and they gave this literature preference over the Divine Scriptures.

"So these Pharisees and scribes asked him, 'Why do your disciples not respect the tradition of the elders but eat their food with unclean hands?' He answered, 'It was of you hypocrites that Isaiah so rightly prophesied in this passage of scripture: 'This people honours me only with lip - service, while their hearts are far from me. The worship they offer me is worthless, the doctrines they teach are only human regulations. You put aside the commandment of God to cling to human traditions.' And He said to them, 'How ingeniously you get round the commandment of God in order to preserve your own tradition!'....In this way you make God's word null and void for the sake of your tradition which you have handed down. And you do many other things like this' - Mark 7:5-9 and 13.

This is not an isolated passage from the Lord's teachings. Matthew records a lengthy and more scathing attack by our Lord on the hypocrisy of the Jewish leaders (See Matthew chapter 23). The question which faces us today is: 'To what extent do Jesus'

words apply to situations prevalent now?’ Besides these severe comments on the religious practices current in the First Century, Jesus warned that there would be a departure from the truth taught by him and his disciples. There can be no doubt about the severity of these warnings and forecasts. “Beware of false prophets who come to you disguised as sheep but underneath are ravenous wolves” (Matthew 7:15).

The Apostle Paul was also concerned about future problems which he knew would face the early Church. When he left Ephesus for the last time he counselled the elders there with these words:

“Be on your guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you the overseers, to feed the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know quite well that when I have gone, fierce wolves will invade you and have no mercy on the flock. Even from your own ranks there will be men coming forward with a travesty of the truth on their lips to induce the disciples to follow them. So be on your guard” (Acts 20:28-31).

This forecast made by Paul came true before very long. In his letter to the churches in Galatia the Apostle expresses astonishment that some of the believers there were leaving the Christian community which he had established on his missionary journey. The preaching of ‘another gospel’ by some believers was causing serious confusion and disruption. Paul is forthright in his criticism.

“... if anyone preaches a version of the Good News different from the one you have already heard, he is to be condemned.” - Galatians 1:9.

The Apostle Peter also warned that there would be false teachers in the early Church, just as there were false prophets in Old Testament times, and that these men would disrupt the Way of Truth - 2 Peter 2:1-3.

It is to be noted that in the main, these warnings referred to the infiltration of false teaching -Christianity was to be corrupted from within its own body!

Our Responsibility

The Bible is the only source of authority. Its principles are unchanging and everlasting. The scriptures provide a secure foundation for faith. Let us emphasise that the Holy Scriptures are God’s revelation to man - they open up the way of salvation and are intended to reveal, not conceal, the purpose of God. The Bible contains all that is necessary for salvation.

What is our responsibility then? Men and women possess the potential for good and evil. We have the free will to exercise choice in this world. It is important to reinforce the point that, when Jesus and the Apostles were preaching, they always appealed to

the written authority of the Holy Scriptures. The oral tradition was not given superior authority.

After his resurrection Jesus spoke to the disciples about the Scriptures:

“Then, starting with Moses and going through all the prophets, he explained to them the passages throughout the scriptures that were about himself ... ‘everything written about me in the Law of Moses, in the Prophets, and in the Psalms, has to be fulfilled’. He then opened their minds to understand the scriptures ...” Luke 24:27, 44 and 45.

When Paul was at Thessalonica he went into the synagogue and reasoned with the congregation from the scriptures. On leaving that city he moved on to Berea and again taught in the synagogue. Luke’s account of his experience there is very instructive - for he commended the Jews for their diligence in comparing the Apostle’s preaching with Old Testament writings:

“Here the Jews were more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, and they welcomed the word very readily; everyday they studied the scriptures to check whether it was true” - Acts 17:11.

These people were following the scriptural principle “Come now and let us talk over” - Isaiah 1:18.

The Apostle Paul made repeated appeals to the Holy Scriptures using the phrase “Scripture says”. It is obvious from the accounts in Acts that Paul was at pains to emphasise the importance of the written word. He wrote to Timothy:

“... ever since you were a child, you have known the holy scriptures - from these you can learn the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and can profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people’s lives and teaching them to be holy. This is how the man who is dedicated to God becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work” (2 Timothy 3:15-17).

The Apostle James states:

“... (God) made us his children by the message of the truth” (James 1:18)

The Apostle Peter declares that the believer is born by the Word of God:

“... your new birth was not from any mortal seed, but from the everlasting word of the living and eternal God... What is this word? It is the Good News that has been brought to you” (1 Peter 1:23-25).

In his preaching about Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God, Paul was concerned to encourage his hearers to check what preachers said with what was recorded in the Old Testament. (These were the only authorised Scriptures extant at that time). This practice is endorsed by the Apostle in several of his letters to the early believers. For example, he wrote to the church in Corinth:

“Examine yourselves to make sure you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you acknowledge that Jesus Christ is really in you? If not, you have failed the test, but we, as I hope you will come to see, have not failed it.” (2 Corinthians 13:5-6).

Is a considerable degree of academic ability necessary in order to ‘test all things’? No. The Bible never states that Divine knowledge can only be acquired by clever people. The attitude of men and women in searching for Truth is all important. Throughout the Bible there is emphasis on the fact that God is pleased with those who are humble and contrite and who are willing to learn from the Scriptures. The Apostle Paul told the believers at Corinth:

“Take yourselves for instance, brothers, at the time when you were called: how many of you were wise in the ordinary sense of the word, how many were influential people, or came from noble families? No, it was to shame the wise that God chose what is foolish by human reckoning, and to shame what is strong that he chose what is weak by human reckoning; those whom the world thinks common and contemptible are the ones that God has chosen - those who are nothing at all to show up those who are everything.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-28).

The same Apostle told the Philippians – “... work for your salvation in fear and trembling.” (Philippians 2:12).

In the light of such Biblical teaching how can anyone defend the surrender of individual responsibility to the Church? We all have a responsibility to examine Bible teaching and accept its message. We have seen from the New Testament record itself, that false teaching crept into the early

Church from outside but, more importantly, heresies were also promoted by church members themselves. If Jesus and his apostles were scathing in their criticisms of false teachings which arose during the First Century, then what about the ‘developments’ of ideas and practices in the following centuries? We are confident that we are observing Christian principles when we say it is essential to follow New Testament Christianity - that which was taught by Jesus and his apostles.

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