

One Bible – Many Churches ...

Does it matter what we believe?

THE title of this booklet is partly factual and partly a matter of judgement. *One Bible – Many Churches ...* is surely indisputable. *Does it matter what we believe?* is open to discussion. It seems sensible to begin where there is likely to be the greatest measure of agreement – that there is one Bible. Surely this is manifestly true. The Bible may be a collection of books but they are brought together into one volume, called ‘the Bible’. Of course there are several versions and many translations – but one Bible, whether the language is eastern or western, ancient or modern. The text is not open to alteration in order to bring it into harmony with this point of view or that. There are hundreds of scholars quick to detect any interference with the book. Thousands of pens are poised ready to condemn any attempt to meddle with the words. The Bible is unique, using the word in its proper sense – there is *one* Bible. It is true that the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches include some additional books which are not recognised by Protestant churches as inspired. But they make little difference to the integrity of the central collection of 66 books.

That there are many Churches seems equally self-evident. There are some who say that there are many names but the church is one. This is a verbal device to hide the divisions. The different names do stand for different causes. True, they are alike in some respects but the differences are real enough. There is a difference of teaching between one church and another, and sometimes the difference is very substantial, even fundamental. Then sometimes within the same church there are ideas and practices which contradict each other. In any case the effect speaks for itself – some seeking to find the true church are puzzled and perplexed and forced to cry at last that they cannot make up their mind when faced with so many different churches clustered around one Bible. The problem is intensified by the fact that most of the differing churches claim to have based their teaching on the one Bible. How has this situation arisen?

The development of differences

When the 16th Century Protestant Reformers opposed and subsequently separated from the Church of Rome, their battle cry was ‘The Bible, the whole Bible and nothing but the Bible’. Underlying that cry was a theory that if people could read the Bible for themselves they would discover the truth about God and His purpose, would shed their old errors, and consequently would be united by a common faith.

One of the great disappointments of Protestantism has been that the theory did not work. Instead of the unity which its founders expected, it produced in the course of time a diversity of opinion and an increasing number of competing religious communities all claiming in some sense to be founded on the Bible, resulting in the religious chaos in Christendom today. One of the reasons for the modern ecumenical movement is the awareness that the existence of so many different churches is a reproach to Christianity itself. That personal freedom which was an essential feature of the Protestant cause has produced the very things which have weakened it. Supposedly centred on one Bible, the Protestant churches have in the course of the centuries multiplied their differences.

Was the theory wrong ó the idea that the teaching of the Bible was all-sufficient and, to people of sense and goodwill, self-evident? The fact that results fell far short of the ideal does not make the theory false. As will be shown later, there were other factors which spoiled and limited the unifying effect of religious truth. The Bible's claims about itself assert that its teaching is all-inclusive and all-sufficient. It is God speaking to men and women. It proclaims that God has spoken all down the ages by His holy prophets and now at last He has spoken by His own Son Jesus Christ. What has been spoken, by the prophets and by the Son, for us is imprinted on the pages of the Bible. Take away the Bible and, as far as we are concerned, God is silent. Some religious people claim to have seen visions and received special revelations, apart from the Bible, but for the vast majority of men and women there is no sign or signal from heaven. The voice of heaven is heard in the printed sentences of God's word in the scriptures ó and nowhere else.

Consider the testimony of the Bible about its all-sufficiency. Our Lord often rebuked the people of his own day ó but never did he rebuke them for reading the scriptures, rather he rebuked them for not acting in accordance with what they read. He said, search the scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me. But you are not willing to come to me that you may have life (John 5:39,40). To the Sadducees he said about their attitude to resurrection, are mistaken, *not knowing the scriptures* (Matthew 22:29), and then went on to say, "But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken *to you* by God, saying, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.' Jesus said this was God speaking to the generation of that very day, and because they ignored it they were going astray.

The holy scriptures

The Apostle Paul had a companion in the ministry of the Gospel named Timothy ó the son of a Jewess from Lystra. Two of Paul's epistles were written to that young man and in one of them the apostle used these words: "From childhood you have known the holy scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:15). From this letter to Timothy we also see how he received his early knowledge of the scriptures: it was from his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois. In Acts 17 there is a record of how Paul and Silas preached the Gospel to the Jews at Berea. They received the word gladly, but tested the truth of what Paul and Silas had said and "searched the scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so". Paul did not rebuke them for doing this but rather commended them for their zeal.

To the believers at Thessalonica he wrote, "Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). These references lay emphasis upon the fact that the scriptures are able and sufficient to teach the truth about God necessary for salvation. They uphold the right and duty of ordinary people to read the scriptures for themselves.

It is perfectly true that the Apostle Peter warned the believers against those who twist the scriptures and make them mean something which is not intended. But he never warned them against reading the scriptures, for he exhorts them "as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2). Their spiritual growth and increased knowledge of God depended upon a careful reading of the word of Truth. There is not the slightest suggestion that by doing this they would be exposed to danger or would be led away from the faith. On the contrary, the essential and central feature of these passages is that the

scriptures are able to teach people the truth about salvation and that truth is comprehensible by ordinary people. According to the Bible, then, the Reformers' theory was right, but something went wrong.

Many churches

The Bible is intended not to conceal but to reveal, not to cause confusion but to establish unity. How then has it come about that since the Bible has been made available for people to read in their own language, so many different churches have emerged? In the main, two factors have produced this unhappy result. Firstly, if the Bible is to be understood properly, it is necessary to come to it with an open mind, ready to be instructed and willing to submit to its teaching. The trouble has been that so many people have come to it with preconceived ideas, seeking in its pages support for doctrines already formulated from other sources.

There has been a marked tendency for people to make God after their own image ó to fashion their ideas about Him out of their own desires, so that they invent a God in accordance with what they wish Him to be, rather than as He is revealed in the Bible. They come to the Bible seeking support for a self-invented God and very often they are satisfied that the Bible supports them.

This satisfaction is secured by a superficial reading of certain passages of scripture, a personal selection of parts of the Bible which appear to be favourable, and a rejection of those parts which are not. Furthermore, doctrines are formed or supported on isolated texts without reference to the general teaching of scripture. Very often doctrines tend to be isolated from each other, like parcels tied up separately, and the final and logical outcome of their teaching is not looked at in any depth. So the discrepancies and contradictions are not brought to light.

Secondly, certain churches have been dominated by particular doctrines upon which more than usual emphasis has been laid, which has resulted in the neglect of other important teaching. The outcome of this has been a dislocated and unbalanced view of Bible truth leading to false conclusions and a disordered conception of salvation.

In the religious world today, therefore, it would be impossible to get a clear and unanimous explanation of the kingdom of God, the authority and inspiration of the Bible, the second advent of Jesus Christ, the importance of baptism, the nature of the church, the meaning of the Lord's Supper, the nature of man, the resurrection of Jesus Christ and life after death. Churches which for years have been teaching their people a theology based on the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, now find that some of their leading theologians and writers are saying that this doctrine is not Biblical but pagan; that survival of the individual will not come about by flight of the soul to heaven at death, but by the resurrection of the body at the second advent of Jesus Christ.

This is the Biblical view of the nature of man, but only a few believe it. The Bible says that man is mortal. It says it categorically and emphatically, and yet in the religious world there is uncertainty, doubt and deliberate contradiction. This one thing alone is representative of the confusion and multiplicity of ideas which confront the seeker after religious truth. It so often fills him with dismay and despair, or breeds an indifference leading to apathy and agnosticism. Sometimes that indifference is expressed in the belief that it does not matter

which church you attend or what you believe ó with so many to choose from, one is as good as another.

Does it matter?

As a first step, apply the test of common sense. Imagine someone in hospital waiting to undergo a surgical operation. The person finds that the surgeon who is to perform it holds the opinion that it does not matter about the principles of surgery ó the important thing is to get the instruments and proceed with the work. It is almost certain that the patient would discharge himself! Imagine someone preparing to travel by plane who discovers that the pilot thinks it does not matter about the principles of aerial navigation ó the really important thing is to get the plane into the air and trust to a sense of direction. It is almost certain that one passenger would choose an alternative form of transport!

These illustrations are, of course, hypothetical and outrageous. Yet when it comes to religion, what in the case of surgery and navigation is obviously wrong and dangerous, is too often accepted as reasonable and harmless. Plenty of people hold the view that it does not matter what you believe about God so long as you lead a respectable life. On the face of it, does this seem sensible? Is it likely that God, who made the world and sustains it day after day by laws which are unchangeable and absolute, would be indifferent to how people regard Him? Would it not be reasonable to expect that this God would be vitally interested in what men and women think about Him and how they treat His word? But the truth is that man is not left to his own feelings on this matter. God has spoken and the Bible claims to be His word. It is there that God reveals the principles of true religion, principles whereby we may come to God and be accepted by Him and receive His salvation.

Upon reflection, therefore, it is just as dangerous and just as foolish to neglect the principles of true religion as it is to neglect the principles of surgery or navigation. The only difference is that the results of neglect in the case of religion are not so obvious at first, but at the last are more permanent and irrevocable. In the case of religion, just as truly, somebody's life is at stake.

What about tolerance?

Religious tolerance is a blessing when it means freedom to worship God without interference. It is less than a blessing if it infects people with a kind of religious colour blindness which robs them of the capacity to distinguish black from white. In the old days when men and women felt strongly about their religious beliefs, they were prepared to speak boldly about what they thought was right and wrong. Now in this age of broadmindedness and compromise, religious controversy is reckoned to be out-of-date; almost something to be ashamed of. Dogmatic positions are taken less often ó moderation is the key word and anything which is likely to fan the flames of controversy is disapproved.

In some quarters it seems that the great thing is not to come to definite conclusions about anything. -Discuss and consider but never decide.ø-Some religions may be better than others ó but all religion is good.ø-Choose the one that suits you and brings out the best in you and does no harm to others.øThis point of view has the appearance of moderation and reasonableness ó but it contradicts the teaching of the Bible. Intrinsic in true religion, as revealed in the Bible, is the idea of *intolerance* ó that is to say, because there is a true religion,

that which is in opposition to it and contradicts it must be false. This point of view is unpalatable, but to the honest mind it must be logical.

About the method of approaching God, the Bible uses words which are imperative and categorical. An example is in Hebrews: "Without faith it is impossible to please him, for he who comes to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him" (11:6). Notice the words *impossible* and *must*. The writer does not say it is better to come to God with faith or that it is difficult to come without faith. He says, "Without faith it is *impossible* to please him, for he who comes to God *must* believe". Those words allow no middle course. Whoever comes must believe and it is no good coming without faith. This provokes the question, "Why won't I do as I am? What's wrong with me like this?" The Bible reveals that God is not prepared to accept anybody because of their natural goodness. It is unacceptable and it would be unfair. Some are born in bad circumstances and live in degraded conditions, so that natural goodness is a struggle; others are born in good circumstances and live in congenial surroundings, so that being good comes easier. God does not accept people on this unfair basis.

The basis for God's acceptance

In the sight of God all are sinners. There is only one standard of righteousness, holiness and justice, and that is God's standard. God will not at any time compromise that standard in order to accommodate the fickleness of men and women. Sin today is no less sinful than it was in the days of Noah or Adam. God has not evolved from a God who hates sin to a God who merely overlooks it. Human goodness compared with God's standard of righteousness is stunted and impoverished. It is no good coming to God with our "scorecard" which testifies that we are decent people, we pay our debts and never harm our neighbours. In the context of respectability this may be important, but in the context of salvation it is paltry. Our bit of righteousness is no passport to God's favour. The Bible teaches that we have to confess that we do not measure up to God's standard. This is called Repentance.

Since men and women cannot be received on the basis of their natural goodness, which is inadequate and unfair, God receives them on the basis of their *faith*. The faith they show is counted by Him as righteousness. This is the great doctrine of justification by faith and explains why it is impossible to come to God faithless, and why those who come must believe. In order to show how the great principle operates the Apostle Paul takes the case of one man, Abraham. Abraham received certain promises from God which, at the time they were spoken, appeared, humanly speaking, to be impossible of fulfilment. But Abraham had faith in the promises in spite of adverse appearances and God counted this for righteousness:

"He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what he had promised he was also able to perform. And therefore it was accounted to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, *but also for us*. It shall be imputed to us who believe in him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offences, and was raised because of our justification." (Romans 4:20-25)

Paul insists that the principles which operated in the case of Abraham are true for every man who will come to God for salvation.

Faith in the word of God

The essential feature of the process is faith in the word of God. This is the beginning of the new life, the basis of true religion. The Apostle Peter writes of being reborn again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the *word of God* which lives and abides forever (1 Peter 1:23). This is why so many parts of the New Testament lay emphasis upon the necessity for faith:

“He came to his own, and his own did not receive him. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, to those *who believe* in his name.” (John 1:11,12)

“Without faith it is impossible to please him, for he who comes to God *must believe*” (Hebrews 11:6)

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who *believes* and is baptized will be saved.” (Mark 16:15,16)

Faith or superstition

As faith is so important, it stands to reason that the faith which God requires cannot mean believing in what is false or self-invented. The faith which God insists on is faith in what is true, because faith in what is false is really superstition. The Bible says, “As he thinks in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7). It tells us that ultimately a man’s actions are conditioned and regulated by what he believes, and therefore it follows that a false belief could result in a false life.

The writers of the New Testament knew this and were constantly urging the believers to hold fast to the truth. Consider the strong words which the Apostle Paul used on this very issue:

“But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.” (Galatians 1:8,9)

These are solemn sentences. Paul pronounces a double curse on those who preach falsehood. This is an example of the intolerance already referred to. It is so different from the modern attitude of easy tolerance towards ideas about God which are totally divergent and sometimes mutually destructive. Paul insisted that the Gospel he preached was the truth and anything which contradicted it was a lie. He maintained that there was a definable standard of truth about God and His purpose and those who departed from it were in danger.

It is popular today to say that the Christian faith cannot be defined in propositions. It is supposed to be too personal and too mystical for that. It is this point of view which encourages so many to say that it does not matter what you believe or which church you join. But such a view is manifestly false, measured by the teaching of the New Testament where the church is called “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). There is a solemn duty laid on all believers to ensure that *their faith and their church* are built on that true foundation, as it is revealed in the Bible.

When Jesus was speaking to the Samaritan woman about true religion, he used some very significant words:

“The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship him.” (John 4:23)

What Jesus meant was that true religion does not consist of mere outward show and external ritual, nor only the performance of certain acts of praise and submission, but rather it is an inward condition, of the spirit and not just of the letter. This emphasises the importance of living according to the way God has commanded. It is possible to praise God with our lips but in our lives to dishonour Him. It is possible to sing songs of submission and bow our heads in humility and yet in our hearts to be as proud as peacocks. We prove the truth of our religion by the obedience of our lives. The need is to discover the truth by humble reference to God’s word, and to apply it in daily living. This is worship “in spirit and truth”.

A matter of life and death

The issue is not just of concern to those interested in theology or who like a religious argument. It is a matter of life and death for all who seek salvation. The question whether it matters about finding the truth can be answered only on the basis of eternal principles revealed in the Bible. The principles which govern our approach to God have always applied; they are ageless.

In Leviticus there is a record of two men who ignored the principles and ended their lives tragically. Nadab and Abihu were priests of the Lord and their lives were regulated by God’s commandments concerning His worship:

“Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them. So fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. And Moses said to Aaron, “This is what the Lord spoke, saying: By those who come near me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified.” (Leviticus 10:1-3)

Priests were right to offer incense before the Lord, and the way of doing it was carefully prescribed by God. But these two men ignored God’s commandments. Perhaps it was due to carelessness, or indifference, or just plain disobedience, but God rejected their worship because it was done in a way He had not commanded.

Some people would say that wrong ways ought to be excused if the objective is right. But this is evidently not true when it comes to worshipping God. This story unmasks and condemns the theory that the end justifies the means. It shows that God is not indifferent to the methods people invent for worshipping in His presence. We may claim the right to please ourselves but it may not please God.

The Bible teaches us over and over again that truth is not advanced by false means, neither will it rest upon corrupt foundations. You cannot worship God by disobeying His commands. We cannot glorify God by being indifferent to His will, any more than could Nadab and Abihu. It is no good coming with “profane fire” now any more than it was then. God has not changed in nature or in purpose. Those who stand in His presence for worship must be those who have bothered to enquire about His will and who have a master passion to do it and obey His word. The old principle which Moses reiterated to Aaron is still true: “By those who come near me I must be regarded as holy; and before all the people I must be glorified” (Leviticus 10:3). If God is to be glorified He must be obeyed. Any church which leads men to

believe that God's word is unreliable, or that His commandments can be ignored, or that it is a matter of choice whether we believe in certain fundamental doctrines, must be false because in the final analysis it teaches people to disobey God's word.

The test of truth

It is no good pleading that we have been misled by other people. In the high court of heaven this is not a valid defence. Jesus said, 'If the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch' (Matthew 15:14). It is no good urging that clever and scholarly people have taught us what to believe and what to do. The test is not scholarship but truth measured by the word of God. Man-made religion is no substitute for God's religion, be it ever so clever. Jesus made this clear when he took the words of an old Hebrew prophet and reinforced their meaning:

'In vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.' (Matthew 15:9)

This is far removed from popular religious teaching of today. There are prominent teachers in some Christian churches today who deny Bible teaching about God and His purpose, who explain away the reality of Christ's resurrection, who throw doubt upon the authority of God's word, and water down His commandments. The moral is that we ought not to be too impressed by the credentials of the 'scholar'. Where scholarship is faithful to God's word and helps us to understand it better we ought to be grateful for it. But the Bible never suggests that human cleverness is the passport to divine knowledge. Instead it tells us that the truth unveils most of her face to those who are humble and of a contrite spirit.

Bible teaching

The great doctrines of the Christian faith are based upon facts. Deny the facts and you falsify the doctrine. Deny the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and he becomes the son of Joseph and not the Son of God: he is made a man of his time and no more. Deny the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ and it strikes at the very foundation of the faith and makes Christ's apostles false witnesses, and leaves the dead in their graves for ever. Deny the fact that Christ worked true miracles and he is robbed of his authority and real status, because he said that the miracles were signs of his divinity. In the end the seeker for the truth has to show a spirit of independence and look carefully at the teaching of the Bible itself rather than accept conclusions second hand.

One of the first things the New Testament emphasises is that doctrine can be defined. Sometimes today it is said that the Christian faith cannot be stated in propositions and that it is something mystical which cannot be analysed. If that be true, here is a strange thing. The Apostle Paul in the letter to the Galatians marvels that some of them had turned away from the truth and had departed from the Gospel to another. The point to notice is this: how can it be said that somebody has departed from something if that something cannot be defined? Surely the teaching of the New Testament is that there is a definable objective standard by which judgements can be made. Now if the Lord God has gone to great care to reveal the truth about Himself and His purpose it is illogical to behave as though it does not matter, and that people can please themselves about what they believe.

The Old Testament passage alluded to above settles this point clearly:

“On this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and *who trembles at my word.*” (Isaiah 66:2)

Trembling at the word of God means understanding it, believing it and obeying it. People are not entitled to please themselves if that leads them to be indifferent to what God has revealed. Men and women ought to look carefully and sincerely at their beliefs.

Vital doctrines to be discovered

Those who have responded to the exhortation to look penetratingly at their own religion and measure it by the word of God have often been surprised to discover that things they had believed all their lives were untrue! The writer acknowledges that this was his experience: such a process exposed the false doctrine of the immortality of the soul and its associated ideas concerning the destiny of the soul after death. It brought release from the doctrines of demons and devils and disembodied spirits. Instead it brought to light the real and vital significance of resurrection as the method of survival, at the second coming of Jesus Christ as King of the World. It brought enlightenment and understanding concerning the kingdom of God – a realisation that it is a real kingdom to be established on the earth, in the very place where human kingdoms are crumbling to decay. It opened up the prospect of life eternal, a life not spoilt by sin or by the challenge of disability, a life immortal and wonderful, to be lived with Christ in the kingdom of God.

It also brought the sobering conviction that one of the most solemn commandments of the Lord had never been obeyed: to be baptized. With an understanding of the Bible doctrine about baptism, it became evident that what had previously passed for baptism in the form of christening was quite out of harmony with scriptural teaching and practice. The word of God demonstrated that baptism is an act of obedience, resulting from faith – a voluntary burial in water as a sign of death to the old life, and a rising again from the water to a new life of obedience.

In the days of the infant church many believers were stoned, beaten, starved, hunted, hounded and eventually martyred. They endured all this because they believed that what they had to say was vital. In the words of Peter, “We ought to obey God rather than men.” If it does not matter what we believe or with whom we worship, then they were mistaken in their determination to preach the truth at all costs.

Examples of living faith

It is profitable to observe how the apostles put into practice the principles already outlined about the importance of knowing the truth revealed by God. There is an interesting case in Acts 10 about a man called Cornelius. The record says that he was a devout man and one who feared God with all his house. He prayed to God always and gave generously of his money for the benefit of others. God sent Peter to find this man and his companions and preach to him the truth about Christ and his kingdom. When they had heard and believed they were baptized into the saving name of the Redeemer. Why it is so interesting is that Cornelius was such a good man in every way, fearing God, praying regularly and living faithfully and generously. But notwithstanding all this, he needed to know the truth and respond to it in order to be saved. By today’s standards many people would say he was good enough to start with, but the narrative proves that it did matter what he believed. He needed to know the truth so that he could respond in faith.

There is a significant case in Acts 8 which concerns a man who by today's standards would be called a Bible reader and a regular churchgoer. He was an Ethiopian, returning to his homeland after worshipping at the temple in Jerusalem. He was sitting in his chariot reading from Isaiah 53. An angel directed a believer called Philip to go to the Ethiopian and help him with his understanding of what he was reading. So Philip joined the man in his chariot and explained to him the truth about Jesus Christ. As they proceeded on the journey they came to some water and the Ethiopian asked to be baptized. Philip replied, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." Once again it is emphasised that faith is essential in the process of conversion.

The third example has to do with Apollos, a man of considerable eloquence, "mighty in the scriptures" (Acts 18:24), said to have been instructed in the way of the Lord, fervent in the spirit. But the record makes it quite clear that more was needed. Two disciples, Aquila and Priscilla, took him and "explained to him the way of God more accurately." It was a matter of vital importance that he understood the way of God *more accurately*.

So there it is: a devout man who prayed every day and lived a faithful life; a Bible reading man who worshipped God reverently; a man mighty in the scriptures who was fervent in spirit and preached diligently. In every case they needed to be taught the truth. None of these examples gives any support to the idea that religious people can please themselves about what they believe. On the contrary, the evidence is that those who mean business about their religion should take care that their faith is consistent with the teaching of the word of God. Saving faith is faith in that which is true. Any other kind is likely to prove abortive.

One Bible or Many Churches? Does it matter which one? In the final analysis the answer will depend upon what the questioner is seeking. If the quest is for friendship, or to satisfy a feeling that one ought to worship somewhere or then the answer is No, it probably does not matter. The answer is Yes, however, if the quest is for eternal life, and a form of worship acceptable to God.

By DENNIS GILLET

Contact us: www.truebibleteaching.com