

The Church Outside The Camp

This article is written to address the thoughts, needs and concerns of people who have already made the decision to worship "outside the camp" for good and proper reasons.

WHAT THIS ARTICLE IS NOT

This is not written to encourage believers to leave their fellowships if they have good, sound churches where there is no danger of deception.

Nor is it encouragement to those who simply have a grievance or are unwilling to submit themselves to discipline, to come out of their churches for those reasons.

This is not written from the viewpoint of any one denomination or group; nor does it have ANY connection to cell churches or the "Open Church" restoration system.

This is also not written as a practical handbook on "how to worship in small groups" although I agree such a handbook might be useful.

Almost every day I get another e-mail from a desperate Christian saying something like this: "we have been uneasy about our fellowship for some time, and now the pastor has visited Brownsville and he's come back preaching all kinds of strange doctrines. The elders rebuked us when we tried to point out where they were scripturally in error, and in the end we just had to leave the church. Some of our family members are still there and we feel sad to have left them, and we are worried about them. Now we cannot seem to find anywhere suitable to go, as all the local churches are importing Toronto manifestations and suchlike. We just don't know what to do or where to go for fellowship. Can you help us?"

Does this sound like you? Do you know people in this situation? At one small meeting in the UK the speaker called for a show of hands of those who were currently outside the conventional church system, and over 50 percent of those attending raised their hands. Nationwide we have a tremendous movement out of the Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, and there is nothing to replace them.

DECLINE IN CHURCH ATTENDANCE

A recent national survey discovered that 71% of the UK population believe in "a god" (although two thirds of these believe in a spirit-force or non-personal god), 70% believe in a soul, 58% in heaven and 68% know about and believe in the Ten Commandments, but when asked how many go to a church building to worship, it was found that 40% of the population NEVER enter a church building, not even once a year.

Less than 8% of the population has been going to church with any regularity. But in this last year alone nearly a quarter of those stopped attending! Clearly there is something wrong. Without pinning the blame on the Church for a decline in belief (which I think would be unfair) it must be said that the traditional church system is failing. There has also been an exodus from the Pentecostal/Charismatic churches, but for different reasons. Although the Restoration/house-church fellowships are the only

churches gaining in popularity and numbers, they are doing so by moving large numbers of "traditional" worshipers out of the system. This might have been a good thing if it denoted a genuine revival of true Christianity. However, ever since the outbreak of the so-called Toronto-blessing in 1994, and increasingly since that time, genuine bible-believing Christians have been leaving their fellowships because they have refused to compromise.

Some are driven out, and some choose to leave because they have had enough of deception, abusive authority, and the lack of regard for sound biblical doctrine. In addition, the spiritual needs of believers are just not being met.

Some of these exiled Christians find other places of fellowship; many do not. Charismatics, especially, get a raw deal when looking for fellowship. They are "neither fish nor fowl", being too "religious" (as they are told!) for revival churches, but not half religious enough for the traditional non-charismatic denominations.

Those who have been used to informal, Spirit-led worship and the use of spiritual gifts do not want to go back to a formal, ritualized service with no free expression of their love of God. But they want to avoid the revival excesses as well. Frequently they end up nowhere, just sharing with family members or one or two others who feel the same way.

This article is addressed to such people, amongst whom I count myself.

IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

In many ways, the British Christian experience is worse than in other countries, and offers less opportunity for finding a good church. Historically, religious worship has taken place in the staid, and often dead, traditional denominations, which as we see are now in serious decline. I see this in part as a judgment for the high level of ecumenism, interfaith activity, homosexuality and liberal doctrine we see in those churches, not to speak of the revival, globalism and so forth.

In terms of church history, the Pentecostal denominations never made a major impact on British religious life. Independent fellowships were practically non-existent. Only from the 1970's have independent churches (house-churches and the like) sprung up, but over the years these have come under the wing of the Restoration (= Latter-Rain/Revival) leaders. The Assemblies of God and Elim Pentecostal groups, in the main, have now both succumbed to Toronto. Thus it is rare to find a good solid and doctrinally sound 'Pentecostal' fellowship, although pockets of reliable fellowship do exist.

The situation here in the UK (and from my observations America is fast catching up) is an impressive, well-heeled, powerful majority of aligned restoration/ reconstruction style churches in the "revival-river" or going down the road of globalism; and a minority of bible-believing individuals of all denominations, who keep loose contact with one another by letter and phone calls and who meet up occasionally at larger conferences given by a handful of reliable speakers. Most of these individuals do not "go to church" as we say (unbiblically!) but meet privately in small groups at home or fellowship just with their own family members.

This group of believers is not organized in any way, and consists of many different people, some of

whom are rock solid in their faith and some of whom are very insecure and frightened by the whole experience of being "outside the camp."

May I make a few observations from my encounters with dispossessed Christians and summarize the feelings they may have:

- Am I the only one, or is my family strange in not "going to church"?
- Will God rebuke me for not going to church?
- Have I really done the right thing - perhaps I am just in rebellion?
- Have I sinned against the elders in my former church?
- Should I have left my friends behind in the fellowship - am I just being selfish?
- Am I now outside the Kingdom of God?
- Will I be able to survive as a Christian outside of organized worship?
- What about the children?
- What about taking communion?
- Should I just go to any local church, for the sake of being under authority?
- Who will teach me?

These and many more questions, I believe, spring to mind once the decision is taken to quit the fellowship. There are all kinds of questions apart from these, and I don't propose to answer them all. Only God can lead a believer to peace and to a right understanding of these things. However, if I can point the way, I am pleased to do so.

Many of these questions will be answered by fellowshiping and talking with others who are in the same situation. The pain and guilt is eased when somebody shares the burden. There are those in the "remnant" as we have come to call it who have a pastor's heart and are capable of upholding and ministering to the weaker ones. Without any "ordination" beyond the calling of God, some will minister effectively to others. This is precisely how the BODY of Christ should function and I believe we are beginning to see a return to bible-based church life.

OUTSIDE THE CAMP

It is also becoming plain that God himself is taking his beloved children on a journey, which involves a different type of fellowship with HIM and with EACH OTHER, an informal destructuralized Church. This has been likened to the Church "Outside the Camp."

"For the bodies of those animals, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Therefore let us go forth to Him, outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you." (Hebrews 13:11-18).

Outside the camp, for the Jews, was a place of reproach, excommunication and defilement. It was a place for cursing, punishment, garbage, human excrement and dead bodies (*Leviticus 13:45-46; Leviticus 24:14; Numbers 5:2-3; Deuteronomy 23:12-13; Numbers 31:19; Numbers 15:33-35*).

But like Paul we are considered by the world as "the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things" (*1 Corinthians 4:13*) and it's unlikely their opinion will change between now and the return of the Lord. So we'd better get used to it. Our place is with the crucified Lord, outside the gates of the citadel of conventional religion.

While some may see this as a disaster, I no longer do. Instead of seeing this exodus from the churches as a destructive thing, I see it as a positive opportunity to recover some of the most precious gems of scripture, lying hidden for ages underneath layers of historical dust.

I also see it as a move of God to both protect his people from error and to preserve a genuine expression of faith and worship in a time of growing apostasy. You could argue that we are witnessing a TRUE "revival!"

WE GO TO THE TABERNACLE OUTSIDE THE CAMP

There is an incident during the Exodus that I want to bring to your attention. In the long wait for Moses to return from the Mount, the people had tired of an unseen God and wanted to have "more, more". They wanted to feel and see and touch their god, and to enjoy ecstatic worship such as they'd seen in Egypt - where religious rituals often descended into an orgy of sex and drugs and abandonment to other "delights" of the flesh.

As you may know, the people donated their gold ornaments and created a calf of gold, and then they partied! When Moses returned, he heard the noise the people were all making and thought there was a war going on. Imagine, then, the shouting, screaming and dancing there must have been. It was religious mayhem (*Exodus 32:17-18*). Furthermore, they were NAKED, clearly indicating the nature of their "worship" (*Exodus 32:25*).

Oh and by the way, did you know that these idolatrous Israelites also experienced GOLD DUST? Yes, for Moses *"took the calf which they had made, burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder; and he scattered it on the water and made the children of Israel drink it"* (*Exodus 32:20*). They had to drink gold dust! Perhaps the revival worshipers should recall that the first mention of gold dust in the Bible is of sin and judgment!

The first thing Moses did was to identify any who dissented from this apostate worship. *"...then Moses stood in the entrance of the camp, and said, "Whoever is on the LORD's side—come to me!" And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him"* (*Exodus 32:26*). So here was a gathering out of the dissenters, or remnant, who were grieved by the idolatry and disorder.

As for the others, God pronounced judgment on them. About three thousand men died as a result of that sin. The remaining people for some time were under a cloud of God's displeasure.

Even though God had saved the Israelites from Egypt, caused them to escape Pharaoh and provided

for them in the wilderness, He now said *"Whoever has sinned against Me, I will blot him out of My book"* (Exodus 32:33). Compare Deuteronomy 29:18-20 and also Revelation 3:4-5:

"You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels."

Then God told Moses, *"... I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people"* (Exodus 33:3).

Next we read that the Tabernacle of His Presence was set up OUTSIDE THE CAMP!

"For the LORD had said to Moses, 'Say to the children of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people. I could come up into your midst in one moment and consume you. Now therefore, take off your ornaments, that I may know what to do to you.'" So the children of Israel stripped themselves of their ornaments by Mount Horeb. Moses took his tent and pitched it outside the camp, far from the camp, and called it the tabernacle of meeting. And it came to pass that everyone who sought the LORD went out to the tabernacle of meeting which was outside the camp" (Exodus 33:5-7).

A PATTERN IN SCRIPTURE

You must know if you are a lover of the word of God, that there is a pattern concerning the Temple, and the people of God. God establishes his presence amongst his people as a whole, but then the majority turn to the worship of false gods, thus God withdraws from them, leaving only a despised and forsaken remnant, often persecuted and driven into the wilderness, there to exist in isolation until they are raised by God.

Even so, a remnant remained, and in time the Holy Spirit returned to a Temple made without hands, initially Jesus and then also His Body - a temple of living stones composed of the remnant of Israel and converts from the Gentile nations (*John 2:19-21; Mark 14:58; 2 Corinthians 6:16*).

We now see this pattern once again in our own time, so we should not be too surprised or dismayed at events.

DESPISED AND REJECTED OF MEN

Those who held to the truth, both in the Old and New Testaments, were usually in a despised minority. When Jesus left this earth after three years of open ministry, he left behind such a small band of followers that they were considered a nonentity. They were hounded from place to place, driven out of their former places of worship, despised by their friends, rejected by their families and even put to death for daring to believe what Jesus had shown them. Despite all that, the victory of the gospel can be seen all around the world.

Our experience of Westernized "Christianity" being in the majority with whole nations supposedly "Christian" - or at least church-going - is an exception rather than the rule. We have been living on borrowed time.

You will recall that, of all the Israelites who set out to reach God's Promised Land, the great majority failed to enter into that blessing, and as scripture reminds us *"For who, having heard, rebelled? Indeed, was it not all who came out of Egypt, led by Moses? Now with whom was He angry forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose corpses fell in the wilderness"* (Hebrews 3:16-17)?

To set out as chosen, blessed and led of the Lord is no guarantee of reaching the ultimate goal safely. Many churches and denominations were originally raised up by the Lord but now we see them "fallen in the wilderness", and we have to move on from there.

THE SMALL AND INSIGNIFICANT

Throughout the Bible, God chose to work with a small, insignificant, or unusual band of people. David the shepherd-boy became the greatest Jewish ruler; Joseph the runt of the litter, rejected by his brothers, becomes a great man, second in command in the land of Egypt and the provider for his entire family. Jonah is called as a prophet despite being fearful and disobedient; Gideon's army is reduced in numbers to a size that would (in natural thinking) be unable to achieve any great victory; and a great walled city is felled by a small band of worshipers blowing trumpets!

Also notice how many of the Bible's great leaders were obliged to spend a time of growth and preparation hidden in the back of beyond. Moses for example only came to greatness after becoming an outcast in Midian, and David was driven out of his city and forced to live like a wandering tribesman with a rag-tag band of followers. Jesus, too, immediately after his baptism and call to ministry was *"led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil"* (Matthew 4:1). So we are in good company.

Returning to my first scripture, it seems obvious by the examples given throughout scripture, and supremely the example of Jesus being crucified "outside the camp", that genuine believers are often called to be outcasts from the main stream of organized religion, just as Jesus was rejected by the majority of his own people, the Jews.

GUILT AND FEAR

Now to look more specifically at the questions I raised at the beginning of this article, I want to point out that the established (priestly) church system - and that now includes a great number of Restoration fellowships - preaches that the Church world-wide is the DOOR to the kingdom, and that coming under the authority of church leaders is mandatory for salvation.

The Roman Catholic Church has taken this to extremes, considering anyone outside of its system to be "separated brethren" and unfit for heaven. It also uses the punishment of "excommunication" believing that anyone denied the benefits of the Roman rituals can never be acceptable to God. They base this on their interpretation of *Matthew 16:18-19* in which Peter is given the keys of the kingdom.

Therefore the pope (the supposed successor of Peter) is believed to have the power and responsibility to open or close the gates of heaven.

While this may be an extreme, we now encounter the same thinking in Protestant/Charismatic churches. It is often found in strongly authoritarian dominionist fellowships and cults. The first time I met a man belonging to the "Bugbrooke Community", now better known as the Jesus Army, we exchanged comments on the pillar of fire that rested over the camp of God, which led the people through the wilderness.

However, while I used the term 'camp' in general to mean all believers, he spoke of only ONE camp upon which the Holy Spirit rested - his own Community and denomination! He explained that his fellowship WAS "his Father" - God - to him and if he left his community, he would no longer be in God's kingdom. This appeared to be what was taught the disciples in that cult.

The concept of the church being God and/or the kingdom encourages the leaders to threaten any dissenters with what amounts to "excommunication". That is, they warn anybody opposed to their rule that to leave the fellowship and to challenge their authority is tantamount to challenging God Himself and falling away from the true faith!

Those who leave the church are told they put themselves outside the hope of salvation. Clearly this is enough to frighten some into staying.

JESUS IS THE DOOR

The teaching that the CHURCH is the Door of Salvation (thus people have to "belong" to a church in order to be fully saved) is not biblical. It is Jesus Christ who is the Door (*John 10:9*). It is by Him that we enter into salvation and eternal life, and we are made HIS disciples, not the disciples of men.

If any individual were to find true salvation in Jesus Christ in a place where no church or pastor existed, that person would still be truly saved. The Church, according to scripture, is the assembly of "called-out ones" or the world-wide body of genuine believers, joined to one another by invisible spiritual ties, and ALL having Jesus as their Head.

There is only ONE Body, even though there may be many local expressions of it. However, once people begin to see their own local fellowship or group of fellowships as the only true church, they have moved outside of the biblical terminology. There is always a temptation to claim that your own denomination is the only true one, but we must be willing to accept that people knowing Jesus as Savior exist in every denomination and therefore the invisible Body of Christ is composed of many different races, denominations and styles of worship.

Having established that, such questions as "will God judge me for not going to church" become meaningless. Although we use the phrase "go to church" what we actually mean is "go to a local building set aside for a particular denomination's style of worship".

Attending a local church is good and useful, and to be recommended as a general tenet of the Christian life. Nevertheless, once you consider the differences between belonging to the Church (the

Body of Christ) and attending a local service you realize that God does not require as a part of your salvation that you attend any particular local expression of worship, especially if that worship is harmful to your faith!

I have never been able to grasp the reasoning of some who go to a dead church or a revivalist church (where the worship either has no reality, or is seriously out of line with scripture) just for the sake of "going to church" - as if God required them to spend one hour of their weekend accruing points on a religious scorecard. If we are not participating in genuine, spiritual, meaningful and biblical correct worship, and meeting with those who really know the Lord - then what is the meaning of "church?"

Nor are we commanded to come under the authority of a man who has never been called of God, has raised himself to a place of authority without regard to other people and merely for the love of power or money, and who regularly preaches error! Yet some will force themselves to sit as the feet of such a man, believing that if they are not "under authority" of some kind they are out of the will of God.

This is lunacy, and I believe it can only be fear and threats that make people act in such a way. If you speak to them, they KNOW their faith is suffering, and they KNOW they are being fed poison but week by week they quietly and patiently go and submit themselves to such a man, simply for fear of "not going to church."

I know one fine young woman who is genuinely called of God and has a superb grasp of scripture, as well as being in active service to the Body in a number of important ways. Yet despite all this, come Sunday she sits under the spiritual authority of a domineering leader who teaches all kinds of errors. This poor woman endures unbiblical teaching, and many offensive practices at the church she attends, things she freely admits are terribly wrong - YET when challenged she will not leave that fellowship for fear that she will no longer "be under a covering". How very sad.

PRACTICAL MATTERS

What does the Bible have to say about "church" and worship, and how can we obey the Lord in these things?

Notice, I am not, and never have, argued for Christians to give up meeting together, nor to abandon the biblical kind of eldership. All I argue for is a correct interpretation of these things, so as to avoid forcing people back into a system that is damaging.

Has God commanded in his word a particular order of service? Has God shown us what we are to do during a "church service?" Are there biblical commands requiring once-weekly attendance at a local fellowship? The surprising answer is - NO.

The bible (and a study of the Early Church) can show us what is necessary to maintain a healthy body of believers, but it cannot lay out an order of service, nor give instructions on how to set up "a church".

CUSTOM OR COMMAND?

Let us here establish one principle of the Christian life - which we are bound to heed and obey the specific **COMMANDS** of God, but with regard to **TRADITIONS** and **CUSTOMS**, we are free to pick and choose!

God commanded certain things in the Bible that are necessary for our Christian life, but throughout Church history men have added their own interpretations and traditions that are not mandatory. Therefore, we should not allow ourselves to be pilloried or condemned for failing to keep the traditions of men. And we should not be cowed into believing we are being disobedient to **GOD**, when in fact all we are doing is disputing with **MAN**.

You should know we cannot find weekly "church meetings" as we know them today either in the New Testament or in the history of the believers up to the third century! At that time, as many of you know, Constantine legitimized Christianity and elaborate worship buildings began to be built for public religious services.

BIBLICAL WORSHIP

And our worship to God? Putting it simply, the biblical way of meeting with, relating to, helping and loving others is close personal relationships, not large public meetings.

The Bible tells us to let the Holy Spirit lead and guide us in all things, including our worship of God (*John 4:24*). That kind of spontaneity is almost completely ruled out when a church "service" is organized down to the smallest detail. Permitting the direct leading of the Spirit in a large meeting often leads to disorder, whereas it is much more feasible in a small intimate group. This alone tells us much about genuine biblical worship.

"Going to church", as we know it, (attending weekly services in a religious building), is the exception rather than the rule in the Bible! Noah, Abraham, Job - none of the OT saints, though truly called of God, 'went to church' yet their experience of God was rich and real. When at last a tabernacle was provided for more formal worship, it was not a fixed structure for formal worship meetings. God dwelt with and moved with the people, and this we know was a pattern of the temple to come, the "temple not made with hands."

Later on, once the people had settled in one place, they were permitted to create a fixed structure, Solomon's Temple. However, that was still not the fulfillment of God's promises with regard to his dwelling with man, but a mere shadow of them. We see from scripture that God was looking far forward into the future, to an invisible, spiritual House of God, Jesus Christ and his Body of living stones (*2 Samuel 7:12-13*).

It was the **OLD** covenant, the shadow not the reality, that had "ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary" (*Hebrews 9:1*).

The New Testament confirms that the only true House of God in this present age is the invisible Living

Temple of the Body of Christ (1 Peter 2:5), and that this was always the intention of God in dealing with his people, for "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24).

"However, the Most High does not dwell in temples made with hands, as the prophet says: 'Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. What house will you build for Me? says the LORD, Or what is the place of My rest'" (Acts 7:48-49)?

Even with a fixed building in place, the OT people of God did not "go to church". For there was only one Temple, in Jerusalem. If you lived outside Jerusalem, then most of the time your religious rituals were conducted IN THE HOME amongst your own family.

Although commanded to "keep the Sabbath," the Jews did not see this in terms of going to a place of public worship. A passage in *Nehemiah 13:15-22* shows that the Sabbath was more about refraining from work and trade than about public worship. (In fact, traveling to a public meeting would have been impossible due to the Sabbath Day restrictions.) Nehemiah rebukes the people in the above passage for many instances of Sabbath-breaking, but missing public worship was NOT among them!

SYNAGOGUES

In later days the Jews set up local synagogues for public worship. Was it at that time God's people were commanded to attend regular services? Certainly synagogues were established, but not because God commanded it in scripture.

Once the Temple worship has been corrupted, the building destroyed, the people dispersed and the Spirit departed, the loss of the rituals and festivals was keenly felt by the exiles and so they created "mini-temples" wherever they happened to be, and this became the normal method of gathering together. However, there was no Ark, no Holy of Holies, no Presence of God between the cherubim! The synagogues were places of prayer and education, but they could never bring back to Israel true, spiritual, God-given worship such as the Lord intended!.

However useful for preserving the teachings of God, and for administration, synagogues were empty shells and not a genuine biblical expression of what it meant to be the children of God. They (like many similar religious buildings today) offer "a form of godliness but denying its power" (2 Timothy 3:5).

This explains why those Jews who accepted Jesus were eventually thrown out of their synagogues. The two expressions of faith were so far apart that they could no longer mix. If Jewish believers continued to "go to church" or the synagogue, it was only for practical reasons of evangelism. They went where the Jews congregated in order to preach to them (Acts 13:14-16; Acts 14:1; Acts 18:4)!

NO BUILDINGS

In the New Testament era, there were NO buildings for the purpose of Christian worship. This is a fact that surprises many. Christians became increasingly persecuted and eventually met "from house to

house", that is, in their own homes, sharing the task of hospitality between them.

And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved (*Acts 2:46-47*).

Notice the use of the word "church" in the above verse, where it applies to the entire body of believers, not to one local house or building!

We see this again in the following verse, which identifies the Church as the saints (believers):

"To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2).

As I said before, there were NO purpose-made buildings or huge congregations meeting regularly for services. Although on particular occasions there would be a larger public gathering, the normal pattern for "assembling yourselves together" was small informal groups in homes.

"Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house" (Colossians 4:15).

"The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house" (1 Corinthians 16:19).

This pattern is now being re-established today, as small groups of believers meet infrequently and informally, but also on occasion gather in larger groups from a wider area for conferences or public meetings.

The conventional church building, and set service, is actually copied from Jewish rituals and practices, with more than a few pagan religious practices thrown in (such as an altar of sacrifice) but few of these can be found in the word of God. They are man-made rituals, CUSTOMS of men, not the requirements of God!

This is not to say that they have no merit, or that Christians cannot make use of such services. Of course God will meet with Christians wherever true heartfelt praise is given, but the fact remains that we are not bound to submit to the customs of men with regard to our experience of worship.

ARE WEEKLY MEETINGS COMMANDED IN SCRIPTURE?

What can we say about the practice of coming together on a Sunday morning and/or evening? Is this commanded in scripture, and do we offend God if we miss the Sunday meeting?

Again, there is surprising little in the Bible to show on which day the believers met. I suspect they met whenever and wherever it was safe and convenient. I also believe they had been liberated from the fear of not properly "keeping" a day of worship set aside and now sought to love, serve and worship

God at all times, continually.

"So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (Colossians 2:16-17).

"... but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4).

"Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name" (Hebrews 13:15).

In the early days of the Church, in Jerusalem and where believers were mainly fresh out of Judaism, the convention of keeping the Saturday Sabbath was doubtless observed, but NOT because it was God's law for the Church. Here we see Christians happily mixing tradition with biblical command, and if there is no real clash between them, well and good. Meeting with other Jews at the synagogue certainly gave the early believers an opportunity to speak about Jesus to their friends. Later this became impossible.

However, there was no binding obligation or law requiring regular attendance at synagogue. Paul clearly felt free either to attend at the synagogue or not, as the occasion demanded. He also in *Galatians 4:9-10* chided those who "*observe days, and months, and times, and years*" things which he described as "*weak and beggarly*" (which means impotent and impoverished, unable to do us any real good).

SUNDAY

It is difficult for us to understand that when the Church first began Sunday was not a day off work, a rest day, or a religious day at all. The Gentile world had no weekly rest day, just irregular pagan feast days. The "day of the sun" was just another day like all the rest.

It is often claimed that the Christians met on the "first day of the week", or Sunday. This would now equate to our Monday, the first working day of our week, so if they did meet on a Sunday it would have been an ordinary working day and not kept as a "Sabbath."

Looking at the Day of Pentecost meeting, in *Acts 2:1*, we see believers gathered in one place, praising the Lord. It was a Sunday, but only because Pentecost fell on that day.

Another reference in *Acts 20:7* tells us nothing about regular meetings, and Paul's advice to the believers, in *1 Corinthians 16:1-2*, to set aside an amount of money on the first day of the week may simply have been a practical measure. Beyond that, there is NO reference in scripture to help us decide when the believers met for worship! The single reference to the Lord's Day (as it is translated) in the Bible (*Revelation 1:10*) seems to refer to the eschatological Day of the Lord, not to Sunday.

THE EMPTY TOMB

Another argument often given for worship on "the first day of the week" or Sunday, is that Jesus rose at sunrise on that day.

However, the disciples and those who were at the Garden Tomb knew otherwise. The women hastened to the tomb as soon as they could after the Sabbath restrictions, having only a short nap and setting off for the tomb long before dawn. When they arrived, just before or at dawn, they found the Lord HAD ALREADY RISEN. The tomb was empty (*Matthew 28:1-6; Mark 16:1-6*).

For a number of reasons too tedious for this article, I believe that Jesus rose shortly after sunset on Saturday evening and NOT at sunrise the next morning, so there would have been no sense of sacredness about Sunday amongst the early Christians.

Therefore, it is an open question as to whether the early believers held any one day to be more special than the others, more sacred, and therefore more fit for worship.

Historically, Sunday did not become a regulated, legalized "Christian" worship-day until the 4th century AD. We know that the choice of that day had as much to do with reverence for the sun-god as to Church custom. Certainly it had nothing to do with the Bible. It is a fact of history that Sunday became a "sacred day" ONLY when the Church had defected from its early purity and had begun the downward slide into ritualism.

ASSEMBLING YOURSELVES TOGETHER

Of all the scriptures used to unsettle or even to condemn those who have chosen to worship "outside the camp", this one is supreme:

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching (Hebrews 10:25).

Does this verse not command regular worship in church? Let's see. We do see here that the first Christians "gathered together". But look at what this verse DOES NOT tell us:

- how often they gathered;
- on which day they did so;
- how many there were,
- what they did,

where they gathered (though other verses explain this was in their homes as we have already seen). Why do people read into this verse a command to "go to church?" Perhaps it is that word "assembling?" But the word simply means "gathering" nothing more or less. It is not talking about going to a church on Sunday mornings!

We must certainly gather together with other believers, but I do believe there is no lack of desire and willingness to obey that scripture amongst the Remnant. Why else would they be desperately seeking for fellowship?

If it really were true that the "Remnant" outside the camp were disobeying the scriptures and "forsaking the assembling of yourselves together" then they would be contentedly playing computer games and going to the beach, instead of desperately crying out for fellowship! If ever a group wanted fellowship more, then I have yet to find it! No, there is no want of desire, but the opportunities are just not there in many cases.

Does this "assembling" necessarily mean a regular weekday event, in which one lapse is tantamount to "backsliding"? Looking at *1 Corinthians 14:23*, Paul uses the phrase "*IF therefore the whole church be come together into one place...*" not WHEN. I suggest that his choice of words indicates that larger public gatherings of the kind described in *1 Corinthians 14* were not necessarily regular events.

In any event, we have no scriptural command to "assemble together" on any specific day, nor regularly, but we are to keep close contacts with other true believers (even if one or two) such that we can form meaningful relationships with them, pray for one another, give practical help and do the other things that build up our faith, such as study the Bible together, pray and praise. Even those totally isolated and without the support of their families can find such fellowship on an irregular basis, sharing on the phone, through e-mail, letters, and occasional visits.

Although not ideal (obviously) this is still in fulfillment of the scriptures on assembling with one another. No one should feel intimidated or condemned when the Hebrews verse is thrown at them by critics of their stand for truth. A refusal to compromise with biblical error, and a determination to obey the spirit rather than the letter of the word, is more highly commended by God than a slavish following of church customs!

DOES GOD COMMAND REGULAR CHURCH ATTENDANCE, REGARDLESS OF ERROR?

The impression is often given - and indeed some preachers make a point of teaching - that Christians should go to a local church no matter what they find there, simply for the sake of obeying scripture.

But see how God HATES religious assemblies when there is no genuine meaning or heart obedience to Him. (This surely also applies to meetings where God's own word is contradicted and the worshipers entertain themselves rather than worship God.)

"When you come to appear before Me, Who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; Seek justice, rebuke the oppressor; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow." (Isaiah 1:12-17).

“Then the Pharisees and scribes asked Him, ‘Why do Your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat bread with unwashed hands?’ He answered and said to them, “Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: ‘This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.’ For laying aside the commandment of God, you hold the tradition of men—the washing of pitchers and cups, and many other such things you do.” He said to them, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition” (Mark 7:5-9).

The 'Organized' Church

Is the only alternative to the 'organized' church, a church of disorder? Many seem to think so. Organized worship has its place and can be uplifting, but tends to become ritualistic. Every activity, however spiritual to begin with, loses its relevance when turned into a conditioned response. I remember the early days of the renewal in the 1970's when clapping or raising hands in worship was a very novel and sometimes astonishing thing to do in church! However, what began as a spontaneous outburst of joy and praise, soon became a charismatic "tradition" and then many raised their hands in every song just because it was "the thing to do". It had lost touch with its spiritual roots and become "organized."

Almost all "church" worship (even in charismatic churches) is a case of "here's one I prepared earlier!" This encourages laziness. If one or two people have all the responsibility of laying on "worship" then performing it on behalf of several hundred, then not only does that place on them a heavy burden, but it allows all the others to 'cop out' of having to think for themselves.

That way, thousands of Christians have grown up believing themselves to be at a peak of spiritual fitness, whereas in fact they are totally dependent on others. In any sudden crisis they find themselves unable to pray, ignorant of the scriptures, and out of touch with God.

I believe that God would far rather receive the stumbling prayer of an immature believer feeling his way in personal worship, than any amount of eloquent prayers said by rote. It is better to say "Jesus! Jesus!" out of a heart full of praise, than to recite a thousand words that have no spiritual life.

Does this mean that those meeting "outside the camp" will reject any kind of order or organization? Absolutely not. We must not descend into anarchy, where anything goes. We must strive to keep a balance between spontaneity and disorder.

If there is a genuine reverence for God (and especially in a small group) there will probably never be a need for organization; but in larger groups containing children, new converts, the immature or those with a tendency to dominate, somebody with God-given abilities will need to keep an eye on the meetings and steer them in the right direction. That does not mean electing somebody to do EVERYTHING, which is the equal and opposite error.

ORGANIZATION

Does being out of the church system mean that we reject all organization? While encouraging informal meetings, I am not advocating total disarray!

On the one hand we can be too formal, forcing everything into a rigid structure for fear of awkward silences, or disruptions; on the other hand we can become altogether too spiritual and end up like a Quaker meeting where everybody is silently waiting for the inner prompt and scared to say anything in case it is not a direct word from the Lord!

Organization and planning, in themselves, are not cardinal sins. There are some things that would never happen unless we organized them. On the other hand, when it comes to following the Lord's leading in worship, we should be careful not to overrule the paths God has laid out for the meeting, refusing to follow his lead because it does not fit into our planned schedule. Once again, keeping a balance between the two is the goal.

The biggest problem in fellowships is people! There are so many different personalities to cater for, each at a different stage of growth. It takes a wise shepherd to lead all these folks to pasture.

You will probably find the first hurdles to your new-found freedom to worship are two sets of people coming from different ends of the spectrum:

1. Those who never say anything and never contribute, no matter how much you encourage them.
2. Those who have a desire to lead and set themselves up as authorities over you.

The first set of people is shy to the point of reclusive, and pretend to be incapable of doing anything. They tend to drain the other members and ask for support in everything they do. If you are not careful, these people end up getting the lion's share of attention, and never contribute a thing. You must be firm in drawing these people out of their shells and requiring them to make a start by reading from the Bible or saying a short prayer.

The second set of people is generally arrogant, and believe themselves to have a God-given right to lead the group. They sense an opportunity to elevate themselves, but you must make sure the message of the BODY is repeated regularly so that everybody feels they have a place, and a role to play. Only if you give in and allow domineering people to take over will they present a problem. I find such people usually leave the group after a time, because they are not getting their own way.

MOTIVATION

It is the fear of some that they cannot survive outside of conventional church life, because the church lays on social activities, and arranges neat packages of teaching, worship, prayer and bible study. Some feel that, outside the motivation of those activities, they will fail to thrive as Christians.

But our Christian lives should not be motivated by others. Jesus called men and women to be HIS

disciples, not the disciples of the leadership. We sit at the feet of Jesus, in spirit, not at the feet of learned scholars and preachers. If you see yourself more as a member of your church/denomination than a disciple of Jesus Christ, then your focus is wrong. If your sense of belonging centers on your fellowship, rather than Jesus Christ, then you are setting yourself up for a fall.

If a Christian is unable to survive without the impetus that others provide, then he/she desperately needs to mature and develop some independent spiritual virtues. Anyone today who is looking to OTHERS to lean on will have a nasty shock when persecution and troubles come along. Even in the absence of persecution, it is a wise Christian who stands on his or her own spiritual feet, able to seek God directly for help and guidance, knowing how to pray, and having a good working relationship with God.

Unstructured worship in a small group of believers, as I have said, encourages this independent spiritual life. Yet independence must always be tempered with respect and honor for the other members, for we all depend on one another. In the Bible the Body is pictured as a functioning composite of equals parts, each with a role to play (some greater, some lesser) but all working inter-dependently for the good of the whole.

THE BODY

In your physical body, each organ and member not only has a unique role, but each is dependent on all of the others. We know how quickly a sick stomach throws out all the other organs, and the whole body feels ill. Similarly, in Christ's Body, the Church, each member must be encouraged to find his or her God-appointed role, and to function fully in that role as an independent member of the Body, yet dependent on all the other members.

There is one reason for seeing the small home-based fellowships as a positive sign of Christian growth today. That is, God may be in the process of training and equipping people to endure the coming persecution.

In almost every country where persecution broke out the Christians had to retreat to small, hidden, home-based fellowships. Those who could only function as Christians within an organized structure had a hard time surviving, but those whom God had called out and trained beforehand were ready to provide sanctuaries and refuges for the persecuted.

God had raised up leaders in those countries amongst the ordinary folk (knowing that most of the ordained church leadership would be imprisoned or killed). When the time came, there was a provision made for those who needed help and counsel. There was also a network ready to offer practical help, to house the widows, give financial aid and minister to the sick. This similar move to house-churches in our own nations may be God's provision for our day and age, so we do well to avoid despising the "*day of small things*" (*Zechariah 4:10*).

Leadership and Authority

Being outside the camp does not mean we no longer have any authority structure or that we do not

need elders. The Bible indicates that elders are a vital part of any Christian church. However, I do draw the line at demanding (as some do) that all Christians put themselves under the authority of a specially accredited and ordained minister, just for the sake of being "under a covering" as if there were something magical about having a man to lead you in the faith. This is a hangover from the old days of priesthood, where believers could not speak to or hear from God direct, but were forced to go to the Prophets or the Temple Priesthood for all their religious needs.

As most of you already know, we have been liberated from the NEED to follow the teachings of a Priest or spiritual Father (or whatever else he might be called). Christianity is unique in that it offers full, free, unrestrained and personal contact with God by the individual.

Jesus came calling God "my Father" and although the Jews found this utterly shocking, and rejected the idea, we Christians perhaps take it for granted without discerning its meaning. We are not bound by laws to an overbearing Master so much as in a family relationship with a Father. We owe him respect, obedience and praise. We do not follow him out of a sense of duty but because of our love for Him, and His for us!

This glorious, unique one-to-one relationship should not be jeopardized by excessive cow-towing to Authorities and Leaders. Too many Christians submit themselves to leaders and ministers to such an extent that they end up being unable to think for themselves and can do nothing without "guidance" from others! This is a recipe for disaster, especially in these latter days when every individual is under personal attack by deceiving spirits eager to divert his or her minds from the truth.

The church system has its own way of appointing elders, which reflects the traditions of many years. However, once 'outside the camp' we no longer need to search in the religious newspapers for an ordained minister to come hundreds of miles across country to "lead" us. We do not appoint a stranger to be our shepherd, but we expect and pray that God will raise up elders from within the Body.

Nor do we make an artificial and unscriptural division between "clergy" and "laity" where a small number of men are given rulership over the majority.

The pattern throughout the New Testament is that elders were appointed, after a certain time for God to mature the new converts, from amongst the fellowship - not from out of town. However, these elders did not become well-known names with important international ministries, with certificates pinned to their office walls and a diary to regulate appointments with the church membership.

In fact, some 20 years after Pentecost, Paul still describes the leaders (including such figures as Peter, James and John!) as those who SEEMED to be in a place of leadership. There was no blatant, man-led Church Government apparent here, even after more than two decades of Christianity (*Galatians 2:1-9*).

MINISTRY AND SERVICE

Leadership was low-key and "of the people" with a minister seeing himself as servant to the Body, not an important figurehead and Supremo holding the reins of church government! It is interesting to look

at the various words used to denote leadership in the New Testament Church because they give an impression very different from our modern-day concepts:

- MINISTER (1) - diakonos; one who runs errands, attends on others, who waits upon, who serves others. (We get our word "Deacon" from this)
- MINISTER (2) - huperetes; a subordinate, assistant, (under-oarsman in a boat) (*Acts 13:5*)
- MINISTER (3) - leitourgos; from LAOS (people) and ERGON (deed or work) - a public servant or functionary or public benefactor, who performs works on behalf of the people
- DEACON - (see above) (*1 Timothy 3:10*)
- BISHOP - episkopos; an overseer or guardian from EPI (over) and SKOPOS (to peer about or watch, from which we get our word sceptic)
- PASTOR - poimen; a shepherd (literally or figuratively): (*1 Peter 2:25*)
- ELDER - presbuteros; a senior; specifically in scripture, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin (also figuratively, member of the celestial council) or a member of the church council. (*1 Peter 5:1-7*)

Each word above has to do with service not lordship! The task of the elders is explained in *1 Peter 5:1-7*. It is to "feed the flock" (also see *Acts 20:28*) and to "take the oversight" that is, be guardian of the flock. But this oversight must not be done "by constraint" nor "as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock". The scripture continues with an admonition for all -

"Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:5-7).

ORDINATION

How are elders appointed? God will point out those who are able and gifted to be elders, having a care for all. The word "ordination" that has come to mean working for a degree in a theological college of some kind, actually denotes a simple appointment to a task. The word used in *Hebrews 8:3* is kathistemi which simply means "to designate".

We need wise and loving shepherds who will keep the sheep from straying, and protect them from wolves. Those with a pastor's calling will already be exercising this role in a minor way, and we will often know instinctively who is being called to "lead" a group. (Do not assume this is the most experienced or most forthcoming of the group! Remember God's choice of David as king of Israel.)

Leadership, however, should unobtrusive. Biblical leadership is not authoritarian (indeed, Jesus commanded that it must not be so in *Mark 10:42-44*). However, when God does appoint leadership over a body, however large or small, he expects that all will respect and abide by their decisions:

"Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you" (Hebrews 13:17).

Wise Christians will acknowledge and respect the leadership that God has provided for them, without becoming enslaved to their every opinion. Dissent is allowed so long as the members of an assembly can show where the elder has strayed from scripture or from God's wisdom. But in normal every-day running of the assembly or group we can treat the elder's decisions as a welcome hand upon the rudder, knowing that they have a concern for the fellowship as a whole.

ELDERS IN THE WORSHIP MEETING

One mistake that elders often make is assuming they must take charge of and run every meeting. But the Bible calls for EVERY believer to take part in and contribute to the worship. This is simply not the exclusive province of the eldership. Yes, they must watch over and sometimes steer the direction of the meetings, but nowhere in scripture do we see elders or other ministers taking over every meeting and imposing their own teachings, thoughts, prayers, choice of songs and whatever else happens in the course of worship.

EVERY-MEMBER MINISTRY

The most productive meetings in terms of growth and spiritual life are those in which the eldership sits on the sidelines and encourages others to take part.

Not everyone wants to contribute, and many feel too timid or think they lack the essential biblical knowledge. However, every Christian should be growing in his or her role and gifts in the Church, and to allow some to sit back doing nothing is a failure for all, not least the elders who ought to be actively encouraging everyone to take part in worship.

There should be a gentle persuasion for people to pray, read a scripture aloud, share a thought on the scriptures, play an instrument, sing or do whatever else is genuinely helpful to everybody else. Nobody, however young in the Lord, has NOTHING to contribute to an assembly of believers!

Elders are needed to step in when the meeting goes seriously off the rails, veers into error or gets bogged down. They should be there (and be known to be there) to rebuke the dominant ones, check unbiblical behavior, encourage the weak, but NOT to take over completely with their own agendas! It is not even necessary for the elders to teach at every meeting.

Wise elders give place to some of the other members who also have a word from the Lord and want to share it. They are sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading and if there is something God wants to impart, they allow Him to do so using the person of HIS own choice, not necessarily the elders or recognized teachers.

"Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints" (1 Corinthians 14:29-33).

This verse is primarily about prophecies, but it also applies in other situations. Notice how Paul states that *"the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets"* - in other words, Christian ministry is not being "taken over" by the Holy Spirit to the extent that one is FORCED to speak or prophesy, compelled to utter a word regardless of whatever else is going on in the meeting.

We should all be sensitive to one another and to the meeting as a whole. If somebody else has a revelation or word, at the moment you opened your mouth to speak, then hold your peace and wait for another opportunity. Everybody clamoring to speak at once leads to bedlam and disorder, which is not of the Holy Spirit.

THE CHURCH SERVICE - WHAT IS WORSHIP?

We might be forgiven for thinking the meaning of the word "worship" is "a set service of routine activities relating to our belief in God". The word has lost its biblical sense in many cases. Churches proudly state that if you arrive at 10.30 on Sunday you can partake in "Morning Worship" but in reality very little will happen that pertains to the worship of God as described in the Bible.

According to God's word, worship is not an organized "service" but the spontaneous expression of love and adoration of God, whatever form that happens to take.

In *Genesis 24:24-27 and Exodus 4:29-32* worship is a heartfelt prayer of thanks for provision; in *Matthew 28:9* it is a spontaneous adoration of Jesus. In *Revelation 3:9* we see apostates forced to admit their mistake, and the reference to "worship" here involves humility, repentance and submission. *"Indeed I will make those of the synagogue of Satan, who say they are Jews and are not, but lie—indeed I will make them come and worship before your feet, and to know that I have loved you."*

The word used in the Old Testament for "worship" (shachah) shows that it has to do with our humility in the sight of God and not something we confidently DO, or OFFER to please Him. In the OT "worshipping" meant prostrating oneself, crouching down or falling down in awe, fear or wonder. It meant lowering oneself to a place of humble beseeching and reverence for God.

Although you might think New Testament worship would lose this sense of man's obeisance before a mighty God, the Greek word most commonly used for the worship of Jesus or God is very similar - proskuneo -derived from the concept of a faithful dog licking its master's hand. It means to crouch, prostrate oneself and do homage.

Do we "go to church" carrying this sense of who God is? Do we go to fall at the feet of an Almighty and Holy God before whom we tremble? (*Isaiah 66:2*). Or do we go in a sense of pride and pleasure at our ability to craft a "worship service" that is entertaining, musically pleasant and exactly the right length for us to reach home before the game starts?

Let those who pride themselves in their regular "church-going" reflect on the meaningless of their activities if they are not worshipping in the Bible sense of the word. On the other hand, those who meet one evening a month with a small dedicated group of believers, may find themselves truly worshipping the Lord as they pour out their hearts in prayer and adoration. They may even find

themselves prostrate on the floor as the greatness of God grips their hearts.

WHAT ABOUT COMMUNION?

There has developed (in this country at least) an almost Roman Catholic attitude to the importance of taking communion in church. Some feel that if they do not take the bread and wine once a week, they are out of fellowship with God and the Church.

One woman we fellowshiped with in a home group had decided to join us during the week because her church (High-Church Anglican) was made up almost completely of unsaved nominal people and offered nothing in the way of biblical teaching or worship. Nevertheless she persisted in attending week by week, and accused us of being out of the will of God because we did not "go to church to take communion."

Of all things, communion, or "breaking of bread" seems to be the sticking point. Yet if you read what the Bible has to say, you see no such ritualistic attitude.

PASSOVER

The occasion of Jesus commanding his followers to "remember Me" when they broke bread and drank the wine together was the Passover celebrations. Some have argued therefore that this was a once-yearly remembrance of Jesus' death.

However it is true that the disciples also "broke bread" together in the normal course of life. Providing food and drink for one another, as today, was part of their hospitality. The believers met over a meal, and when they broke the bread, they remembered the breaking of the body of Jesus, for he had told them "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (*John 6:35*)

This is well illustrated in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It is clear that the breaking of bread and drinking of the communal cup took place in an informal atmosphere where other food and drink was also enjoyed - in the case of the Corinthians, though, to excess!

Paul warns them not to let this special time of fellowship become just a party with Christians scrabbling to eat and drink rather than understand the spiritual meaning of the "one loaf" and the "broken bread". The Corinthians enjoyed the idea of a communal meal, but they were losing sight of the significance of "breaking bread" together.

"Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you.

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the

same night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep" (1 Corinthians 11:20-30).

Did you know that the word translated "communion" in the NT is the same word translated elsewhere as "fellowship" - koinonia and it derives from a word meaning partnership or participation in something?

Jesus is the bread, and we partake of it, to show our partnership and participation in Him, in our "common-union" with Him and each other. Taking the bread and wine together is therefore a practical demonstration of our unity.

Paul later used the analogy of one loaf of bread to describe the Body of believers; and to show the spiritual unity within that Body.

"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

Jesus used the bread to demonstrate his sacrifice of his own body on the cross. The bread and wine had no sacramental meaning beyond that. They were certainly not magical elements in themselves. Thus breaking bread and drinking wine was not a religious ritual for the early believers, so much as a practical aid to demonstrate the reality of their oneness with Christ and each other.

But even without that practical aid, the reality of our oneness with Jesus, and our partnership with Him and each other is still intact. There is nothing particularly sacred or special about going up to an altar rail to get a wafer and drink out of a chalice. This does not confer any special blessing or do anything magical! We could, if we chose, celebrate "communion" even without breaking bread!

However, most small groups have a time of breaking bread using a simple loaf of bread and some red wine or even blackcurrant juice. This is JUST as valid and meaningful (I would say, more so) than going to a church building amongst strangers and the unsaved to "take communion".

The most moving and meaningful times of "Communion" I have had, have been simple sharing of a loaf of bread and wine in a shared cup, while silently thinking about the meaning of the sacrifice of Jesus. However small the group, participation in The Lord's Supper is still possible.

TEACHING

Here is another stumbling block for many outside the system. Some feel that they can learn nothing without the help of some "qualified" Teacher or well-known name. They escape from abusive and authoritarian churches where their leaders tell them what to believe (and brook no argument) but then when they find themselves isolated, they feel the want of a man to teach them.

Another related fear is that Christians will somehow go astray and fall into error if they rely just on themselves and the Bible.

This should not happen if people are determined to depend on God for instruction, for he has promised to send the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth. Even in the Old Testament, God's people did not go astray so long as they sought God for guidance:

"For a long time Israel has been without the true God, without a teaching priest, and without law; but when in their trouble they turned to the LORD God of Israel, and sought Him, He was found by them" (2 Chronicles 15:3-4).

The most dependable and safe teacher we can have is God! Paul received all the truths of the gospel faithfully preached by God, not man:

"But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:11-12).

The Lord who instructed Paul can also instruct you:

"But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him" (1 John 2:27).

"But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another" (1 Thessalonians 4:9).

I know numerous people who left their fellowships because of domineering leadership, and because they were being forced to accept all the leader's beliefs, only to adopt a "pet preacher" for themselves as soon as they come out. That Minister's tapes and books become their exclusive food, and no they make no decision on doctrine before asking "what does so-and-so say about it?" Since no one person (however sound) has all the truth, this course of action can only result in an unbalanced viewpoint and an attitude of hero-worship that is very unhealthy.

Other groups, sadly, did not last long because they never broke the habit of relying on itinerant teachers and speakers, some of whom they imported from miles away. Every meeting they felt they had to "have a speaker" and the only topic of conversation was "who shall we have next time?"

It's as if the only experience of "church" some people have known is going to a large meeting to hear

somebody speak! (Presumably the songs and prayers are considered mere padding to the main event). Thus they try desperately to re-create this experience outside of a church structure. However, this will dry up and kill any remnant fellowship! It will also leave the group wide open to abuse, and in one case I have seen a false prophet sweep in and woo away most of the group, who are now more in thrall to false teachings than ever before! All due to their desire to follow MAN's teachings, instead of seek the Lord directly.

Doctrine (teaching) and a right understanding of the word does not come by listening to tapes and reading books (although these are a help at times) but by going to the Source Book, the Bible and allowing God the Holy Spirit to lead you in your studies. The dead letter of the word gives no illumination as to its meaning, but the Holy Spirit will illuminate the word and give it real spiritual life and meaning to your heart, as you rely on Him as your Teacher.

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE

You and your group can find your own way of studying. Some find topical studies useful, following through all the scriptures relating to a topic; others find the use of keywords enlightening, tracing the uses of a certain phrase or word in scripture. There are many other ways of studying the Bible, too, and it should never be a tedious, dull, uninspired slog, but an exciting, thrilling journey of discovery and joy.

The main thing is to do this together, as a joint project, with no one person having all the answers. As you look up the scriptures, talk about them and share your thoughts, the Holy Spirit will lead you deeper into its meaning, and will back it up with practical demonstrations in your life. While a more experienced person could perhaps set a topic, prepare a few notes, and make sure the study stays on track, there should be NO pushing of one person's viewpoint to the exclusion of all others.

THE "SERMON"

Our experience of teaching in "church" has often been a twenty-minute sermon delivered from either a pulpit or the front of the congregation, by the Pastor or another accredited teacher. Everyone else was supposed to sit attentively, take notes, and absorb the wisdom of the elders. If heresy was taught, or a scripture wrongly dealt with, you (as a mere church member) had no opportunity to correct it, or point it out to others. Any interruption to the preacher's sermon would be seen as out of order.

In the Bible, the "lecture" style of delivering a message to others is used for imparting important fresh information, or giving instructions to a large group of people. For example, In Deuteronomy Chapter five: "Moses called all Israel, and said unto them, Hear, O Israel, the statutes and judgments which I speak in your ears this day, that ye may learn them, and keep, and do them."

Paul spoke to the gathered brethren (at such length that one man fell asleep!) in *Acts 20:7-11*. And supremely of course in what we now call the "sermon on the mount" we see Jesus addressing a large crowd of people, telling them things that were strange and unheard of.

This style of lecture-teaching is found in the Bible where large numbers of people are involved, and

where a large amount of new information or instruction needs to be imparted quickly to them all. However, once the new material has been assimilated, the apostles did not continue to lecture or sermonize, but allowed for sharing and discussion.

CONVERSATIONAL TEACHING

This second kind of ongoing instruction is done in small groups and families. It is a more informal "conversational" or "question-and-answer" style of teaching in which ALL participate, not just one man at the front.

This kind of instruction in God's ways is commanded for instance in *Deuteronomy 6:6-7*:

"And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up."

The Lord hears and commends those who talk about and share the things of God as a natural matter of course. See how those who love the Lord share the word here:

"Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name. "They shall be Mine," says the LORD of hosts, on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him" (Malachi 3:16-17).

We often learn more by talking, sharing, thinking around a subject, commenting on it and passing our discoveries back and forth between us, than we do by one single lecture. In small groups, it is inappropriate for one member to stand and orate at length to all the others as if he or she were somehow a cut above the rest. The kind of teaching that is most helpful for small informal fellowships is the conversational teaching that is an ongoing, living process, just as growth in a child does not happen all at once but little by little, imperceptibly.

There are certainly times when one member will give a more lengthy dissertation on a biblical subject, but to force such a lecture at every meeting is a mistake.

One small group that I knew well many years ago had come out of their local apostate church and decided to hold meetings in their homes. So they commissioned an elaborate wooden lectern for their living room, and bought hymn books to give out at the door. Then they assembled a rota of visiting speakers, and after an introductory hymn and a prayer, one of these speakers would stand behind the lectern and speak for an hour or so. Not long after, they bought an organ to play the hymns, and made a ruling that no modern songs must be used. They had left the church system, but the church system had not left them!

WHAT ABOUT THE CHILDREN?

There is no reason why children should not participate in fellowship meetings, and contribute

questions, or things to share. Children often provide a fresh outlook on the Bible.

The Bible way is for parents to instruct their growing children at home.

"Hear, my children, the instruction of a father, and give attention to know understanding; for I give you good doctrine: Do not forsake my law. When I was my father's son, tender and the only one in the sight of my mother, he also taught me, and said to me: 'Let your heart retain my words; keep my commands, and live'" (Proverbs 4:1-4).

God did not command us to send our children away from home on a Sunday, in order to be taught by virtual strangers. They need the close affectionate and relevant attention that only parents can give (or members of the extended church family if they have become trusted allies.) This is important if difficult things are to be shared, or discipline is needed.

"My son, hear the instruction of your father, and do not forsake the law of your mother" (Proverbs 1:8).

"Hear, my son, and receive my sayings, and the years of your life will be many. I have taught you in the way of wisdom; I have led you in right paths. When you walk, your steps will not be hindered, and when you run, you will not stumble" (Proverbs 4:10-12).

I will leave the practical advice on just how to integrate children into a small group, and keep them happy, to others who have more experience.

One further point: some who have left their fellowships now find it hard to know what to say to older children and teenagers who are forced to leave friends behind. They also feel that they cannot offer anything like the range of organized activities that their former church arranged for the youngsters. This too is a problem of which I have no first-hand experience, but it seems to me that alternative activities could and should be found outside of an apostate church environment.

It also seems unwise to allow impressionable and spiritually open young people to continue attending a fellowship (unsupervised) which has been deemed unsuitable for mature Christian adults! The excuse that they will have to break up friendships is not enough to risk the spiritual damage that could be done, possibly breaking up the entire family in the long run.

The children should be made to see what deception is, how it harms people and why sacrifices have to be made to follow the Lord. And if the children are not yet saved, they are much more likely to be interested in a small informal meeting than large church services. In that atmosphere they can freely discuss their doubts and be gently led towards the Lord.

MISSION AND CONVERTS

Another criticism aimed at those outside the church structures is that they are ineffective. They cannot organize large evangelistic outreaches or major charitable projects.

But biblical evangelism is sharing the gospel with local people and friends as the occasion arises.

Statistics are misleading but I think you will find that many more people are saved through the one-to-one friendly contact with workmates or friends than through large-scale evangelistic events.

Major church projects might look impressive, but are they as effective as people claim? Is there in fact more work being done in the background by individuals with a love for the Lord and a discerning heart, than up on a stage with a white suit and a rock group?

In any case, we should not be going outside of God's leading when preaching the gospel, but only speaking when prompted and using appropriate, relevant material. Aiming one message at everybody together sometimes works but it is a blunderbuss approach and I do not believe it is what God really intended for evangelism. Each individual comes to the Lord in a slightly different manner, having different needs which we have to understand and cater for. Also, each individual has a different lifestyle. Some may need bold speaking on the subject of sin, while some may need gentle coaxing and loving support, others again need deliverance. We cannot know these things without personal contact, and that contact is made much easier when we can invite people into our home for a meal, or invite them to join us in an informal time of fellowship.

Those who are wary of "church" because all they know about it is "bells and smells" will be intrigued and possibly delighted to discover the real "church" of living stones!

The problem of "where do we send new converts?" is answered when we have a small group (or a slightly larger but still intimate group) of people who know, love and trust one another. Converts can fit in right away, be nurtured, watched over and steered in the right direction without making them feel intimidated or out of place.

Teaching can be tailored exactly to their needs, and their questions can be answered by a number of people. There is no substitute in larger churches for this kind of hands-on person-to-person caring and nurturing for new converts. They will learn from the word 'go' to seek the Lord in prayer, study the Bible for themselves and not depend on others to create their spiritual lives! That is a priceless inheritance for any new believer.

GOOD WORKS

Other projects that we think cannot be achieved outside "proper" churches are church outings, charitable works and helping in the community. But why not, I ask? Where there's a will, there's a way. There is nothing to stop members of a small group setting aside sums of money for good works, or going to visit hospital wards and old folk's homes; and why not organize a fellowship trip to the seaside?

Church fellowship should be fun, liberating and full of joy. We should not see our relationships as all on a spiritual plane, where we only talk about the bible, and never meet except to pray! No - let's relate as people, take the children to a theme park, organize a meal together at a restaurant, and just chat!

BAPTISM

There is no need to worry about how to baptize new believers. In the bible we see believers being baptized (and I mean immersed) wherever there was water available, and we can do the same.

Speaking for myself, I was baptized at the local swimming baths (in the shallow end I hasten to add) and I know people who have been baptized in a domestic bath. Sometimes, groups can borrow the baptistry of a sympathetic church for the day, or in summer go to a secluded lake, or even buy a large paddling pool. Improvise!

WHAT DO WE DO IN THE MEETING?

I'm always surprised when people ask me this question. I assume every Christian has a natural desire to fellowship and will spontaneously pray, sing or share from the word. But of course that is not the case. There are lovely Christians who would not dare open their mouths in a meeting, even to pray.

We have to cater for the needs of all. This is MUCH easier when we have come to know everybody well, and we are all saved (unlike the situation in many organized churches!).

The shy ones need to be encouraged, and the domineering ones need to be hindered so we create a balance where all can be helped to grow.

Exactly how this is done is not something I plan to cover in this article, and each group must work out their own answers. However, the Bible does give a number of examples of what we should expect to see in our worship meetings:

"How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification" (1 Corinthians 14:26).

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him" (Colossians 3:16-17).

"... speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another in the fear of God" (Ephesians 5:19-21).

There are a number of pointers here to what we should do (although the Lord Himself will lead you.) We should expect to see some:

- sharing of revelations
- bible teaching
- practical illustrations of doctrine drawn from everyday life

- tongues and interpretations (if people with these gifts are present)
- admonishing one another
- singing (psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, sometimes created on the spur of the moment)
- thanksgiving and praise
- adoration and worship
- intercession and other prayers

None of this should follow a set routine, and all the while we should be open to the Holy Spirit's leading. If God wants us to spend all evening discussing one bible verse, then so be it. If we spend the time just singing and praising, then if that is what God wants, then it is the best possible use of our time. Be flexible!

BUT I AM ON MY OWN - WHAT ABOUT ME?

This article has been written from the point of view of those who are meeting in small groups or with members of their family, or with one or two friends.

However, it is a fact (sadly) that many have come out of fellowships knowing that they have nowhere else to attend, and nobody with whom to worship. Possibly they are single, or married to unbelievers, or simply don't know anybody else in the locality.

This is clearly not an ideal situation for any Christian. It is perhaps the most difficult and trying situation of all and after a time isolated Christians can fall prey to loneliness, guilty feelings and a pressure to "go somewhere" simply for the sake of attending some local expression of Christian worship.

It is a step of bold faith to part company with a local church, because they have rejected sound doctrine, and decide to seek God alone. The decision not to compromise with error can soon be shaken by those who see it as their business to pour scorn and criticism on every isolated believer, telling them they are out of line with God's will and even in danger of losing their salvation. This is not helpful, and it all adds to the pressures to give in and "go back" which is not what God wants.

If there is no suitable local fellowship, and nobody known to you with whom you can meet for prayer and bible study (at least) then rather than decide to cave in and go back to the wrong kind of church, you should trust God to provide fellowship for you and to lead you to other like-minded Christians. Here are a few pointers (by no means an exhaustive list of instructions!) for isolated believers outside the camp. They also apply in many cases to ANYONE coming out of a fellowship:

Make sure, first of all, you are not harboring anger and bad feeling towards people at your former fellowship. This can block the way forward with God and hinder your Christian walk. Set about shaking the dust off your feet in practical ways, forgiving those you left behind, making a decision not to get involved in an ongoing dispute by letter or phone call, and not brooding about the situation day after day.

It is often a good idea, and sometimes very needful, to make a definite spiritual cutting-off in prayer

from what has been done and taught at your old fellowship, especially if you have had laying on of hands there, or been involved in various unbiblical things. Simply repent before God and make a positive break with all of that, laying it down before the Lord in prayer. Some find it helpful to make a statement of disassociation of those former ways in the Name of Jesus, commanding in His Name all the ties of the former fellowship to be broken.

Don't allow other people to dictate your thoughts and feelings and beliefs. If they phone you or contact you, don't let them sway your judgment by any manipulation or guilt-trip or by trying to make you fearful of the future. Be strong in the Lord and remind yourself of the basic reasons why you choose to leave. Stand firm on what you know to be God's will. One person with God is a majority.

People will often try to persuade you that your reasons for leaving your church were wrong, and that for the sake of others left in the system you should go back and minister the truth to them. However, I have rarely if ever seen a lone Christian make any change in a church where the pastor and many others are set on error. (Quite the reverse - the church has a way of eroding the determination of many who stay in the system.) If you have made your point, stood up for the truth, spoken out against error and been ignored, then you have no choice but to leave, and you are NOT responsible for the faith and decisions of everyone else at that church. They also have the Holy Spirit and minds of their own. They must make their own choices.

Remember that many of the bible saints of God were loners or were isolated through no choice of their own. Think of Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, Elijah, John the Baptist and Paul the Apostle. Each had their experience of isolation and spent long periods without conventional "fellowship". Yet God used them, taught them and kept them from falling away from the faith.

Realize that you need to develop your personal Christian life and not be molded by the world around you. Without a set time of worship it is easy to just drift. Therefore you will need discipline in order to maintain times of prayer, bible study and worship. Do these when it suits you. There is no merit in deciding to force yourself out of bed at five in the morning just because it feels "spiritual". After the first couple of days you'll give up! Choose a time when you know you can be relaxed and uninterrupted, whatever the time of day.

Don't think that ALL your Christian growth and worship must come from formal times of bible reading and prayer. Worship is a lifestyle, not a single act, or a "service" in a church. Those who worshiped Jesus did so out of spontaneous sense of love and adoration (*Matthew 28:9*). Any time of the day or night is a good time to tell God how much you love and worship him!

Similarly, don't despise the little ways in which we all learn and grow. The newspaper that sparks a thought about God, somebody's remark that causes you to meditate on the goodness of God; a phone call where you share with another Christian how both of you are being blessed and helped. Just a chance meeting with somebody else, another like-minded believer, can give weeks of pleasure and satisfaction, and be very meaningful.

Singing is a good expression of praise and worship. If you have the opportunity, and can carry a tune (or even if not!) try singing around your home, or whenever you have the opportunity. Some hymns have good scriptural words and are easier to remember than modern songs. Or just use whatever

bleses and inspires you. I used to sing aloud as I cycled to work and I had SUCH a good time of praise at those times! The rhythm of the pedals often inspired me to make up songs of my own that were a real blessing to my spirit. It doesn't matter how basic or simple these songs are, God understands!

Take advantage of any good conferences or public meetings where there will be people that you know are sound, and where other remnant believers will attend. These are like an oasis along the desert path.

Trust God, for he knows how to provide hidden manna in the wilderness and to open springs of water from the rocks along the way. It is often surprising how well nourished we can be on the fare that God provides in a desert situation! When we meet Christians still "going to church" we compare their situation and lives to our own and suddenly realize we have grown MUCH more since leaving the fellowship than ever we did inside it!

CONCLUSION

Many times during our history we can see true believers experiencing isolation or living "outside the camp". In fact, it is probably the "normal" experience for most genuine believers throughout the Church age! Every time the visible Church faltered and fell into apostasy there were those who rekindled the flame of truth, but more often than not it meant coming out of their fellowships (or being driven out) and starting afresh in their homes with one or two others.

Now at this time of gross apostasy, heading full-scale into the end times antichrist deception, more than even God has preserved a remnant of believers for Himself in every nation. Some are still attending good churches, others are not, but increasingly we are seeing a move to ONE Body of believers out of every denomination, all of whom have the desire to preserve biblical truth and a biblical expression of the love of God.

We cannot see exactly where it will end. Perhaps God will add to our numbers and we will see some kind of home-based Church forming that will be given the task of teaching, evangelizing, ministering to and delivering the lost. Or perhaps we will see a decrease in numbers instead and end up like the believers in communist countries who met in secret. Only God knows.

But whatever the future holds for us, we must never be persuaded to compromise with the Harlot system simply for the sake of submitting to the traditions, rules and government of MEN. What God commands is obedience to his WORD and to HIMSELF as our only Lord. Where that conflicts with the traditions and demands of man, so be it!

And may all those who read this be inspired and comforted in the Lord, *FindingTheChurch.com*