How May I Know Which Is the Right Church?

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It must be a matter of the utmost difficulty for a new convert to decide to which church he should attach himself. Told, as he is by some, to go to the church of his own choice, he finds it well-nigh impossible to decide. Every church very naturally claims to be the right one; though clearly they cannot all be right: it may be that every one is wrong in some respect or another. What, therefore, should the young convert do? To live in isolation from all other Christians is neither scriptural nor spiritually wise or healthy. To expect to find a perfect local church is to entertain a vain hope, for such a church presupposes perfect people, and there are none.

It is unsatisfactory to decide the issue by conforming to [A passage here could not be read in the scan.] would be without personal conviction, and apart from this there will be no stability. Our early background is no safe guide. We must think for ourselves: we dare not drift along willy nilly.

Moreover, it is unwise to determine the matter by following a popular preacher, for popularity is but transient, and when it has waned what is the new adherent to do? He needs his roots to be planted in better soil than that of mere current acceptability. The attractive powers of man pass with the years.

Nor can we be sure that our spiritual fathers (that is, those through whom we have been converted) will give sound advice, as their main concern is with the salvation

of persons rather than their subsequent church connections. But it is a sad thing to rescue a man from drowning, yet leave him on the river's bank without further help.

It is to be feared that we are living in days when the "will of the Lord" is far too lightly treated, and preference is given to one's own fancy, or that of some other person rather than to the mind of God Himself as revealed in His word. The Scriptures are the sole authoritative guide for the believer. They are the only safe guide in this as in all matters, and though the young convert may need a helping hand in order to understand them, he has within him the Holy Spirit who will impart convictions. For even "guides" are apt to be biased in favour of certain whims which cannot be supported by the Scriptures. Guides may help, but in the last instance the Word of God is final.

It is assumed by some that a return to primitive conditions, that is, those obtaining in the earliest days of the Church's history, is impossible, and they have therefore, sought to be satisfied with a scheme of things which ignores certain clearly defined principles. Others, on the other hand, consider that it is necessary to have regard to what they call "legitimate development", and they affirm that we must pay due regard not only to the Word of God, but also to the history of the development of church practice throughout the age. The wisdom and experience of our predecessors, they say, cannot be safely neglected. What shall we say to all this?

There is one thing crystal clear: we dare not detract from nor add to the word of God, for He expects His people to observe all that is written and to obey (Deut.

4, 2; Prov. 30, 6; and Rev. 22, vv. 18 and 19). Therefore, in seeking to determine to what congregation of believers one should attach himself, he must seek for a company which not only practises what he gleans from the Scripture should be done, but which does not practise things which are accretions and for which there is no scriptural sanction. This makes the matter fairly simple, for it will eliminate from our list of "possible companies" very many indeed.

The believer will, for example, fail to find anything in his New Testament (and it is there that we must look for details of church order) which teaches a selective priesthood restricted to a few (such as is recognised in some churches, where the "priest" is distinguished from the congregation), though it does indubitably teach the common priesthood of all believers (I Peter 2, vv. 5 and 9; and Rev. 1, 6). Nor will he find anything whatsoever about infant-baptism, infant-sprinkling, baptismal regeneration, one-man ministry, vestments, incense, altars, and all such other ornate and sensuous things which are regarded by some as essential to Christian worship. The onus is on those who sanction and approve such things to show incontrovertibly their right from Scripture. The writer of this article is fully aware that certain Scriptures have been adduced in support of some of these practices, but it is submitted that in no case do such passages, rightly interpreted, justify the claim.

It is, of course, conceivable that some might have genuine difficulty about one-man ministry, citing as possible justification of it the cases of Timothy and Titus, and at times Paul, who seems to have been the chief if not the sole speaker. But a fair reading of the epistles to

these two first named men will show that they stood, for the time being, in an exceptional and non-repeated position as apostolic delegates; and as to Paul—he was the founder of many assemblies and, therefore, in their beginnings had perforce to be the sole guide. Moreover, the injunctions given to Timothy and Titus are clearly with the view of fitting others to continue ministry in the local church. There is not a hint in either letter that one person, not even Timothy or Titus, was to be regarded as authorised to claim the exclusive monopoly of public preaching in any local church. Paul always wrote in the plural of them, as for example, "faithful men who shall be able to teach others also": he speaks of "bishops" and if, at times, he uses the word in the singular it is in a generic sense. Nothing was farther from his mind than that one man should be invested with exclusive rights in any one church.

Dr. J. Stuart Holden, a well-loved minister of the Church of England, wrote: "It is obvious that the ideal form of service is one in which all the members take individual part, each contributing something of ministry to the whole. Perhaps it is because this plan is no longer pursued in the church that many of the gifts of the Spirit seem now to have been lost. Where every member of an assembly is filled and controlled by the Spirit of God so that He speaks through one and another to the conviction, illumination, and edification of all, there is a fulness of blessing that is not possible as a general rule where the majority of worshippers are silent and where the whole of the ministry is committed to one man. What we have gained in order we have probably lost in effectiveness both as regards inner life and outward witness". This coming from such a pen has more weight

than if it came from someone less prominent, though the writer failed to state that there have been through the centuries and still are, here and there, churches of believers who endeavour to pursue the plan referred to.

Wrapped up in the matter of one-man ministry is that of appointment, but the authority of the appointing person or body is altogether invalid, since it has no scriptural warrant whatsoever. If the reader thinks otherwise, he must satisfy his conscience from Scripture that his judgment is right. But some will ask, are there no Bishops and Archbishops, and other church officers? This opens up a large matter but it can be briefly dealt with. The word "bishop" is but an Anglicised Greek word and, were it properly translated as, indeed, it has been in certain cases (e.g. Acts 20, 28), it would have been shown as meaning "overseer". At the beginning the Apostle Paul appointed elders (another word for "overseers" or "bishops") for the recently formed local churches (Acts 14, 23); then he also indicated to Timothy and Titus the kind of men who should be recognised as elders (I Tim. 3, 1-7, and Titus 1, 7-9). But there is no such thing in the New Testament as an Archbishop or body of Bishops met together in solemn congress for the purpose of appointing other bishops, or higher or lower officers. Much less is there any hint whatsoever of the political power recommending or appointing any to the position. "The laying on of hands of the presbytery" (I Tim. 4, 14) does not denote an elaborate ritualistic ceremony. It is merely the statement that identification of sympathy and interest of the elder brethren was given to the young man Timothy for his future spiritual work.

Touching baptism, John 3, 5 has been cited to support the notion of baptismal regeneration, but without going into its meaning here, this much may be said, that it could not relate to Christian baptism for at the time when the Lord was speaking such baptism was not known. As to household baptism, the onus of responsibility is to prove that in the households referred to in the Book of Acts there were irresponsible infants. It is a pity that such a simple and significant ordinance should have been so beclouded by ecclesiastics, but the recourse of the young convert is to read the Scriptures (specially the Gospels and the Book of the Acts) laying aside all hitherto held or imparted notions, and in simplicity prayerfully to seek to learn from the Bible God's mind on the matter.

A vast number of Christians have clearly seen the wrong in these things and, in consequence, are found in what are regarded as dissenting or nonconformist churches. But even so, such companies do not always satisfy the consciences of all God's people, because in many of them one-man ministry persists with all its accompaniments, not mentioned in Scripture, thus making the practice of I Cor. 14 impossible. Where then shall we turn?

Let the believer consult his Bible, taking note also of the habits of God-fearing men who appear to be ruled by the Scriptures. He will, as we have said, limit himself in his enquiry to the New Testament because the local church did not exist until after the day of Pentecost (see e.g. Eph. 3, 5). Therefore, nothing can be gleaned as to church order in any part of the Scriptures earlier than the Book of Acts, although the very important principle of obedience to the word of the Lord is repeatedly

stressed in the Old Testament. Obedience is always binding and none can disobey God without incurring the gravest consequences. For in this matter as in all others it should be not a question of our own choice but of His will.

It is suggested that a Christian, on searching the Scriptures, will find the following things:—

(i) A Scriptural local church consists only of those who are professed believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. (Read Acts 5, 13). It is, of course, presumed that every company which claims to be a Christian church at all would claim also that its membership is composed only of those who are supposed to subscribe to its tenets. Therefore, this does not help us forward very much, though it must be plain to most that the church roll in some cases does include the names of people who give no evidence of having been born again. It is by their fruits that we know them. The right of church membership is new birth: without this none is entitled to be in a local church. (The word "church" here is used in the Bible sense, of a congregation of believers, not of a consecrated building.)

(ii) A Scriptural local church accepts without addition or subtraction all the Word of God as an authoritative and all-sufficient guide for its practices (II Tim. 3, 16). Whatever it finds written in the Scripture touching its order it regards as binding, and whatever lacks such written authorisation it regards as unessential and dispensable. In this connection it is important to remember that the Old Testament ritualistic religion has been rendered effete by the death of Christ, as the Epistle to the Hebrews indisputably shows and,

therefore, its system is not binding on churches to-day. Those, therefore, who seek to imitate it in matters of a selective priesthood, vestments, incense, altar, and the like should show good cause why they do not also offer animal [A passage here could not be read in the scan.] ing to days and meats. It is hardly just to select certain parts and to ignore others. A clear and intelligent grasp of the all-sufficiency of the Word of God will help a young convert very much, for it will keep him free from the trammels of ecclesiastical tradition.

(iii) A Scriptural church has one ordinance: it practices the observance of the Lord's Supper (I Cor. 11, 23). It may be asked, but what of baptism? In itself baptism does not entitle one to a place in any local church. It is an ordinance altogether independent of admission into it. It merely denotes that one has taken one's place as a Christian. The necessity, mode, and meaning of each of these ordinances can be gleaned from the Word of God. The New Testament mentions no other ordinance as obligatory on Christian churches. If the reader thinks otherwise, he must satisfy himself that the Bible is crystal clear on the items he considers to have been omitted here.

(iv) A Scriptural local church welcomes into its midst all true believers who are known to be sound in doctrine and godly in life. The interpretation of this phrase must be, however, of the most generous nature possible. Mere differences of understanding as to the meaning of Scripture is far remote from denial of its statements: godliness of life is far different from immunity from all failure. Spiritual men will know intuitively who conform to this pattern, but any barriers whatsoever, which exclude from the company bona fide believers must be

firmly resisted, seeing that it was not done in Bible times. The doors of a local church should be open to all the sheep. If, in the earliest days, wolves got in in sheep's clothing, it is no wonder if such happens in our days. None is to blame but the Archenemy. Usually, it is where the wall is high that the young convert will be expected to subscribe to things which are not contained in the Word of God and, if he abides by our second principle, he will be saved from being ensnared. (The reader should consult I Cor. 5, 13 and II John 7.)

(v) A Scriptural local church is so ordered that the Spirit of God has liberty when the saints are met together to use those whom He will for the edification of the whole company (see the whole of I Cor. 14). Any internal organisation which prevents any one qualified and authorised by the Lord from exercising his gift when the saints are met together is to be rejected. The acknowledgment of bishops and deacons in the scriptural sense (not in the modern hierarchical sense) does not imply that they are regarded as superior to the rest of the personnel of the church. They form part of it, and when met together the privilege of any one of these to take audible part is no more than that of the rest. The fact that they are bishops or deacons does not confer on them extra privileges: rather it puts upon them extra responsibilities. It may also here be added that the holding of special meetings at which one person is expected to preach does not infringe this principle, provided that the church at regular times practises the principle stated.

(vi) A Scriptural local church is solely responsible to the Lord in heaven and is bound by no earthly system to any other church. The only bond of union is that of the Spirit

of God who prompts companies here and there to obey His word. Plainly they will enjoy, as a result, community of thought and privilege, but there will be no administrative authority governing any two or more such churches. The sphere of influence of bishops or deacons is restricted to the church in which they are and it extends to none other. In view of this independence of each local church the necessity of denominating it does not arise. It is sufficient that Christians meet together.

The matter is thus reduced to a fairly simple thing. Look for a church that has these hall-marks. It is believed by the writer that they cover everything of importance, though should the reader discover from the Scriptures any items omitted from this booklet, he must regard that item or those items as also binding on his conscience. When such a church is found, do not expect to find it perfect in practice. Many churches, thank God, hold right principles though they be faulty in enacting them. But if one is satisfied that the church found is conforming to the Word of God, he should be there and take his proper part in its privileges and responsibilities. He will be happy nowhere else. We should never forget that we all have to give an account at the Judgment seat of Christ and He will make inquiry as to why we have outraged our convictions, or been negligent to develop them.

The writer has mentioned the name of no one section of the church: he has purposely avoided doing so, lest the impression be given that he is pleading the interests of a particular party. We should not be interested in parties at all; it matters not how they began or what illustrious names can be cited as belonging to them. So far as can

be gleaned from Scripture only two things are recognised: (a) the universal Church which embraces every true Christian and (b) the local church in one of which every true Christian should be found. If we are like-minded our sympathies will then go out to every child of God and our loyalty will be to our own local church. These will keep our hearts and hands full.