

# Towards a Christian Church

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## Introduction

When I became a curate in the Church of England at the age of 35, I was delighted. I was half way through my allotted span of threescore years and ten, and I looked forward to doing something really worthwhile with the remaining half of my life. I was on top of the world!

I have always been involved in churches. One of my earliest memories is of helping to stack the prayer books on the shelf in the village church after the evening service on a Sunday night. I have been more or less involved in fifteen churches since then, and visited scores of others.

I had always taken it for granted that these churches operated on roughly the right lines. A church could be described as a worshipping community, it seemed to me, and that's what these bodies were. It was only when I had turned forty that I began to question the nature and role of the church. I looked in the Gospels to see what it was that Jesus actually asked his followers to believe and to do.

To my horror, I discovered a wide gulf between what Jesus said to his followers and what the churches around me were actually doing. In fact, the gulf proved to be so wide, that the conclusion I gradually came to is that our so-called churches are not real churches at all. In my opinion, we do not have a Christian church in the UK today, and probably never have had one.

This idea may seem shocking, ridiculous or irritating, depending on your standpoint. I was inclined to reject it when I first conceived it. It has taken me ten years of reflection to come to terms with what I have discovered; all I ask of you is that you be prepared to think about the issues raised in this book rather than dismissing them out of hand without a thought.

This is a book for those who care about the state of the Christian church. My basic assumption is that the Gospels as we have them today contain a reliable record of what Jesus taught his disciples. If that is an issue for you, then you may prefer to start by looking at the Appendix, where the arguments in favour of accepting the Biblical text that we have are set out in a question and answer form.

The aim of this book is to examine three key issues that define a Christian church. I have begun by trying to define the use of the word "Christian" as an adjective in part one. This is the longest section, because the whole argument rests on it, and also because the definition I have proposed raises difficulties for those of us who have been broadly happy with the churches we have seen. These need unhurried discussion. Part two looks at the correct usage of the word "Church". I will then propose what comprises Christian Teaching in part three. It would be nice to end the book with a blueprint for a truly Christian church, but this would be premature; the current need is for thought and reflection, rather than hasty action, so that the genuine church which has yet to emerge will be based on a solid foundation. Some readers may find this omission disappointing, but I believe it is better in this volume simply to raise the issues that need to be addressed, to allow for reflection. Ill-considered action on the basis of the argument at this stage would be a mistake.

I welcome feedback, and my plan is that any discussion that results might appear on [www.pennantpublishing.co.uk](http://www.pennantpublishing.co.uk) for those interested in following these things further. I intend to update the site frequently. I would prefer emails where possible to save postage costs when replying, and to enable easy cut and paste operations to web pages. Please send to [david@pennantpublishing.co.uk](mailto:david@pennantpublishing.co.uk), indicating if you want your view to be anonymous, or not to be quoted at all on the internet. No attachments please! Thank you.

## Part One

### What does 'Christian' mean?

Just because a painting has some scene from the Bible as its subject, does that make it a Christian painting? If a song is about Jesus, or even addressed to Jesus as an act of worship, does that make it a Christian song? Many people would answer yes to both those questions. In effect, they would think it natural to apply the word Christian to anything connected to Jesus. They would be comfortable talking about the Christian quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem, meaning that this was an area where the inhabitants were influenced by Christianity rather than Islaam or Judaism. They would be happy with a phrase like Christian Democrat or Christian Socialist to describe a person of certain political opinions or persuasion. A Christian book would mean a book whose subject matter involved Christianity in some way.

I would like to propose that this use of the word Christian as an adjective is defective. To my mind, the word Christian should not be applied widely to anything and everything connected more or less closely with Jesus in the public imagination, as is so often done. Instead, it should only be used of things that Jesus himself did and talked about.

Let us look at some instances. Jesus spoke a number of times about love, so there is such a thing as Christian love. He taught about giving, so there is such a thing as Christian giving. But to return to the examples given above, Jesus never took up a paintbrush, or said anything about painting, as far as we know, so in my opinion we should not use the phrase Christian painting. Such a phrase is confusing, because it implies that Jesus has authorised or encouraged the creation of paintings, but in fact he never did. Similarly, the phrase Christian song seems unhelpful, because it implies that Jesus was involved with songs in some way. In fact, he never encouraged anybody to sing at all. From the amount of singing that happens in many so-called churches, you might deduce that Jesus was very keen that his followers should sing. The fictitious visitor from Mars who landed in a gathering of Christians might conclude that the main thrust of Jesus' teaching on earth must have been to do with singing. But in fact, the concept of a Christian song, which implies a song authorised by Jesus in some way, seems faulty, as Jesus never mentioned singing to his followers.

In the same way, to my way of thinking, talk about the Christian quarter of Jerusalem, as if Jesus was somehow at home there but not elsewhere in the neighbourhood, is unhelpful. Since Jesus never spoke about politics, there is by definition no such thing as a Christian democrat or a Christian socialist. By the same token, there is also no such thing as a Christian book.

By now, I suspect some readers will be most unhappy. "How can you possibly deny the existence of Christian songs," they will ask, "and how can you possibly say there is no such thing as a Christian book?"

These examples are only the first of a number of points to be made in this book which go against the trend of current thinking. We need to be clear from the start that just because a belief may have become widespread, it does not follow that it must be a valid belief. The human race has had to learn this many times over, often painfully. It was not easy for people to accept that the earth was round rather than flat, as almost everybody had believed for centuries. The novel idea of Copernicus, that the earth went round the sun, was strenuously resisted for what seemed to be good reasons at the time. More recently, the suggestion that there were invisible rays that could pass

right through the earth must have seemed shocking at first. The earth is clearly solid – how could anything pass through it? The idea was ridiculous!

If you feel inclined to oppose the suggestion that there is by definition no such thing as a Christian song or a Christian book, be careful that you are not simply being influenced by having heard the phrases Christian Song and Christian Book used many times over. Mere repetition of a concept does not make that concept valid on its own.

I put it to you that in order to qualify for the title with certainty, a Christian song would need to be one that Jesus himself had produced, and the same applies to a Christian book. Such things don't exist, as far as we know. If Jesus had given teaching about the nature of songs and books, then we could talk with confidence about Christian songs and books, but he did not. If someone were to produce a song or book today by divine revelation, claiming that it was inspired 100% by Jesus himself, and this was widely agreed by others as being so, then there might be a case for calling it a Christian song or book. However, in my experience, the words Christian song and Christian book are actually used of any song or book that make reference to Jesus, more or less closely, and are not used as a claim of divine authorship. I believe this to be an unacceptable use of the word Christian.

Let us consider the idea of a Christian building for a moment. All my life, I have been used to thinking of the cathedrals and churches of our land as Christian buildings. They were designed for the worship of God, and by implication are special, even objects of veneration. So my thoughts have run. When I was quite small, I dreamt one night of an enormous church building that I had built, which covered acres and acres, with multiple naves and chancels. The quality of the stonework was fine. I glided over it all in my dream, and was very pleased with it. Looking back on my dream now, I am aware that there was nobody in the building, and that the cost of upkeep would have been phenomenal. My infant mind had not grasped these matters! Perhaps it was not such a good idea after all.

In the gospels, there is no instance of Jesus promoting buildings, so applying the principle I have proposed leads to the notion that there is in fact no such thing as a Christian building. My veneration was misplaced.

This may seem harsh at first, but consider the evidence of the text. On one occasion, Jesus' disciples pointed out the very fine temple that Herod had built in Jerusalem, praising the stones to him. I guess this landmark was more imposing than any cathedral we have in the UK. Jesus' reply was most disconcerting for those who want to allow the concept of Christian buildings: "I tell you, no stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down." Herod's temple was considered one of the wonders of the ancient world. It was built on a site hallowed by centuries of tradition, and chosen originally by King David for a temple. Despite this, Jesus was very rude about it. Since this is so, it seems very hard to imagine that buildings put up in the UK for religious purposes carry enough approval from Jesus that it is appropriate to call them Christian buildings.

As we reflect on all this, it seems that a Christian notion of buildings might even be the reverse of what I at least have grown up with. Jesus, when invited to comment on the importance of a special place where God met man, would have none of it.

There are two features of this to be noted. Firstly, if we are going to call ourselves followers of Jesus, and want to create a church which adheres to Jesus' own wishes, then maybe buildings are likely to be more of a hindrance than a help, because of what Jesus himself said. Secondly, and importantly for our present purposes, it appears from our discussion about buildings that an object or idea could have a history of being described as Christian even when it ran counter to the wishes of

Jesus. This is somewhat alarming. If we want a truly Christian church, which we do, then before accepting current beliefs and practices, we need to be prepared to look thoroughly at aspects of existing churches which are widely assumed to be Christian, and not just copy what others have been doing. It will not do to assume that the churches we are used to have been operating on roughly the right lines. A more radical re-think is called for.

Returning to supposedly Christian activities, it may be helpful to look briefly at a few allegedly Christian practices from the past, which we no longer adhere to today. Take for example the burning of heretics at the stake. I imagine that the people who did this in former centuries thought they were doing the will of Jesus; if asked, they would probably have been happy to describe the practice as a Christian one. I once read that when a man was tried for heresy by the Spanish Inquisition, the result would be made known by whether the wooden Christ figure nodded its head up and down, or shook it from side to side, thereby declaring the prisoner innocent or guilty. The model was manipulated by hidden levers, moved by a man who was out of sight of the anxious crowd of onlookers. At the time, this control of a wooden Christ by hidden levers was presumably accepted as a Christian procedure, at least by some people, because it was the practice of the church of those days. Personally, I find it hard to imagine anything less Christian! Again, I read recently that because of his writings, Galileo was called for questioning by the Holy Office of the Inquisition in Rome, which was known to be prepared to use torture to discover the truth if necessary. This was presumably thought of as being Christian torture in those days.

These actions seem wrong to us today. Is the change in view simply a matter of fashion or taste? I suspect not. If we were asked for a reason, we might say that no justification for any of these courses of action can be found in the life or on the lips of Jesus.

By now, we are in a position to clarify two competing definitions of the adjective Christian. A wider, and more traditional definition, might be “connected with Christ”, or “associated with Christ”, or “pertaining to Christ”. A narrower definition, favoured here, might be “issuing from Christ”, or even better, “authorised by Christ”.

Some readers may consider the narrower definition too restricting, and prefer the wider definition. I can understand that view. You will need to be careful, however, that your understanding of what is Christian does not permit the practices of bygone centuries mentioned above, which we thankfully no longer tolerate. On what grounds do you rule them out if you accept the broader definition? Or are you prepared to accept the idea of burning and torturing heretics as being a Christian concept?

To my mind, the broader definition is tainted because it allows a watering down of the uniqueness of Jesus, which is crucial to Christianity. Those who call Jesus Lord should be careful to take notice of what he says. Only those practices and ideas that he encouraged should be regarded as Christian.

Maybe you are with me on this; maybe not. However, even if you are not persuaded to favour the narrower definition by the argument above, I invite you to join me in looking at some traditional church practices with the narrower definition in mind. I think you may find it can be instructive. Let me give an example.

In the UK, a minimal level of contact that people have tended to have with the so-called churches has been at three special occasions in their lives, those of baptism, marriage and burial. These events all fit within the broader definition, evoking the name of Jesus as they do. But now we will apply the narrower definition to these three significant moments. We notice that we can legitimately talk about Christian baptism, as Jesus mentioned it. His followers were to baptise the new converts. We can also

talk about Christian marriage because Jesus said things on the subject of marriage. However, when we come to burial, the narrower definition brings us up short. Jesus never said anything about his followers being involved in funerals; in fact, quite the reverse.

The gospels tell us a number of things on this subject. Jesus came across three funerals, and on each occasion he raised the dead person back to life again. A young man, who said he wanted to follow Jesus after he had buried his father, was told to change his plans in the words, "Leave the dead to bury their dead." On sending out the twelve disciples in advance of him, Jesus instructed them among other things to raise the dead. It seems, then, that the phrase "A Christian funeral" is a contradiction of terms. The narrower definition shows us that there is no such thing as Christian funeral, as Jesus wanted his followers to raise the dead rather than bury them.

Some readers may scoff at this. We are all so familiar with the clergyman dressed in black and white pronouncing the time-honoured words at the graveside that the idea that he is going against Jesus by performing his duties strikes us as absurd. Besides, we all know that in due course people die, and there is an important function to be carried out as the body is disposed of. Who better to do it than a clergyman?

Note, firstly, that those who use the broader definition do not encounter any difficulty over burying the dead in the name of Jesus. People need the church at least three times in their lives, they think, to be "hatched, matched and dispatched". It is only because we are considering the narrower definition that we have noted a fundamental difference between baptism and marriage on the one hand, and burial on the other. Two of these have Jesus' stated approval, but the third runs opposite to Jesus' wishes. If we had not formulated the narrower definition, we would have been quite happy for the church to see its role as including the taking of funerals, but by making use of the narrower definition, we are gaining a new perspective, which may prove helpful to our task.

It is easy to be aware of the difficulties that arise from the idea of raising dead people. Jesus appears to be calling his followers to resist the inevitable in the manner of King Canute trying to halt the incoming tide on the sea shore. The world could not function if people did not die. There would be no room for us all. Suppose we raised the hopes of relatives by trying to raise a dead person, only to dash them again by failing; that doesn't seem a good idea. And so forth. It is easy to decry attempts to raise the dead.

Counter to these objections, there is the obvious point that for those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus, the expressed will of Jesus on this matter should take priority over our own thinking. But we will leave that argument aside for the present. Instead, we will see where the broader definition of the word Christian might lead. Let us agree to yield on this point for the moment and accept the possibility of a Christian funeral. What would the consequences be?

To my way of thinking, what may look like a small concession dictated by common sense would in practice allow an attitude of unbelief to enter in its shadow. My suspicion is that once we accept that death cannot be fought against, then we will also give up on those who are as good as dead. I think of a young man I once met who was so far gone on alcohol that his body had withered away to little more than skin and bones. Death seemed imminent to me. The idea of helping him seemed so daunting that it was tempting to give up on him as being hopeless. Even as I thought that, I also realised that my mental reaction to him was hardly a Christian attitude.

If we give up the idea of raising the dead, then we will tend to become happy with the idea of incurable disease as well, for example, whereas if we open the gospels we

see immediately that Jesus regarded no disease as incurable. In fact, it is noteworthy how Jesus regarded nothing as impossible. The wind and waves that had been whipped up in a storm subsided instantly at his word. The most crazed man imaginable was transformed into someone able to sit quietly and listen to him. Five loaves and two small fish were enough to feed thousands in his hands. Accepting death as being something we cannot challenge feels suspiciously like a first step towards giving way on a whole raft of related issues to me. Unless we are careful, so-called Christians will end up feeling unable to challenge anything that seems daunting and against the run of daily experience. So what started out as being realistic, or sensible, may well end up by running counter to faith in Jesus. We recall his words to Peter, "What is impossible with men is possible with God."

This tendency to accept the impossible as being impossible is something to stand against. The sick can be healed by prayer. Miracles are within the grasp of believers. Death is not the end, as Jesus himself demonstrated, and can even be conquered here and now by those who follow him.

I like the narrow definition! I'm sticking with it. The broader definition feels like a cop-out. The narrower definition feels tighter and more precise. It will save us from being so broad-minded that almost anything goes, an attitude which has done our traditional churches so much harm in my opinion. So I am happy to say, there is no such thing as a Christian funeral or a Christian burial; these phrases are a logical impossibility, a contradiction in terms. The traditional practice of the church burying the dead runs counter to the teaching and practice of Jesus.

It follows, therefore, that there are likely to be few if any Christian ministers in the UK today. To be certain that I am not overstating the case, I will set the level of what a Christian minister may legitimately do with dead people at its absolute lowest. It would have been reasonable to insist that a Christian minister would only ever raise people from the dead, but I will allow that in order to qualify as a Christian minister, a person would only need to have raised more people from death than he or she had buried. Someone who had taken ten funerals could still be counted as a Christian minister if they had raised eleven people from the dead. So if there is anyone in the UK today involved in taking funerals who has raised more people from the dead than they have buried, I will allow that that person may be a Christian minister.

I doubt that there is anyone in that category. Speaking for myself, during my seven years as a clergyman, I buried around two hundred people and did not raise a single one, so there is no way I was anywhere near acting as a Christian minister. I can see it now, but I thought I was doing the right thing at the time. I thought that by being as sensitive as I knew how, I was doing Christian work, but instead of opposing death by raising the dead, as Jesus called his followers to do, in carrying out my duties I was rubber-stamping the fact of death.

You may think that saying people who conduct funerals cannot be Christian ministers as a result is unreasonable. Perhaps you are right, but what bothers me is this; how can someone be considered a Christian minister if instead of carrying out Jesus' clearly expressed instructions, they are actively doing precisely the opposite of what he asked, not just once but many times over, on a regular basis? Should not a Christian minister do the will of Jesus?

When the Athenians heard Paul talking about the raising of the dead, they scoffed. However, the idea may not be as far-fetched as it seems. There have always been rumours and accounts of dead people being raised. The preacher known as Smith Wigglesworth is reputed to have raised eight people from the dead. He was forever healing people. When I first heard of him, I became so excited that I gave my brother

a paperback about him for his birthday, and then the following year, having forgotten that he already had one, I gave him another Wigglesworth biography for his next birthday! Fortunately, it was by a different author. So I know that there are at least two recent accounts of his life, if you want to read about him. In one of them, it came out that a quarter of an hour never went by without Smith Wigglesworth thinking of or speaking to Jesus. I felt completely inadequate when I read that.

I wonder what your reaction is to all this talk about raising dead people. You may have noticed that I have chosen one of the hardest of all of Jesus' commands to discuss. Paul admitted that the last enemy to be overcome is death. Might I have been wiser to make my point with some issue that is less contentious? Could I not have chosen one of Jesus' less difficult instructions, like loving people for instance?

I can understand that in the light of our discussion, some readers will be more than ever convinced that the broader definition is the only workable one. Personally, I am unhappy about this. On closer examination, there is nothing very workable about any of Jesus' demands on us, as I see it. Jesus' words "with God, nothing is impossible" come to mind. Also, Paul said it was the foolish people and thoughts of this world that God uses. Apparent foolishness is not such a setback after all to those who want to follow Jesus closely. Indeed, wherever you turn in the Bible, the impossible seems commonplace. We are asked to believe that the universe sprang into being as a result of God's words. There are several birth accounts in the book of Genesis that should have been impossible, those of Isaac, Jacob, Esau and Joseph, foreshadowing the virgin birth. In Egypt, we read of extraordinary miracles, including the sea standing back like a wall, and then a rock in a desert producing water sufficient for six hundred thousand men to drink. Many of the stories in the Old Testament put a strain on our critical faculties. How could the sun stand still for nearly a whole day while a nation took vengeance on its enemies?

I suspect that the reason why the broader definition of the word Christian has the appeal that it does is that it tends to obscure the poor level of faith we so-called Christians have, allowing us to gloss over those areas where we scarcely follow our Lord at all. Jesus' teaching was always challenging, and reducing the level of difficulty to what we can all manage easily runs counter to his words. There is a great deal at stake here, and I suggest it would be unwise to dismiss the tighter definition in a hurry without thinking the matter through carefully. I invite you to suspend judgement for the present as we consider the matter further.

We now come to an important point. Whether you opt for a definition of the adjective Christian as "connected to Christ", which we have labelled the broader view, or whether you opt for a definition such as "issuing from Christ", which we have called the narrower view, may not matter so much on some subjects as on others. But when we come to the idea of a Christian church, then we are bound to follow the narrower definition. To live up to its name, a Christian church must perform all those functions that Jesus wanted it to perform, and omit all those other practices that Jesus never mentioned. Jesus must set the agenda for a church which aims to be truly Christian. It is his church after all. He is the head of it. To discover his agenda, we will need to go back to the source documents and note what Jesus taught his followers to be and do.

Using the broader definition, which would mean allowing activities that have traditionally been associated with churches to be on the church's agenda, seems inadequate. That approach reminds me of the phrase that I have often heard in church committee meetings, "What did we do last year"? Simply repeating past practices and programmes is not going to produce a truly Christian church. As we noted earlier, we

will need to think carefully about any and every practice of existing churches before we can agree to admit them to a truly Christian church.

So before we come to an understanding of the word church itself, we will look at some of the practices of existing churches and apply the test of the narrower definition to them. Are these practices authorised by Jesus; do they flow from him? Or have they simply been associated with him without sufficient reason?

Some of these activities can be dealt with more easily than others. Take bell-ringing for example. For hundreds of years the changes have been rung in churches up and down the country with more or less skill. It only takes a moment's reflection to realise that this activity does not issue from Jesus; therefore, it does not qualify as a Christian activity. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with it as an activity in its own right. Personally, I enjoy the sound of a peal of bells. We just need to think of it as a hobby, on a par with bowling or golf. It should be politely excluded from the fully Christian church that we have in mind.

Let us be quite certain what we are aiming at. In a law court, witnesses promise to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Precise accurate statements are required from the witnesses for justice to be done. In the same way, in order to do justice to the concept of a truly Christian church, a precise and accurate statement of Jesus' wishes as it were, the agenda needs to be what Jesus said, the whole of what Jesus said, and nothing but what Jesus said. So activities like bell-ringing, however much fun they are, will need to go!

Money-raising activities also will have no place. Jesus was quite clear about this. "Seek first the kingdom of God," he said, "and all these things will be added unto you." The things referred to were daily needs like food and clothing. They will be provided to those who follow Jesus, seeking to promote the Kingdom of God. In Acts three, we read that Peter and John had no money, but rather than focussing on this and directing their steps to finding a job, they went to the temple to pray. The lame beggar who was healed lost his interest in money as a result, and many people were added to the faith. We are not to get distracted by thinking that money needs to be raised. Jesus taught that this is an area for trust and faith. If the means are not forthcoming, then rather than it being seen as a signal for money-raising, those in charge should search their souls for what has gone wrong that God is no longer providing the necessary supplies.

The next unacceptable item of church practice may come as a shock. I regret that Bible teaching has no place in the Christian church. If we apply the criteria, we realise that Jesus never encouraged anyone to teach the Bible. He did have a teaching programme for his followers, which we will come to later, but it was not to teach the Bible. He himself knew the Scriptures very well, and was able to call on relevant passages in discussion with others. However, he chose not to teach the Scriptures to his followers, and did not ask them to do so either. The closest he came to teaching the Bible was when he "opened the minds" of two of his followers "to understand the scriptures" in private conversation. What this actually meant was Jesus pointing out from the Scriptures that the Messiah was bound to die and then rise from the dead. He used the Scriptures to explain to them what had just happened to him.

For many readers, the idea that expounding the Bible is not a Christian practice will be hard to accept. I found the idea shocking when it first occurred to me that Jesus never taught the Bible to his followers. He could easily have done so; he had the whole of what we call the Old Testament. He knew the material well, as can be seen from his dialogue with his two followers. Yet he made no reference to teaching the Bible.

There has been a strong tradition of Bible exposition in several of the churches that I have been associated with. It will be hard enough for many people to accept that this is not part of Jesus' agenda for his church. However, we need to go further, and ask, as we did before about raising the dead, whether the practice of Bible teaching could have done any harm.

Our first response might be that to teach the Bible must be a wholly good thing. It is important that people have their opinions formed by the teaching of Scripture. This seems desirable. But the reality is that this is better done by people reading the Bible for themselves, rather than someone else doing the work for them. It strikes me as fundamentally wrong that so much of our so-called church life should consist of one person doing a lot of talking while the rest all sit mutely on seats trying to concentrate on the address. For 99% of the people, it is a passive experience. All the pundits agree that you learn most by doing. Jesus did talk to people in groups, admittedly, but what he always chose to do was to give them puzzles to chew over – he called them parables. He never lectured from the Scriptures.

The experience of Moses' successor Joshua is helpful here. On his appointment as leader of the people, he was told by God himself of the importance of the Book of the Law. This can be thought of as the Bible of his day. We might expect that as leader he was to set it before the people, but this is not the case. Rather he was instructed to meditate on it himself day and night. There is no hint that he was to pass on its contents in public speaking.

People do need to know the Bible, but the way to absorb it is to meditate on it yourself, not to have someone else doing the meditation for you. I once read that C.T. Studd, the pioneer missionary to China, India and Africa, would rise at 3 a.m., meditate on the Scriptures for ninety minutes before returning to bed, and then pour out what he had learned to the Africans sitting in a semi-circle round him, when the sun had risen. I used to think this was an excellent model for the Christian leader. Now I am not so sure. It was great for Studd himself, but I have come to realise that for his audience, this was spoon-feeding. There is a place for spoon-feeding. I have delightful memories of twin girls aged six months being given breakfast from a teaspoon, turn and turn about. A mouthful for you, then a mouthful for you. They cooed and gurgled with pleasure in their high seats at the breakfast table. This scene took place fifteen years ago. The idea of those young ladies still being spoon-fed today as teenagers is a ridiculous one, but this is exactly the situation that we have in many so-called churches. People are expected to sit quietly in the pew being spoon-fed year after year. It is not right.

What makes it even worse is what they are being taught. In many cases, the material is not coming direct from the Scriptures at all, but has been drawn from commentaries and books by supposed scholars, or worse still absorbed from addresses given by other supposedly Christian teachers. As a generation, we seem to have forgotten the text in Jeremiah where God says "I am against the prophets who steal my words from one another for their own use." Theft is a serious matter.

A word here to those who stand up and speak in Christian gatherings. If you teach others from the Scriptures in a Christian context, and you cannot be certain that your comments on the text are inspired by God and not by some other human source, then you would do well to limit yourself to simply reading out the text of the Scriptures. Even better, to my mind, would be to encourage people to read the Bible for themselves.

I remember a student coming to faith, years ago. His attitude was to read a book of the Bible each day. "I read Acts yesterday," I heard him say, "and Luke the day

before that. What shall I read today?" I suggest that he absorbed far more from doing that than from attending hundreds of Bible talks. In addition, what he grasped would have been untainted by the current fashion of thought in the circle of believers where he found faith.

When I put my trust in Jesus, I was not only pleased with what had happened, but I was ready to soak up anything my new teachers said. I trusted them. Looking back now, I can see that although much of what they said was helpful, I also took on board other beliefs that they held. The idea that prophecy does not occur today was one. Another was that the Church has replaced Israel in the purposes of God. Not only do these two theories not spring from the Gospels, they do not appear in the New Testament either, to my knowledge. Everyone is entitled to their opinions, but when these are presented alongside the teachings of Jesus as if they were all one package, confusion results.

Please understand that this is not a criticism of these particular views, or of the sincere people that taught me to think in those ways. I might never have found the Lord if it had not been for them. Rather, my comment is on the process of supposed Bible teaching itself. On reflection, it seems to me all too easy for any one of us to be passing on not just the teaching of Jesus, but our own views mixed in as well. It has taken me decades to disentangle myself from several thought patterns which are widely accepted in the Christian community, but which on closer inspection do not spring from the words of Jesus himself.

We see, then, that although knowing the Bible seems indispensable, the process of teaching the Bible was not encouraged by Jesus, and so is not a Christian activity according to the narrower definition. In addition, the giving of Bible teaching even has the capacity to do harm, by inducing spiritual torpor and by becoming a vehicle for non-Christian ideas.

Naturally, this insight applies to this book as well. Please test everything I have written against the Gospels!

We now come to what may prove to be hardest of all for some readers to accept. If we apply the narrower definition, that an activity is only to be called Christian if it proceeds from Christ or is authorised by Christ, then we discover that worship is not a Christian activity. Since many Christians believe that worship is a crucial part of church life, perhaps even the most crucial part of all, this may evoke a howl of protest. I ask you to bear with me and be patient.

The starting point is that if you search the gospels, you will find that Jesus did not encourage his followers to worship God. He never raised the subject with them. Look for yourself!

Now he did respond on one occasion when a woman raised the subject of worship with him. His reply was that the worshippers God wants are those who worship God in spirit and in truth. You might think from this that Jesus did teach that we are to worship God, but if you read the text carefully, you will see that in fact Jesus was rebuking the lady. He had raised with her the fact that she was now with her fifth man, and that he was not her husband. Her response was to change the subject and start arguing about where the right place to worship God was. Jesus then told her that those who want to worship God need to do it genuinely. The lady was attempting to turn the conversation onto venues for worship rather than take steps to put her life right with God. Any worship in that state of mind would not be worshipping "in spirit and in truth" as Jesus put it.

There may be different ways of understanding Jesus' words, but what does seem clear from what he said is that until her love-life was sorted out, the Holy Spirit would

not be comfortable with her attitude. Nor would her worship in that state be worship in truth; where is the integrity in your supposed worship of God if you are breaking one of his most important commandments at the same time?

I attended a baptism a few years ago. There was a large gathering, and the singing of the worship songs was carried on with gusto. It all seemed fine. Later on, the speaker said that there were three people present in the meeting who were in adultery and God wanted them to sort it out as a matter of urgency.

Let us assume for the moment that the speaker was right in what he said about the three people, and that God had revealed this state of affairs to him. Let us imagine the worship from God's point of view. What did it feel like to God to know that some of those singing his praises were living in adultery? Would he have appreciated their worship? What would we think of people living a life of burglary singing God's praises on a Sunday? Could that be worship in spirit and in truth?

Some reflection soon makes it clear that worship carried on by people living in disobedience to God is more of an insult to God than anything else.

Someone I know very well was giving a lunch party on a Sunday in June a few years back. Twenty guests would be coming at 1230, and there was a lot to do. At breakfast, he asked his twelve-year-old son to give a hand, but the boy contrived to make himself scarce all morning despite the fact that he had nothing to do. He did not want to help.

However, at about 1215, the boy came up with a card. It was Father's day. His dad opened the envelope, and read the caption on the card – To the Best Dad in the World. His response was to be angry. He had been working hard all morning doing the catering, setting out plates and cutlery, and now he was tired, just as the guests were about to arrive. He would have really appreciated some help from his boy, but none had come. This card was no help at all! However, he did not want to hurt his son, which he knew he could easily do, so he swallowed his anger, and thanked the boy for his kindness.

I found this incident most instructive. God through Jesus has given his church a job to do. How frustrated he must feel when the response of most so-called churches is to ignore what he actually asked, and give him a lot of worship instead? Do you imagine that he enjoys it? Yet maybe, like my friend, he hesitates to express his anger to his people, not wanting to hurt us.

We may note in passing that the examples we gave, of worshippers involved in adultery and burglary, are breaches of Old Testament commands. How much worse the situation becomes when people who claim to be worshipping Jesus are at the same time breaking or ignoring Jesus' commands. Some readers will be unconvinced by our argument, and want to give worship high priority, but they should be sure of one thing; those who want to worship in Spirit and in truth had better make sure that they are living the life Jesus wants them to live, in obedience to his instructions. We will cover this more fully later in the book.

We should also note that in Old Testament Hebrew, the word used for "worship" can also be rendered "service" or "work". In Exodus, for example, the Egyptians forced their Israelite slaves to make bricks; the word rendered "service" in the older King James version appears as "work", or "hard labour" in modern versions. The same word is translated "worship" elsewhere. We are used to thinking that the people served Pharaoh by making bricks and later on were set free so they could worship God at the mountain. The text allows us to say that the people worshipped Pharaoh by making bricks and served God at the mountain.

The same dual usage is true of New Testament Greek. When Paul wrote to the

Roman Christians urging them to offer their bodies as living sacrifices - we might say in today's idiom, to put their necks on the line for what they believed, he added that this was their reasonable "worship". One could translate it "service" instead. You can see this if you compare different versions.

I like to think that the Biblical languages themselves are telling us that there is no true worship of God without service, and also that if you are serving God, then you are actually worshipping God by your actions.

When someone appears to support something and says so, but in fact does not back his words with action, we sometimes use the phrase "paying lip-service" to comment on what is happening. This turn of phrase appears to come from Jesus' own words, "This people worships me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Mathematically minded readers might like to express this as an equation:

worship minus service equals lip-service.

Much of what passes today for worship in our so-called churches is no more than lip-service in my view.

I was brought up to attend Sunday worship, and for many years, I enjoyed it and once a curate, I felt at home arranging and leading it. It was only when I had been in church leadership for a few years that I realised that the mass of those attending regarded the Sunday morning hour as the sum total of their church involvement. This left me with questions. What about the un-churched millions who did not know Jesus? What about the homeless sleeping in doorways? What about those in distress of one kind or another? Should we not be training ourselves in healing the sick, cleansing the lepers and raising the dead? Most people preferred to ignore these things. Some were more blunt. "If you don't stop showing these videos on casting out demons each week, you will kill the evening service!" said one. And when I wanted to keep the church building open overnight one winter for shelter, I was told, "We don't want these people in our village." Although this was the equivalent of telling these people to go and jump, which is hardly a Christian attitude, at least I found the remark refreshingly honest.

Now I ask you, what was the value of our supposed worship to God if we were ignoring his promptings in these directions, as I believed them to be? I now find it hard to attend on a Sunday at all, as the general attitude seems to be that by meeting we are offering service to God, and are thereby doing our bit for the week.

In heaven, where there is an end to death and mourning and crying and pain, there will be unlimited opportunities for singing, but while we have the few decades allotted to us here, it seems to me that showing love to people as Jesus asked us to do is the priority. Personally, I don't mind if I never sing another song of worship again, but I do find it distressing to think of the amount of personal pain around us. I once read that fifty people a week in our country commit suicide. In round terms, that figure amounts to one per million inhabitants, and for most readers of this book that might represent the number of people within a twenty mile radius from where they are sitting. This suicide statistic, which represents the extreme of human suffering, is on the low side, as any death which could conceivably be accidental is not included in it. In other words, you don't have to go far to find people in need.

In our discussion about what is and is not Christian, we have suggested that the defining factor is whether Jesus authorised it. Before we decide in favour of this definition over what we called the broader definition, that activities associated with Jesus may be called Christian, there is one more question to discuss.

This is the idea that if Jesus did something himself, then that makes it a Christian activity. For example, Jesus never encouraged his disciples to spend long hours in prayer. However, he himself once rose a great while before day and went to a quiet place to pray, so perhaps this may be seen as a Christian activity that may helpfully be copied today. Another time he prayed all night; perhaps we should do so too.

I think we need to be careful here. The issue is not whether Jesus did something himself, but whether he wanted his followers to do it. Did he encourage them to rise early to pray, or spend long hours at it, or pray overnight? I find no record of it. Rather, he did not place heavy demands regarding prayer to his followers. What he did say on prayer tended to come in dribs and drabs on different occasions. When the twelve asked him to teach them how to pray, he gave them a short prayer to use, and added a few comments. We call it the Lord's prayer. He once encouraged them to be to the point in their prayers, and not to babble on. Another time, he told them to persist in their requests to God, and not give up. On one occasion, when his disciples could not cast out a demon, he explained that this kind only comes out by prayer. So although Jesus himself may have spent long hours in prayer, the impression given in the Gospels seems more to be that for his followers, prayer is to be persistent, and "little and often".

You may disagree with the last sentence, and feel that I have misrepresented the teaching of Jesus on prayer. That is fine, as long as you can substitute a better understanding of what he taught in place of my summary. But what is unacceptable, in my view, is for someone to stand up and say, "because Jesus spent long hours in prayer, we need to do the same." This sounds good, if we don't listen too critically, but it is the speaker's idea rather than an idea expressed by Jesus himself. A Christian action should be understood as being one that Jesus wanted his followers to perform, to my mind, not just one that he himself did.

The argument "Jesus did this, so we should do it too" is seldom applied across the board. Jesus once said that, unlike foxes and birds, he had no home of his own, nowhere to sleep. I have yet to hear the suggestion that Christians in the UK ought to make themselves homeless as a result. In his public speaking, we read that Jesus never spoke to people without using a parable. I am not aware of any school of thought which says that every time someone speaks in a Christian setting, they should use parables. Although Judas used to carry a bag, which had money in it, funds were so short that on one occasion, when the temple tax was called for, Jesus told Peter to go and catch a fish; there would be a coin in its mouth, which would pay the tax. Clearly, the finances were low to non-existent. Some have chosen a path of poverty, as a result of what they have seen in the life of Jesus; but it is another matter to suggest that Christians in the UK have a duty to make themselves penniless in order to copy Jesus.

It seems to me that the argument "Jesus did such and such, so we should do it too" is seen to be less than helpful when it is compared to "Jesus told his disciples to do something so we should do it too." The former lacks the authority of the latter. In practice, the former tends to be wheeled out at the whim of a church leader; we can see this from the fact that it has not been applied consistently.

There may be something to be drawn from this line of teaching about copying Jesus, however. His first call to his followers was "follow me". Jesus walked a difficult path and died a painful death, refusing to compromise in the face of criticism and anger from the religious authorities. We may need to follow him in much or all of this; indeed, Peter wrote that when it comes to suffering, "it is for you to follow in his steps." Still, I doubt that we do well to say that just because Jesus did something, it has the status of being a Christian activity, and we should therefore do it too. Jesus ate

and drank. Does that make eating and drinking a Christian activity? Not according to Paul, who wrote, “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking but righteousness, peace and joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.”

The issue, as I understand it, is one of following Jesus and not the well-intentioned appeals of some human leader. While recognising that some followers of Jesus may be called to copy certain details of Jesus’ life-style more closely than others, for the purposes of our discussion, we will stick with the definition proposed, that a Christian action is one that Jesus called on his followers to do, not simply one that he did himself.

By now, the path I am hoping to lead us all down is becoming clear. It would be rash to commit to new courses without careful thought. I can imagine somebody feeling that the arguments I am presenting may have some merit in them, but the overall presentation lacks balance. There is a danger of becoming extreme. It is important to keep a sense of proportion.

I am inclined to agree; balance is important. But the issue is, who decides what is balanced? How is a sense of balance to be reached? The answer, as always, is that when it comes to Christian matters, the person who decides what is balanced needs to be Jesus himself, not you or me.

To illustrate this point, we will consider the two activities of singing hymns, and casting out demons, and try to come to a balanced view of how often they might occur in the life of a church. Earlier, we suggested that singing songs is not a Christian activity, to the probable horror of most readers. This may have been premature, as we read in the Gospels that after the last supper, “when they had sung a hymn”, they went out to the Mount of Olives. This is hard evidence that Jesus sang at least one hymn! So despite our decision to refuse the status of Christian activity to what Jesus did, and allow it only for what he taught his followers to do, the idea may linger that hymn-singing somehow has his approval.

The hymn singing episode is admittedly very brief indeed. In the Greek, the phrase “when they had sung a hymn” is rendered by just one word. This is hardly possible in English, unless you are prepared to accept “Hymn-sung, they went out to the Mount of Olives” as being good grammar. If the four gospels average around ten thousand words each, then a statistician might say that one ten thousandth part of the Gospel is to do with hymn-singing; that is 0.01%!

In contrast, Jesus cast out hundreds of demons, according to the gospels. May we say around four hundred, as an approximation? Although he made it clear that he wanted his followers to cast out demons, we might think that this somewhat threatening activity would not be for all followers, but might perhaps be limited to a handful of specialists. However, we would be wrong! Some things in the gospels happened just with the twelve, and some were limited to the closest three, Peter, James and John, but on close inspection we find that the seventy sent out in pairs cast out demons as well. Even the fringe members were involved here. So there is more to encourage us to do it than simply copying Jesus’ actions.

So now to the question of balance. Superficially, the ratio in the life of Jesus appears to be 1 hymn to 400 demons. Those who regularly attend one so-called church service on a Sunday will probably sing five hymns a week. In order to achieve a balance in keeping with Jesus, they ought then to cast out two thousand demons a week. I don’t know about you, but that figure strikes me as somewhat daunting!

This comparison of hymn-singing and demon-expulsion is instructive, because my imagination is that someone wanting to evoke the importance of balance in these

matters was probably secretly hoping it might get them off the hook. When we look at the evidence, however, the reverse seems to be the case, at least in this instance.

Let us linger with the example a moment and ask, how could anyone cast out two thousand demons in one week? The idea seems absurd at first, until we recall the case of the man known as Legion. This man was so crazed that it was impossible to restrain him; he lived a wild life among the tombs, and most people kept well away from him, but not Jesus. When Jesus gave the instruction and the demons went out of the man, they went into two thousand pigs, which then promptly self-destructed. The number of the pigs suggests to me that perhaps the man's name told only half the story; maybe he had two thousand demons, which would mean that on this occasion Jesus cast out two thousand demons in one go!

I love that story, because it sounds the death knell for any and every attempt to replace the challenge of what Jesus actually said with something which may sound more reasonable. Perhaps like me you feel hopeless, weak-willed and fearful in the face of Jesus' demands, but at least the leader we follow was not like that. I think it would be true to say that no obstacle ever stopped Jesus. He invited his disciples to have a similar attitude. "Have faith in God," he said, "and you will say to this mountain, be uprooted and planted in the sea and it will be so; nothing will prove impossible for you." A true church will be characterised by faith like that, which is in fact the only kind of faith that can be called truly Christian, because it is the faith Jesus encouraged his followers to have. It alone passes the test of the narrower definition of Christian faith.

Before we leave the subject of casting out demons, we will note how little our churches have tended to do in this area. Our mathematics implied that for every hymn sung, a balanced follower of Jesus might cast out four hundred demons, crazy as that may sound. The reality in most so-called churches that I have been involved with is this; if the members had cast out one demon for every four hundred hymns they sang, reversing the two numbers, it would have been a significant advance. At five hymns a Sunday, a regular attender would get through four hundred demons in under two years. There are so-called churches in the UK where no-one has attempted to cast out a demon for decades, perhaps for centuries. People would be shocked if you so much as suggested that casting out demons was a normal part of church life.

It may sound startling to you if your background is similar to mine, but in view of what Jesus said in the gospels, followers of Jesus are committed to casting out demons. If you doubt it, read the gospels asking the question, did Jesus want his followers to cast out demons. I reckon you will find the answer is clear. Try it and see for yourself. So the question to be asking here is not, how can I avoid this matter, but rather, how can I get involved? I can tell you from personal experience, it is lovely to see someone in a freer place after you have finished praying with them than they were before you started.

It is time to move on to define what a church is, but before we do, we will summarise what we have discussed.

The word Christian, when used as an adjective, has been attached to many activities more or less to do with Jesus. Our proposal is that this is not adequate; a Christian thought is one that Jesus himself expressed to his followers; a Christian teaching is one that he taught his followers to accept, and a Christian action is one that he wanted his followers to do. It is Jesus himself who sets the agenda as to what is and is not Christian, and nobody else. I therefore invite you to reject what we called the broader definition and accept this narrower one instead as being valid.

## Part Two

### What is a church?

Our task now is to answer the question, what is a church. We will begin by considering what a church is not.

What would you think of a golf club which had a board on display in the car park, whose contents ran as follows :

20 Snooker Tables  
Pool and Darts  
Fully Air-conditioned  
Big Screen T.V.  
Free Parking

My reaction would be one of confusion. Why is there no mention of the usual features of a golf club – holes, fairways, putting greens, the professional's shop and so forth? Also, while I could imagine one or two snooker tables, having twenty tables seems rather excessive for a golf club. I would soon conclude that this was not a golf club at all, but a snooker club.

I would be right. These were the contents of the board outside our local snooker club at the time of writing.

It seems to me that it would be impossible to claim that something was a golf club if it had twenty Snooker tables but no holes for playing golf. This point may seem so obvious that it is not worth making, but please bear with me! A golf club with one snooker table in its clubhouse seems reasonable enough. I once met a friend for a round of golf at his club. On arrival he told me he had broken his thumb the day before, so could we abandon the golf and have a frame of snooker instead on the club's table, as he reckoned he could manage that. I did not mind, as I had been expecting to lose the golf, so we prodded the snooker balls instead, and to my disgust he still won despite his broken thumb.

The presence of that one snooker table did not compromise the status of the golf club, I would say, as long as the main activity was playing golf. On the other hand, the scenario above, where there is no mention of anywhere to play golf and the first thing mentioned on the board was the existence of twenty snooker tables, ruled out the possibility of the place being a golf club.

All this seems obvious. You can perhaps see where I am leading.

When any organisation puts up a board outside its building, it seeks to convey the main features of that organisation, be it snooker club, golf club, or church! So when a local church board states

Holy Communion 8.00 a.m. Sundays  
Morning Worship 10.30 a.m. Sundays  
Evening Worship 6.30 p.m. Sundays  
Holy Communion 10.30 a.m. first Thursday of the month

or something similar, we tend to draw the conclusion that the main activity of the church consists of worship services.

It seems a fair question to ask what features of these worship services Jesus asked his followers to perform. We have already pointed out that worship and Bible

exposition fall outside his requests. So too with the singing of hymns, as we saw earlier.

Holy Communion refers to taking bread and wine in memory of Jesus' body and blood. This seems more hopeful at first glance. Jesus asked his disciples to do that at the last supper. However, there is no hint in the gospels that this practice was ever to be repeated. The only place in the Bible where we are told of the practice becoming a regular one is in Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth, in chapter eleven.

This puts us on somewhat shaky ground. Our definition of a Christian practice was one which Jesus himself encouraged. In this instance, we only have Paul's word for it that this was the case. Personally, I am happy to allow that this is a Christian practice on the basis of Paul's writing, but if we are going to be consistent in applying our definition, it hardly seems possible to give it the central place in the life of a church suggested by our church board. The gospel writers have not even made it clear that Jesus wanted the event to become a continuing feature of the life of his followers, so at best, it will be a peripheral activity in a church which wants to carry out Jesus' will to the letter.

Other traditional practices of local churches do not stand up to scrutiny either. One is the naming of sick people in prayer, asking God to heal them. When we look in the gospels with regard to the sick, we find no encouragement along these lines; rather, Jesus instructed his disciples to do the healing themselves. This is the reverse of traditional church practice. We generally ask God to heal the sick, ignoring the fact that he asks us to heal the sick!

The practice of intercession or praying for others is also part of church services. On inspection, we find that the request to pray for others, especially for the king and for governments, was one given by Paul, not Jesus himself. In Part Three, when we discuss the nature of Christian teaching, we will ask how the contents of the rest of the Bible relate to the teachings of Jesus. For now, it is sufficient to notice that few if any features of worship services, as traditionally practised in the UK, can find support from Jesus' own words.

The use of the word "service" is suspect as well, it seems to me. In every other context, a service is a helpful action that one person performs for another. Normally that action will have been requested, but not always; often it will be paid for. On entering a public building for the first time, for example, a newcomer might advance to the reception desk and ask the staff member attending it, "What services do you provide?" The reply would list the main activities of the organisation as they affected members of the public.

As I reflect on the phrase "church service", I find myself wondering who is helped by what goes on. One might think that a church service was performed for God's benefit, but as we have seen, the traditional activities of churches find little support in what Jesus has asked his people to do. It is therefore hard to assert that God is served by the activities. I find that rather remarkable.

Perhaps the people that attend are the ones who receive a service. I find this idea hard to sustain too, as the emphasis in these events is focussed on giving something to God, not each other. The sermon might be thought of as rendering a service to the congregation, but it seems to me that if the aim of the event was to service the people in attendance, I would arrange it very differently. We all know how hard it is to concentrate on a sermon – my mind invariably wanders at some point – and as I once heard explained, if you want to fill fifty bottles with water, rather than throwing bucketfuls of water over the fifty bottles standing on the ground, it would be better to take each bottle individually and fill it from the tap. If your aim was to service the

people, would it not be better to deal with them one by one rather than in the large gathering?

Still less does a church service help the people that don't attend. Imagine a non-believer accidentally seeing a church service on TV. Might they not wonder how the homeless, those addicted to alcohol or drugs, those who are sick, those in despair, the lonely, and the confused are helped by people meeting in a church on a Sunday? Should not the church be helping broken people rather than just meeting together?

Earlier, we agreed that a hypothetical golf club offering twenty snooker tables was not a golf club at all, but something else. It seems to me that a so-called church whose main activities as listed on its board are "church services" is out of touch with what Jesus wanted his followers to do. To my mind, it is so out of touch with Jesus as to lose the right to be called a church at all.

Some years ago, our family went on holiday on a barge in a part of the country I did not know. At one point on the towpath where we had moored for the night, there was a board erected. "The Churches of this area welcome you", I read. I immediately averted my gaze before reading on, so that I could enjoy this. The churches of the area welcomed me! How pleasant. But even while I was basking in this unexpected ray of sunshine, I had a shrewd idea of what was coming next. I looked back at the board, and read on. "Services are at 10.30 on Sundays at one village, and 11.00 at another village." It was as I had feared. These were not real churches at all.

What are usually termed church services might be called religious assemblies. It seems a more accurate description. I find no evidence in the gospels that Jesus wanted his followers to hold religious assemblies. Any organisation that makes religious assemblies its main business ceases to be a church in the process, in the same way that a golf club with twenty snooker tables and nowhere to play golf ceases to be a golf club, in my view.

Readers who remain unconvinced by this argument, and who still think that the worship of God is the main business of the church, may care to turn to the Appendix at this stage, where further relevant questions are addressed. For the rest of us, rather than prolonging the discussion here, it seems time to ask what the nature of a true church is if it is not holding religious meetings.

The answer, as stated earlier, is that the nature and function of the church of Jesus are defined by what he himself said about the church. If you think about it, they must be!

Jesus made just two statements about the church to his disciples, in Matthew Chapters sixteen and eighteen. We will deal with the second of them first.

"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen to you, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector."

From this instruction, we grasp that Jesus regarded his church as consisting of a group of people. The only indication as to the size of the group is that it is clearly larger than two or three. A church thus consists of a group of Christian people.

We need to be clear about this, as the idea we often have is that the church is a large organisation, with buildings, finance, offices and a bureaucracy, but this is not where the substance of the real church lies. A church can lack all these external trappings without loss. It consists of a group of people following Jesus.

The other remark about the church came in a conversation Jesus had with Peter. He asked, “Who do men say that I am?” Peter replied, “You are the Messiah, the son of the living God.” Jesus replied... “You are Peter, and upon this Rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

Now the church does sound like a building after all, built on rock! However, this is more apparent than real. There is a play on words in here. Peter in Greek is *petros*, which is similar to *petra*, a pebble or rock. Jesus appears to be saying that Peter’s declaration of faith, which he had just made, is the foundation for the church. Once again we note the importance of people – in this case Peter. After Jesus departed from the earth, his continuing work has been put into the hands of people. Into our hands, in fact, if we are believers in Jesus, as Peter had just said he was. That is a pretty frightening thought! From these two texts, then, we learn that the church consists of believers in Jesus acting together, following in the footsteps of Peter, the first believer.

The final element to notice is what Jesus went on to say about the role of the church, that the gates of hell would not prevail against it. We need to understand this phrase.

As I see it, the image here is of hell being under siege. Imagine a walled city. The weakest point of its defences will be the gate. So its enemies in time of war might come with a battering ram with which to pound that gate to pieces. Such an attack is likely to be stoutly resisted, but if it is successful, then the city will be thrown open.

The inference of Jesus words, it seems to me, is that the church’s role is one of warfare. It is to attack hell in such a way that its captives can be set free. This accords with Jesus’ own description of his calling; when he embarked on his life’s work, he said that he had come to set the captives free. Later, he said to them, “As the father has sent me, I am sending you.” The followers were given the same task as Jesus himself had from his father, to release the victims of hell.

There is another way of understanding the words “the gate of hell”. In the Old Testament era, the gate of the town was the place that the leaders met to conduct business. Council meetings and the like would take place there. On this reading, the force of Jesus’ words is that the role of the church is to disrupt the councils and strategies of hell, and so overturn all their plans. Whichever way you care to read it, as a physical gate broken down, or the centre of decision making being disrupted, the effect is the same; the church’s job is to wage war on and plunder hell.

To sum up from the three points we have learned, the church consists of a group of believers in Jesus who ransack hell.

Our view of the church has been taken from Jesus’ own words on the nature and role of his church. I put it to you that whatever else may have been said and written about the church, and there is no shortage of material, the first requirement is that it has to consist of a group of believers ransacking hell. To my mind, the words of Jesus about the nature and role of the church carry more weight than all other opinions put together.

We see that some current ideas about the church are confused, when compared with Jesus’ words. In particular, that phrase which I have heard so many times, “The church is a worshipping community,” is seen to be unhelpful. This idea does not come from Jesus. He never once raised the subject of worship with his followers, as we have seen.

I suggest that the only way that the church can be seen as a worshipping community is in its attitude towards God. Church people love, admire and honour God. However, the phrase “a worshipping community” is normally used to describe

the activity of the church, and this is what is so unhelpful. It is the equivalent of saying, "The United Kingdom is a breathing community." That is true, but what use it is to say it? Imagine a company's annual report beginning with the words, "Once again, our business has been to be first and foremost a breathing community." How absurd! The issue is, what have you done in your business with the life and energy you have been given? It is the same with the church. God has given its members new life, and a task to do. What use is it for the members to spend all their efforts on thanking God for his gift but not putting it into use? And what thanks is it to God for his followers to ignore the task he has given? From what happens in our churches, we might think that Jesus said, "If you love me, you will worship me," but what he actually said to his followers was, "If you love me you will obey my commandments."

The idea of a church being a worshipping community has become so deeply ingrained in our society that the notion that it is unhelpful will probably seem dubious to most readers. But I repeat, if we look at Jesus' own opinion, then the first question to ask about any so-called church is to what extent it is a group of believers ransacking hell. The answer, in my experience, is that most so-called churches are not impacting hell at all. If this is the case, then no matter how much "worship" they indulge in, those churches are not true churches at all. How can they be?

Some readers may have difficulty with the concept of hell. Jesus not only accepted it, but taught that hell was real. He spoke of eternal fire, and also of eternal punishment for those that showed no love to those in need. If Jesus believed in hell, then so should his followers, I suggest, but for those who are unhappy, try this for size. Even unbelievers use the word hell colloquially today, to mean a situation that is awful, as in the phrase, "It was sheer hell". We also tend to refer to life-crushing difficulties as being problems. So, if we wanted to present the function of the church in a way that most people could easily accept, we might therefore say that the role of the church is to search out those for whom life is sheer hell, who are overwhelmed by their problems, and set them free from their prison. This is done by linking them to Jesus, who said "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."

Our thoughts have brought us a long way. We may note the contrast with the widespread idea that the role of the church is to offer worship services, which we discussed earlier. The words of Jesus give a very different impression, if we look at them carefully.

I did not always think this way. I once attended a diocesan conference for the clergy. During it, a fellow clergyman said to me, "Tell me about your services." I replied that we used the Alternative Service Book on Sunday mornings, Rite A, but on Sunday evenings we did something more spontaneous. This was the kind of response the questioner was expecting. I now wish I had replied differently, like this, as I could have done: "We heal the sick, we cast out demons, and we are currently deciding what to do for the homeless of our area." Something of this sort would have been a better response to a question about "church services". The fact that most of us think of a religious gathering when we hear the words "church service" shows what a long way we have come from what Jesus actually had in mind, as we perceive from his words on the subject. The proper use of the phrase "church service" to my mind, is to refer to help the church is offering to people in need.

I am aware that the view of the church I have put forward runs counter to what is current in church circles, and is also against the run of history. I found it too radical myself to begin with, and it has taken me a number of years to become comfortable

that it is in fact along the lines that Jesus intended. If you are slow to accept new ideas like me, then it will not be a frame of mind that you can adopt in a few minutes. Why not reread the gospels yourself, with these thoughts in mind, and allow yourself a period of time to come to a view on the subject? All I would ask is that you don't dismiss these ideas simply because they run counter to what is widely accepted. If you are inclined to the opinion that the majority view is generally the right one, and that the thesis here must therefore be suspect, then please recall the words, "All we like sheep have gone astray." When it comes to following God, the natural thing for human beings is to get it wrong, and to do it in a large crowd!

To help you in chewing these matters over, here are two final thoughts about the existing churches of our country, which I personally find disturbing.

Firstly, the world contains hundreds if not thousands of religions. It is striking that they tend to have in common the use of rituals and ceremonies of worship to the godhead in a dedicated building. I think of TV images of the inside of Hindu temples and the like. Is it not disturbing that the practices of our churches should have come to look so similar to those of religions everywhere? Has the way of life Jesus showed been swamped by an apparently universal human tendency to religion? To my mind, in the matters of rituals, ceremonies, singing and worship, Jesus was not a religious person at all. Why, therefore, should his church have these characteristics?

Secondly, when I look at our church traditions, it almost seems as if people have gone through the New Testament with a fine-toothed comb, sifting out any and every practice that could possibly be considered religious, and making it a major focus of church life. To take a clear example, we may note that Jesus' straightforward request that he be remembered in a communal meal by the sharing of bread and wine has been blown up into a religious observance lasting over an hour. The meal itself has been discontinued, for no apparent reason; the precise understanding of the nature of the bread and wine has been a cause of bloodshed and persecution in the past; and controversy about who may "consecrate the elements" has been painfully divisive in more recent times. Why so much focus on something Jesus hardly mentioned?

Take another example. Baptism, which hardly gains a mention on Jesus' lips, has been blown up into a major point of controversy between different church traditions. Other subjects which have loomed large include ordination of leaders, forms of church leadership, and church structures. None of these subjects are touched on in the gospels. In contrast, the subjects which Jesus was concerned about have often been ignored, as we will see in part three.

These facts disturb me. Those who think that the churches we have are running on roughly the right lines need to have an answer to these matters, it seems to me.

It is time to come to our final area of inquiry.

## Part Three

### What is Christian Teaching?

In order to illustrate an understanding of Christian teaching in wide use, I want to quote from the opening of a talk I once came across. The group addressed was a local church congregation. The subject, The Style and Practice of our Church, is relevant to our enquiry. To save space, I will present the main points of the argument in note form, except for the sentence in inverted commas at the end, which is quoted in full.

#### The Style and Practice of our Church

The church is known in the New Testament as an army... as a temple... as a bride... as a body. From time to time each of these images of the church needs to be pressed into service. There will be times of battle and warfare and prayer (army)... times of each member using their gifts (body)... times of looking forward to heaven and enjoying the Lord (bride). Our style in general, however, will be that of the family, because that is what God's people were in the Old Testament; quite literally, sons of Abraham. Romans 11 teaches that we Gentiles have been grafted into this family by faith. "So the whole idea of family is absolutely central and integral to our understanding of being the people of God and being the church."

The first thing we note is that this speaker turned to the Bible when thinking about the nature of a local church. I take it that we agree that the Bible is the source of Christian teaching; if you don't share this view, you might find parts of the Appendix helpful, where I have tried to present some of the relevant issues clearly.

The speaker's manner of drawing teaching from the Bible is common. There are admittedly some parts of the Bible which we now regard as not applicable to Christians, such as the offering of animal sacrifices in Leviticus. Similarly, prayers in the Psalms along the lines of "If only you would slay the wicked, O God!" are sometimes considered unacceptable today; in the light of Jesus' command to love our enemies, this attitude is often thought unworthy of a Christian. However, the rest of the Bible, broadly speaking, is seen as applicable to the church. Appeal can be made equally to both Old and New Testaments without distinction. One might call this approach Biblical teaching.

Over the course of time, I have become increasingly unhappy about this manner of using the Bible. I propose that a better way of discovering Christian teaching is to ask two questions:

1. What does Jesus say on the subject?
2. How does the rest of the Bible illuminate what Jesus says?

The point I wish to make is a simple one. Teaching from throughout the Bible is often practised, but in a Christian church, one should be aiming for Christian teaching. Christian teaching means the teaching of Christ. To arrive at Christian teaching, one should start with what Jesus said, recorded for us in the Gospels. When stated like this, the point seems self-evident to me.

If this approach is accepted, then we are left wondering what the role of the rest of the Bible is. How should we integrate it with the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels?

We read in the Book of Hebrews that in Old Testament times, God's word came to the prophets "in fragmentary and varied fashion" but that later God spoke to us

through his son. The Old Testament therefore has a role in commenting on the revelation that came later through Jesus. The revelation though Jesus was complete in a way that the earlier prophecies were not; they were fragmentary and varied. Nevertheless, God spoke through them. Likewise, Jesus told his apostles at the Last Supper that after he had gone, the Holy Spirit would teach them everything and bring to mind the things he had told them. This affects our view of the New Testament. The criterion chosen for including a book in the New Testament was that it was written either by an apostle or the close associate of an apostle. The twenty-seven New Testament books are thus Apostolic records. This means not only that we can have confidence in the Gospels as being an authentic record of what Jesus said and did; we can accept the rest of the New Testament as being helpful comment on the life and teaching of Jesus. It seems, then, that the whole Bible has a role in illustrating and illuminating the teaching of Jesus.

Having said that, however, the words of Jesus himself must always take priority. They set the agenda of teaching for the Christian church, to my mind. Let me give some examples.

Firstly, in the matter of love, Jesus said, among other things, "Love one another" and "Love your enemies." Peter wrote in his first letter, "Love one another with a pure heart, fervently; see that you love one another." In his letter, Peter has picked up the first of Jesus' remarks, but not the second. Imagine a pastor preaching through the first letter of Peter week by week. A sermon which exhorted the people to love one another fervently but did not also draw attention to the requirement to love one's enemies would fall short of the standard of Christian teaching, to my mind. Its treatment of Christian love would be incomplete.

One definition of an enemy is a person who threatens you most. Personally, I feel threatened by armed gangs of thugs who lurk in dimly lit subways at night. I would rather not go that way! If the first letter of Peter is read without reference to the Gospels, we might decide that in a church, it is sufficient for the people to love each other. It is only as we read the Gospels that we realise that the church is committed to loving its enemies. A club mentality is not enough for a Christian church. We have to show love to all, even the thugs!

You may consider this a somewhat nit-picking approach, but to my mind, it has big consequences. In the UK, we have hundreds of so-called churches which seldom if ever undertake to show love to their enemies, such as the people in their neighbourhood who threaten them. Contrast that with the actions of Rev. David Wilkerson, who left a country parish and moved to New York in the 1960s to work with the street gangs armed with knives, as told in the book and film "The Cross and The Switchblade". Which approach is the more Christian, when we look at Jesus' teaching in the Gospels?

Jesus once complained that the religious leaders had taken his father's house and turned it into a den of thieves. What about doing the opposite of this, taking a den of thieves and turning it into a home for Jesus? Long before he was ever king of Israel, David did something of this kind at the cave of Adullam, where he once holed up when on the run, and hundreds of outcasts came and joined him. David accepted them and showed them love. Together, they changed the face of the nation in due course. Perhaps this story may be seen as one of the foreshadowings of the church in the Old Testament that Hebrews chapter one hints at. I hope so.

A second example of supposedly Christian teaching concerns speaking in tongues. We read in Acts that on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled the room where the hundred and twenty believers were, they all spoke in other tongues. Similar

remarks appear elsewhere in the Book of Acts. As a result, some Christian groups have said that all Christians should speak in tongues; if they don't they are not true believers.

If we apply our test, we detect a fallacy here. There is no hint in the Gospels that Jesus ever encouraged people to speak in tongues. Nor did he ever do it himself, as far as we know. This rules out any attempt to present speaking in tongues as a must for believers. Even Jesus himself becomes an unbeliever on that basis!

Paul spoke in tongues, and was happy that the Corinthian church members should do so, but he did not impose the practice on anyone. I am glad that I speak in tongues, and I recommend it. But there is no way that speaking in tongues is a required part of Christian teaching, as I see it, because Jesus did not say that. It is therefore an optional extra.

Another practice of some churches that I have been involved with is the waging war on alleged territorial spirits. According to some, a certain city may be thought to have a spirit of witchcraft over it, or a spirit of pride ruling it, or the like. Paul "cast down strongholds in the heavenly realms", we read, and an angel visiting Daniel told him he was "held up by the Prince of Persia" for three weeks. The interpretation of these passages is open to question, but despite that, some have developed a particular understanding of spiritual warfare against alleged territorial spirits on the basis of such passages. Please understand, I don't want to speak against the practice on the grounds of whether it is a good or bad thing to do. My point is simply that we scan the Gospels in vain for any hint of such activities being taught by Jesus. There is nothing remotely like it in the Gospels. So if you want to have a Christian church that follows Jesus closely, I suggest you would do well to avoid attempts to wage spiritual warfare on territorial spirits.

You will see from the examples that I have chosen that even some practices that some might regard as being highly spiritual may turn out to be unauthorised by Jesus. We should therefore beware of accepting a teaching just because it sounds very spiritual, or very holy. Check everything out with the Gospel text. This principle of Christian teaching springing from the lips of Jesus is an important one, to my mind. If it were widely adopted, it would go a long way to healing some of our painful divisions. We have tended to introduce issues into church life that Jesus did not give instruction about. Into this category come a host of thorny problems. Paul warned that we can come to grief in arguing over such things.

Enough has been said to show a distinction between Bible teaching and Christian teaching. We are ready to ask the question, what exactly is Christian teaching?

Jesus' closing words to his followers in Matthew's Gospel were "Go into all the world and make disciples (learners) of all nations, and teach them to observe what I have commanded you." So there is no room for guess-work; Jesus himself has defined what Christian teaching is. It happens when his disciples today teach what Jesus commanded the first disciples.

It is extraordinary, in my opinion, how little attention has been paid to this verse. Books and presentations on the ten commandments, which Moses brought down the mountain, are legion. Not long ago I was at a Christian meeting where there was a table of around thirty Christian books for sale at the back (whoops, I mean books with a greater or lesser connection to Jesus. Sorry). Two of the thirty books were recent titles by different authors on the ten commandments, which seems a large proportion to me.

In contrast, I have yet to see a single book-length treatment of the commands of Jesus. There may well be one, but I am not aware of it. So to discover the commands

of Jesus, I made my own list. I went through the gospels carefully, noting every direct command addressed by Jesus to the disciples. I may have missed some. I have omitted commands he gave to the crowd and to the Pharisees on purpose, as these fall outside the realm of commands made to the disciples. Commands in parables are also avoided for the same reason. In other words, I have tried to be as precise as possible. Here is the result.

## A List of Jesus' Commands to his Disciples in the Gospels

### Matthew

- 1) 4:17 Repent
- 2) 4:19 Follow Me
- 3) 5:12 Rejoice at persecution because of me
- 4) 5:16 Let your light shine before men
- 5) 5:17 Do not think I came to abolish the Law and the Prophets
- 6) 5:24 Be reconciled to your brother before you offer a gift
- 7) 5:24 Leave your gift before the altar
- 8) 5:25 Settle with your adversary before getting to court
- 9) 5:29 Gouge out your eye rather than sin
- 10) 5:30 Cut off your right hand rather than sin
- 11) 5:34, 36 Do not swear by anything
- 12) 5:37 Let your 'Yes' be 'Yes' and your 'No, 'No'
- 13) 5:39 Do not resist an evil person
- 14) 5:39 Turn the other cheek
- 15) 5:40 Let a man take your tunic
- 16) 5:41 Go with a man an extra mile
- 17) 5:42 Give and lend to the one who asks you
- 18) 5:44 Love your enemies
- 19) 5:44 Pray for those who persecute you
- 20) 5:48 Be perfect as your heavenly father
- 21) 6:1 Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men
- 22) 6:2 Do not announce your gifts to the needy with trumpets
- 23) 6:3 Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing when you give to the needy
- 24) 6:5 Do not pray so as to be seen by men
- 25) 6:6 Pray in your room in secret
- 26) 6:7 Do not pray babbling like pagans
- 27) 6:9 Pray using the "Lord's Prayer"
- 28) 6:16 Do not fast so as to show this to men
- 29) 6:19 Do not store up treasures on earth
- 30) 6:20 Store up treasures in heaven
- 31) 6:24 You cannot serve God and money
- 32) 6:25 Do not worry about food, drink and clothes
- 33) 6:33 Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness
- 34) 6:34 Do not worry about tomorrow
- 35) 7:1 Do not judge others
- 36) 7:5 Take the plank out of your own eye before removing your brother's speck
- 37) 7:6 Do not give dogs what is sacred nor throw your pearls to pigs
- 38) 7:7 Ask, seek and knock

- 39) 7:12 Do to others what you would have them do to you
- 40) 7:13 Enter through the narrow gate
- 41) 7:15 Watch out for false prophets
- 42) 8:22 Leave the dead to bury their dead
- 43) 9:38 Ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into his harvest field
- 44) 10:5 Do not go among the Gentiles or Samaritans
- 45) 10:6 Go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel
- 46) 10:7 Preach the message 'The kingdom of God is near'
- 47) 10:8 Heal the sick
- 48) 10:8 Raise the dead
- 49) 10:8 Cleanse those who have leprosy
- 50) 10:8 Drive out demons
- 51) 10:8 Give freely
- 52) 10:9 Take no money for the journey
- 53) 10:10 Take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic, or sandals or a staff
- 54) 10:11 Search for and stay with some worthy person when you enter a town, until you leave
- 55) 10:12 Greet the home with your peace as you enter
- 56) 10:14 Shake the dust off your feet of those who will not welcome you
- 57) 10:16 Be shrewd as snakes and innocent as doves
- 58) 10:17 Be on your guard against men
- 59) 10:19 Do not worry about what to say on arrest
- 60) 10:23 Flee to another place when you are persecuted
- 61) 10:26 Do not be afraid of those who call you Beelzebub
- 62) 10:27 Speak out openly what I say secretly
- 63) 10:28 Do not be afraid of those who kill the body
- 64) 10:28 Fear the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell
- 65) 10:31 Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows
- 66) 10:34 Do not suppose I came to bring peace on earth
- 67) 13:18 Listen to what the parable of the sower means
- 68) 13:43 Hear, if you have ears
- 69) 14:16 Give the 5000 something to eat
- 70) 14:18 Bring the five loaves and two fish to Jesus
- 71) 14:27 Take courage! Don't be afraid (disciples in boat)
- 72) 14:29 Come (Peter over water)
- 73) 16:6, 11 Be on your guard against the teaching of the Pharisees and Saducees
- 74) 16:23 Get behind me, Satan (Peter)
- 75) 17:7 Get up (disciples on the mountain), don't be afraid
- 76) 17:9 Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead
- 77) 17:27 Take the coin from the mouth of the first fish you catch and pay the temple tax
- 78) 18:10 Do not look down on one of these little ones
- 79) 18:15 Show your brother his fault if he sins against you
- 80) 18:16 Take one or two others along if he will not listen
- 81) 18:17 Tell the church if he will not listen
- 82) 18:17 Treat him as a pagan or tax collector if he still will not listen
- 83) 19:14 Do not hinder little children from coming to me
- 84) 20:26 Be a servant and slave to other disciples if you want to become great among them

- 85) 21:2 Go and untie the donkey and colt, and bring them
- 86) 24:4 Watch out that no-one deceives you
- 87) 24:6 Do not be alarmed at wars and rumours of wars
- 88) 24:16 Flee from Judea to the mountains when 'the abomination that causes desolation' is in the holy place, taking nothing with you
- 89) 24:20 Pray that your flight will not take place in winter
- 90) 24:23, 26 Don't believe anyone who announces the Christ at that time
- 91) 24:32 Learn from the fig-tree how to recognise these events
- 92) 24:42 Keep watch, because you don't know what day your Lord will come
- 93) 24:43 Understand about the owner being ignorant of the time the thief was coming
- 94) 24:44 Be ready for the Son of Man's unexpected arrival
- 95) 26:18 Go to a certain man to prepare for the Passover
- 96) 26:26 Take and eat; this is my body
- 97) 26:27 Drink from the cup
- 98) 26:36 Sit here while I pray
- 99) 26:38 Stay here and watch with me
- 100) 26:41 Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation
- 101) 26:46 Rise, let us go
- 102) 26:52 Put back your sword
- 103) 28:10 Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee
- 104) 28:19 Go and make disciples of all nations
- 105) 28:19 Baptise the disciples
- 106) 28:20 Teach them to observe all I have commanded you

## MARK

- 107) 1:15 Believe the good news
- 108) 4:24 Consider carefully what you hear; with the measure you use, it will be measured to you - and even more
- 109) 5:19 Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you
- 110) 6:31 Come to a quiet place and rest
- 111) 8:7 Distribute to the 4000
- 112) 9:39 Do not stop one who works miracles in my name because he is not one of you
- 113) 9:50 Have salt in yourselves
- 114) 9:50 Be at peace with each other
- 115) 11:3 Tell them the Lord needs the colt
- 116) 11:22 Have faith in God
- 117) 11:24 Believe that you have received whatever you ask for in prayer and it will be yours
- 118) 11:25 Forgive anyone you hold anything against, when you stand praying
- 119) 13:10 The Gospel must first be preached to all nations
- 120) 13:33 Be alert

## LUKE

- 121) 5:4 Put out into deep water and let down the nets for a catch
- 122) 5:10 Don't be afraid; from now on you will catch men

- 123) 6:27 Do good to those who hate you
- 124) 6:28 Bless those who curse you
- 125) 6:35 Lend to your enemies without expecting to get anything back
- 126) 6:36 Be merciful
- 127) 6:38 Give
- 128) 7:50 Go in peace
- 129) 8:50 Don't be afraid; just believe and she will be healed
- 130) 9:14 Make them sit down in groups of about fifty each
- 131) 9:23 Deny yourself and take up your cross daily if you would follow me
- 132) 9:60 Let the dead bury their own dead but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God
- 133) 10:4 Do not greet anyone on the road
- 134) 10:7 Do not move around from house to house
- 135) 10:8 Eat what is set before you
- 136) 10:20 Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you
- 137) 10:20 Rejoice that your names are written in heaven
- 138) 11:35 See to it that the light within you is not darkness
- 139) 12:15 Be on your guard against all types of greed
- 140) 12:24 Consider how God feeds the ravens
- 141) 12:27 Consider how the lilies grow
- 142) 12:33 Sell your possessions and give to the poor
- 143) 12:35 Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning
- 144) 13:24 Make every effort to enter through the narrow door
- 145) 14:26 Hate your mother and father, wife and children, brother and sisters, and your own life, if you would be my disciple
- 146) 14:33 Give up everything you have if you would be my disciple
- 147) 16:9 Use worldly wealth to gain friends
- 148) 17:10 You should say 'we are unworthy servants' when you have done everything you were told to do
- 149) 17:32 Remember Lot's wife
- 150) 18:1 Always pray and never give up
- 151) 18:6 Listen to what the unjust judge says
- 152) 20:46 Beware of the teachers of the law
- 153) 21:28 Stand up and lift up your heads when these things begin to take place
- 154) 24:49 Stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high

## JOHN

- 155) 1:39 Come and see
- 156) 4:35 Open your eyes and look at the harvest fields
- 157) 6:12 Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted
- 158) 11:39 Take away the stone
- 159) 11:44 Take off the grave clothes and let him go
- 160) 12:7 Leave Mary alone (after she poured out the ointment)
- 161) 12:26 Whoever serves me must follow me
- 162) 13:14 Wash one another's feet
- 163) 13:15 Do as I have done for you
- 164) 13:34 Love one another
- 165) 14:1 Do not let your hearts be troubled
- 166) 14:1 Trust in God; trust also in me

- 167) 14:11 Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me
- 168) 15:4 Remain in me
- 169) 15:9 Remain in my love
- 170) 15:20 Remember the words I spoke to you; 'no servant is greater than his master'
- 171) 15:27 You also must testify
- 172) 16:24 Ask and you will receive and your joy may be complete
- 173) 19:26 - 27 'Dear woman, here is your son... Here is your mother'
- 174) 20:17 Do not hold onto me; go and tell my brothers
- 175) 20:27 Put your finger here
- 176) 20:22 Receive the Holy Spirit
- 177) 21:6 Throw your net on the right side of the boat
- 178) 21:10 Bring some of the fish
- 179) 21:12 Come and have breakfast
- 180) 21:15 - 17 Feed my lambs... take care of my sheep... feed my sheep

Rather than repeating the same command found in different gospels, I have listed the first occurrence and then referred to the parallel passages in the notes. This gives the impression that there are more commands in Matthew than in the other gospels, which may not be the case. Add them up to see, if you like.

A possible weakness of the list is that it does not include indirect commands and statements. An example of one of these, made to the crowd and not to the disciples, is the statement "No-one can be a disciple of mine without parting with all his possessions." You may feel that remarks of this kind ought to have been included in the list. On closer inspection, something like Jesus' word to the crowd on possessions comes in number 142, addressed to the disciples, so you may consider it has been covered. I find it hard to know how the list might be best constructed. I suggest you make your own from scratch! As it is, we will work with what I have produced as being somewhere to start.

While we are thinking about possessions, I once heard the idea that a Christian's possessions should be kept on an open palm, rather than in a clenched fist, so that God can remove them if required. I passed this suggestion on to others in more than one address. I fear it was an example of the stealing of words from other preachers that God is against, as we noted earlier. It's easily done.

In constructing this list, I have made no attempt to distinguish between more important and less important commands. It is tempting to decide that some commands are relatively trivial for disciples today. For example, the instruction "Go into the city and follow a man with a jar on his head (no. 95)" strikes me as having been relevant only when it was uttered; it does not seem appropriate today. However, I am reluctant to edit and prune the list along these lines. The reason is that we have shown such a capacity for ignoring the instructions of Jesus that I am hesitant of doing anything which could possibly detract from his words. I would rather err on the side of being over-cautious than introduce a personal flavour to the list by editing it. So any and every command is listed. You can prune it if you like, but be very careful how you wield the red pencil. Followers of Jesus should put themselves under his commands, not above them.

The passage with most commands in a short space is an example of what may appear trivial at first glance. In the story of the coin in the mouth of the fish (no. 77), the five instructions go, take, open, take and pay come within a sentence or two. Here again, we will probably not sense a call to copy these actions, there being no temple

tax to be paid nowadays. We might have felt free to delete the command from our list, but even this can be seen as premature; the principle of detailed obedience to an unlikely instruction can still be gleaned from this episode.

Would you be willing at this stage to cast your eye over the list and select what you think are the three most important commands of all? The reason will become clear in a page or two.

Despite all its limitations, even as it stands, the effect of the list is striking. Until I had constructed it, I had no idea how many instructions Jesus actually gave his disciples. A home group I once asked had no more idea than I how many commands Jesus gave his followers in the Gospels. “Two?” suggested one person. No guess was larger than thirty.

This fact seems most strange to me, as all of those present at the home group would have had no difficulty saying how many commandments Moses brought down the mountain on tablets of stone. They could probably have done more, and quoted most of the ten. Does it not strike you as odd that we who call ourselves followers of Jesus, and who are familiar with the so-called great commission at the end of Matthew’s gospel, should have paid so little attention to the commands of Jesus, when this is what he asked his followers to teach?

Since I became aware that Christian teaching means teaching the commands of Jesus, I have taken note of church services that I have attended to see what is actually chosen for the subject of the address. Of the most recent one hundred and eighty talks I have heard, all of which had a Biblical theme, just two have been on commands of Jesus.

Did you ever hear an address in a church service start something like this:

“Today we are going to look at Jesus’ instruction to ... We are doing this because Jesus himself asked his followers to pass on the things he commanded his first followers, as you will see from Matthew 28 verse 20...”

I cannot recall ever hearing an address start like that. The closest thing to it I have heard was at a conference on healing the sick. I had been sent on this to stand in for somebody else. I was not keen on the idea; I was most suspicious of all the enthusiasm being expressed for healing the sick. I had not come across it in three decades of church attendance; it seemed very outlandish to me.

During the conference, the speaker said at one stage that healing the sick was the right thing to do, because Jesus asked his followers to do it, and they were to teach their followers to do it, quoting the end of Matthew. I found I could not argue with that.

It took me several months of reflection before I finally agreed with him, and a few more months before I was ready to start laying hands on people myself. Nobody had any benefit from my first twenty-four attempts, as far as I know. Since then, I like to think that there have been some positive results. I am not aware of anyone getting worse as a result of my ministrations!

However, it took me another four years to ask whether there were other things that Jesus asked his followers to do that we were ignoring today. This list was the result. You and I may find entries in the list that are distasteful or which challenge our view of the world. But it seems to me that if we want to call ourselves followers of Jesus, we need to act on these instructions and teach others to do the same, whether we personally like them or not.

I once gave a copy of the list to a group of about seven Christian people and suggested that we all choose the three most important commands on it, and share our findings. I proposed that the resulting summary of Jesus’ instructions might provide a

foundation on which a Christian church could be constructed. We would be agreed on what was vital, apart from anything else, and unity is a source of strength.

Everyone thought it was a good idea. As their most important three, the group produced Follow Me (no. 2), Seek first the Kingdom of God (no. 33), and Love one another (no. 164). I asked you to select your three a few pages back so that you could compare your own opinion with theirs.

I then dropped something of a bombshell into the meeting. I told them they were all wrong!

They indignantly asked who I thought I was to say what the most important commands were. It was rather fun. I pointed out to them that it is not up to us to pick and choose in this way; it needs to be Jesus who chooses which are the most important commands. And he has done that in number 106. He has said that ALL the commands are to be taught. So the most important three commands are number 106 and number 106 and number 106.

Do you see how easy it is for the “Pick and mix” mentality that we have suffered from in churches to creep in? The so-called churches that exist tend to be run along lines that people like. A real church can only be run along lines that Jesus likes.

If we return to the address entitled The Style and Practice of our Church that we quoted earlier, we can now see that the role of the other biblical pictures of the church is to comment on the words of Jesus, not to replace them. The church is a group of people plundering hell. That said, the group is more than a group; it is a family of people who love one another, in love with the Lord and as closely united with him as a bride with her husband. The old temple built of stone has been replaced by Jesus’ own body which is made up of himself as head and all those who are united with him as members of his body, like a vine with its branches. All of these images shed light on the church, but it must not be forgotten that the church is fundamentally a group of people conquering hell.

## Conclusion

### What does it all mean?

The aim of this book has been to provoke thought and reflection as to how we can have a truly Christian Church in our country. Our desire was for a church which did the will of Jesus, the whole will of Jesus, and nothing but the will of Jesus. We began by ruling that for something to be described as Christian, it had to be authorised by Jesus himself. We saw from Jesus' own words that the church is a group of people that breaks down the gate of hell. We identified a number of areas of existing church practice that we considered unauthorised by Jesus, and which therefore had no place in such a church. These included teaching the Bible, worshipping and singing, asking God to heal the sick, conducting so-called services, dislocating the sharing of bread and wine from within a meal and expanding it into an hour-long worship event, burying the dead, and erecting buildings dedicated to worship known as churches. It emerged from our discussion that a Christian teaching programme would only arise from a study of the commands Jesus gave his followers, as that was what he specifically asked them to teach; this led to our list of commands. Before we go further, you might care to check the list for yourself to be sure that Jesus did not give instructions about the supposedly unauthorised practices we considered. Please don't take my word for it.

In contrast, let us summarise the attitude we have had in living memory in our so-called churches in the UK, broadly speaking. When telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus spoke of religious leaders walking past the beaten-up man on the other side of the road. Am I alone in seeing this scenario as a picture of the present UK church, in the main? I may be prejudiced by my own experience, but the fourteen churches that I have been involved with over forty-five years have put their main energies into conducting religious assemblies, and have done little to save beaten-up people. Archbishop William Temple may have said, "The church is the only organisation which exists for the sake of its non-members", but we have not behaved as if that was the case. The main efforts of local churches have been put into holding worship services, which Jesus never asked his followers to do. When it comes to our teaching programmes, the desire of Jesus that we pass on his commands has been largely ignored.

It does not seem to be an exaggeration to say that the words that Jesus originally addressed to the religious leaders of his day might have been directed at us: "You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men."

It is unnerving to notice that on both these points, we are largely following in the footsteps of the Pharisees and Saducees, whom Jesus roundly condemned. It might be as well to look through the Gospels at all the words Jesus addressed to the Pharisees and Saducees, and ask whether they apply to us in the UK today. Personally, I don't want to do that, because I fear the result might be too discouraging, but if you have a strong constitution, then you might care to investigate it. Make sure you are sitting down!

If you are still with me, and inclined to agree with the argument of this book to some extent at least, then the question arises, what now? How can we do better?

Personally, I feel very challenged at this point. I seem to be so conditioned by my upbringing and experience that I find it hard if not impossible to imagine a church without buildings, services, worship and Bible teaching! Everything I am familiar

with in churches I have attended seems to need to go. What would we actually do in our meetings? Is there anything left?

On the positive side, there must be. Jesus commissioned his followers to do a job, and the mantle has now fallen on us. There is a world to be won for Jesus. There is Christian teaching to be given – observance of all the commands of Jesus. The church is to be a battering ram, demolishing the gates of hell, and setting the prisoners of Satan free. There is a war to be won.

On the negative side, I am still left wondering what a church meeting might look like. All of its familiar aspects seem to be out of place.

Perhaps the trouble lies in the very idea of having meetings. I seem to be strongly committed to the idea of church meetings. But whoever said that a key feature of the church was to be holding meetings of its members?

Peter and John were once on their way to a meeting of the believers, due to take place in the Temple in the afternoon, for purposes of prayer. However, they never actually arrived. As the song puts it,

“Peter and John went to pray;  
They met a lame man on the way.”

The man was healed, and many people turned to Jesus as a result. Now that encounter with the beggar was a meeting worth having!

Take another instance. I once saw a TV programme about Christian work in Hong Kong. One particular scene sticks in my memory. It showed a modern shopping precinct, all under glass, with many shops selling expensive things. The nicely tiled walkway between the shops was disfigured by a man in dirty clothes lying on the ground, apparently unconscious. He looked as if he might have been knocked out by drugs. The shoppers were trying to ignore him. As I watched, two church workers came into view. Ignoring the shops, they walked up to him, and bent over him. They told him they had been looking for him everywhere. They lifted him up despite his mild protests, and took him off, presumably to help him over his hangover, give him a meal, and generally look after him.

I was struck by the contrast between everything that was desirable, the expensive items in the shop windows, and the man sprawled unattractively on the ground. Most people would not have given him a second thought, their eyes drawn to the shop windows, but not these two latter-day Peter and John characters. There was another good meeting!

The point of these stories is this. I have learned to think of a church meeting as a gathering of the believers, but on reflection, this is reminiscent of the believers in the upper room behind locked doors, out of fear of the people, before they had received the Holy Spirit. I suggest that a more genuine instance of a church meeting takes place between believers and the lost. If you want a real church meeting, then why not get out on the streets and see whom you can find!

I suspect I may not be the only one afflicted with meetingitis. Some years ago, a friend asked me to name five outstanding Christian leaders of the twentieth century. I spent a few moments thinking about it, and named my five. “Exactly,” said my friend in a dismissive tone. “You have named five speakers at meetings. Everyone does the same, as that is our idea of a Christian leader. Nobody ever mentions Mother Teresa of Calcutta.” I felt suitably squashed.

I can see value in the believers in a church meeting together, but the purpose ought to be to plan an assault on hell. It might be somewhat like a briefing before a military campaign. The aim of such gatherings is to lead to a successful assault. The goal is action. In so many of our churches, the meeting becomes an end in itself. How can it

be that the main activity of the church of Jesus Christ in the UK today comprises meetings with the majority of people seated? It's a truly passive image in contrast with his dynamism. What's more, I have attended so many church meetings and services during my life that I find it close to impossible to imagine church being done in any other way. It is not easy to overturn the habit of a lifetime, let alone one of many lifetimes over.

Some readers may have been longing to tell me about their church or organisation, that it meets the criteria of a Christian church that we have identified. If so, do get in touch. Before you do, make sure that the basics are in place, that on the one hand the church is not distracted by things Jesus never commanded, such as religion, worship and Bible teaching, and on the other, that this church follows Jesus' commands closely, raises the dead rather than buries them, heals the sick, casts out demons, takes the Gospel to all nations, etc. It is not sufficient for one or two members to be keen on these things – all should be committed to them all. Every member should be carrying out every one of Christ's commands.

You may think it unrealistic that every member of a church should be trained in casting out demons, but personally, I don't see why not. What use is a soldier without a gun?

Let us develop that thought for a moment, because if our primary task is one of warfare against hell, some thoughts about weapons may prove helpful.

At school, we were taught how to handle a .303 rifle in the cadet corps. There was plenty of drill practice, with the loudly barked commands "Shoulder... Harms!" and "PRE-sent... Harms!". On one occasion, I was taught in a small group how to fit a loaded magazine to the gun. It had to be done in five seconds. I took seven or eight seconds the first few times, but with some practice, I got it down to five. Once the instructor was satisfied, the lights were switched off and we had to do it in the dark. No-one wanted to be the boy whose magazine was the last to be heard clicking into place.

Live ammunition was out of the question; we were only ever issued with blanks, but this did happen quite often. Even these can be dangerous; we were told about a boy who thought it would be funny to poke his gun over his friend's shoulder and let it off. The sound was so deafening at such a small distance that his friend lost the use of that ear for life. We were also warned that at close range, the wadding inside the cartridge of a blank can cause injury. Do not aim at another boy within twenty-five yards, they said. We were to treat the guns with respect.

One year, we were trained in carrying out section attack. If you can remember the platoon running in line over the heath in the final credits from the BBC series *Dad's Army*, you will have a rough idea of what was involved. I was told to "have one up the spout" and make sure I discharged it as we ran through the place where the enemy were said to be entrenched. When I complained that I could not possibly aim my gun while running, loaded down with equipment, a pack and a radio and trying to ignore a painful stitch in my side, I was told, "Never mind - the puff of smoke impresses the umpires." So I did my best. My aim was non-existent.

There can be few people less military-minded than me! However, I took it for granted when I was put into the corps that sooner or later I would be learning about guns. I was rather surprised how much there was to learn, and how much practice was required. Contrast that with my experience of attending churches on Sunday mornings week after week in the sure and certain knowledge that there would never be any mention of casting out demons, let alone instruction as to what you might do if you were confronted by one.

I once had the pleasure of introducing a six year old boy to *Dad's Army*. The lad was very impressed by the army, with all the enthusiasm that boys of that age can generate. We watched together, but I was more interested to observe him out of the corner of my eye than to see the story on the box. It only took him five minutes to realise that these soldiers were not to be taken seriously. He was soon laughing away. It was delightful to watch.

Now contrast that with the church. At least the motley crew from Wormington on Sea did catch the occasional German – two if I remember rightly. Not only do our so-called churches often have a tally of nil when it comes to demons; they are not even aware that there is a problem. It has not occurred to many of them that there is an enemy to be fought. Most church people do not see themselves as soldiers at all.

I find every aspect of this discussion about boys with guns instructive. You cannot be a soldier without fighting. There are skills to learn and attitudes to adopt. Just a few will rise up to the level of generals, but wars are not won by generals fighting single-handed. The men in the trenches may not feel very important but without them there would be no war effort. And most painfully, while we laugh at Captain Mainwaring, Corporal Jones and the rest of them, at least they were trying to do something! It may seem over harsh to you, but when I consider the churches of the UK taken together as a fighting force, I find myself imagining first world war officers forty miles behind the lines, with the heavy guns out of earshot, enjoying dances and parties each evening. Let's hope my view is a jaundiced one, arising out of poor experiences, and not applicable to the church as a whole. What do you think?

If like me you feel scared by any of this, then take encouragement from what Jesus said on the return of the seventy that he had sent out in pairs. They were jubilant, we read, because even the demons submitted to them in Jesus' name. Jesus replied, "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you." We do not need to hang back out of fear.

One of the aspects of all this that I find difficult is feeling that I am in a minority of one. Imagine me arriving on Sunday morning and being greeted at the door.

"Hello, David, how are you?"

"Fighting depression, thanks."

"Oh dear, have you had a bad week?"

"No, not at all. It's the thought of the next ninety minutes I find hard."

"But surely, joining with God's people in singing his praises ought to be a cause for happiness, not depression!"

There is already a small queue forming. How can I explain that during the so-called service, we will do a number of things that Jesus never asked his followers to do, but not do anything he did request, and that despite that everyone except me will think we have done really well. The only part of it I find I can look forward to is meeting the people over coffee at the end. Perhaps there will be some real sharing. But as regards the main event, everyone else seems so happy with what is going on that it seems a shame to question it. Perhaps I am just deluded anyway. Wouldn't it be better to keep quiet?

This book is my reasoned attempt to present what seems clear from the Gospels. You may see it as an attempt to rock the boat. If you wish I had kept quiet, I do understand, but please remember that there is a time when to rock the boat is the right thing to do, and that is when it has capsized and turned turtle. In that instance, once the crew are all accounted for and in life jackets, rocking the dinghy in order to right it becomes the highest priority.

You might have preferred what actually tends to happen at the door of the meeting.

“Hello, David, how are you today?”

“Not too bad, thanks. How about you?”

“Yes, OK thanks. Catch up with you later.”

Note the integrity. I am not prepared to utter the standard response “fine thanks” because things are not fine, and neither am I as I feel it deeply. If I had been too depressed, I would have stayed away. So “not too bad” seems about right. Then I find the thing to do is to promptly ask the other person how they are. It’s better for us to talk about them rather than me. Not only is it likely to be less controversial, but I do actually want to know how others are. I like people to be in a good state.

Maybe you have been convinced by my argument that for all our claims, our churches do not follow Jesus. You may be wondering why things have gone the way they have. An even earlier experience of mine at school may be instructive.

When I was a ten-year-old, I used to join in with the current craze. After French knitting and Moon-rovers, both of which required empty cotton reels from my mother’s sewing basket which consequently gained an unexpected street value approaching gold dust for a while, we turned our attention to world conquest. Several boys had copies of the board game Risk. Armies swept from country to country at the throw of dice, three red ones for the attacker and two blue ones for the defender. Better to attack him before he attacks me, I soon decided. How awful!

For some reason I have never understood, I soon came to be regarded as an expert on the rules of the game. Other boys would consult me on what should happen next. I would give my judgement, the game would continue, and everyone seemed happy, especially me.

A year or two later, someone gave our family a copy of Risk for Christmas. I was delighted. This was a chance to extend my sphere of influence! I told my elder brothers and sister that I knew all about this game, and could tell them the rules. I felt hurt when my sister said she would prefer to read the printed rules for herself. The result was an eye-opener for me. I discovered that my version of the game bore no relation whatever to the rules in the box. It soon became clear that the real rules made for a far better game than we boys had ever played. I went very quiet about it, and have never presumed to advise on how to play the game since.

The mistake I made at the school was to speak as if I was an authority on the game, when I was not. If I had had a full knowledge of the rules, then my advice would have been of some value, but as it was, it was a classic instance of the blind leading the blind, in Jesus’ memorable phrase. It seems likely to me that down the centuries, church leaders will have been tempted to pronounce on things off their own bat in a similar way. It is nice to be regarded as an expert. Also, many people find it easier to ask an opinion from someone they trust than to consult a book, even if it is the Bible. In my opinion, it may well have been that errors in thinking and practice have crept in in this manner.

It may be helpful to reflect on some main areas where existing churches tend to fall short of what Jesus called for. I have noticed three.

I am aware of some churches that aim to do a lot in the community, but they would never consider healing the sick or casting out demons or raising the dead. Their belief system cannot cope with such things. Because of their world-view, they regard the Gospels as an unreliable record of what Jesus did and taught (see Appendix). The result is that hell’s captives cannot be released, it seems to me, as the problems are not tackled at root. The most such churches can achieve is good works, which are great as far as they go, but Jesus calls for more than that.

I have noticed that other churches, which do believe in moving mountains by faith and are not restricted by a sub-Christian world view, tend to become inward looking; they lay hands on one another, but do not venture outside. A few years ago, I came across the slogan “The meeting place is the learning place for the market-place.” This is excellent to my mind, but in too many of our churches, what is learnt in the meetings seems to stay inside the four walls. One might say that all too often, the meeting place is the meeting place is the meeting place! Although the belief system is there, hell’s captives are still not released.

I have also observed churches which can be summed up by the proverb “Like clouds and wind that bring no rain is the man who boasts of gifts he never gives.” I once had a holiday in Israel, where this verse was tellingly illustrated. Our minibus was driving through an area of desert, in the Beersheba region I believe. To my surprise, some rain fell, requiring single windscreen wipe as we drove along. The guide explained that the area we were in would have rain on about three days in the year, and we had hit one of them. He pointed out that the very few trees dotted around were encircled by low ridges of sand, ten metres from the trunk. We passed one tree, and saw the result; it was surrounded by a pool of water. The sand was arranged to save as much of the rain as possible, and this practice just allowed the few trees in the area to survive. There were more clouds about, and I expected more rain to fall, but none of them came to anything; the total rainfall lasted between five and ten minutes. Indeed, I hoped it would rain again, something I have never wanted on holiday before or since, but it did not.

Imagine the frustration of a man looking up, watching the clouds coming over, thinking that this next one would be the one to produce rain, and for them all to sail overhead without a drop. I’m sorry to say it because it sounds so dismal, but this picture sums up my experience of a number of churches in the UK. There were gung-ho songs and enthusiastic speakers to motivate us. A great deal was promised, but little actually happened. The gate of hell remains intact.

Well, you ask, what are your concrete proposals? If what you say is true, then how are we going to do church in practice? If Jesus is building his church, then can you tell us what the finished building will look like?

The short answer is that I do not know. I do understand that a clear understanding that the word Christian means authorised by Christ, a grasp that the church ransacks hell, and a close attention to the commands of Jesus by everyone are all vital ingredients, without which no true church can hope to exist. However, I am aware that there is a job to be done on the basis of these things to produce the finished article. How that is going to happen, I do not know, and I would rather not make premature suggestions. This book is about the need for sound foundations; I personally feel unable to comment further than that.

What I am aware of is the difficulty of moving from where we are at the moment. I can all too easily imagine getting a group of people to meet together, determined to follow Jesus’ instructions to the letter. It’s the first meeting of something that is going to sweep the world! However, before anything happens, someone says, “Please may we sing something before we start?” Personally, I find it hard to turn anyone down. I can just imagine a pleasant, middle-aged lady with a smile on her face saying it. What harm could there be in just one song? So we sing something, and then someone else says could we sing another one, and I can’t think of a way of saying no this time when I said yes before, and before long we are simply doing the same old thing as we have always done. In fact, before half an hour has gone by, whatever I may look like on the outside, conducting this meeting, inside I have already decided it is hopeless and I am

longing to be somewhere else and wondering why I ever agreed to take on this assignment.

Similarly, in view of what we have learnt about burials not being a function of the church, my mind conjures up the first impending burial of all, back in the year dot. As the minister, I am in the building tidying my desk when a lady who has just lost her husband comes in and, after the usual pleasantries, she says “You know my hubby’s just died; I was wondering, could I bury him on this bit of ground just next to the church building?” I wonder what to do with this novel idea (funny how I always end up in charge in my daydreams), but I can’t see any harm in it, so I let it happen. Little do I know that this practice will spread all over the globe, and that for hundreds of years after I’ve gone, buildings known as churches will be surrounded by the most inappropriate thing anyone could possibly have thought of – graves!

Rather than rushing headlong into action, I think we need to take time to realise just how addicted we have become in this country to the idea that a church is a religious institution, carrying out worship services, and singing. We have all grown up surrounded by thousands upon thousands of religious buildings known as churches. It is one thing to begin to grasp that they are not, but personally I have found even that small step hard enough. Despite all I have written, I still think of the gothic pile of stone half a mile from where I am sitting, with its spire pointing to heaven, as a church!

My father once pointed out to me that the church spire pointing the way upwards, towards heaven, was a visual symbol. This is the way to God! My response is to long that all the churches in the land could be carefully turned over and laid on their sides so that the spire pointed towards human beings in need. This is the way to people! However, my fear is that this manoeuvre would overtax the design of the building, and it would crumble to bits.

In my opinion, it could take a long time to alter the way we think about these things as a nation. You can’t turn an ocean going liner round one hundred and eighty degrees in five minutes. It would be much easier to get a Christian church going in the UK if we had not had a wrong model of the church thrust in our noses for many centuries. The difficulty should not be under-estimated.

Rather than me working out a detailed blueprint from what we have learned, therefore, I think it may be better to leave you to come to your own understanding of how to proceed from where you are now. Suggestions from an outside source may prove to be a hindrance rather than a help. Do some work in your own way on the instructions Jesus gave us. Get a group together to pray and reflect and produce a plan. Aim to make it Jesus’ plan, not a human one!

Having said that, I have three modest proposals as to how to start moving forward from where many of us are now.

The first task, to my mind, is to humble ourselves. John’s letter to the Church at Laodicea seems appropriate to the state of Christianity in our land today. In it, Jesus says, “You say, ‘I am rich; I have everything I want.’ But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.” Many of us would do well to take these words to heart, recognise the bankruptcy of much of our church life, apologise for the mess we have made of it, and ask the Lord to open our eyes to see what should be done.

Secondly, we can start where we are. If you are involved in the teaching programme in an existing church, for example, it would be possible to begin by turning the weekly teaching over to a study of Christ’s commands, as was suggested

in Part Two. Explain what you are doing and why! By the time you have got through them all, you may be clearer as to how to proceed.

If you are in leadership yourself, I encourage you to invite feedback as you open up these ideas. Why should you be the one God speaks to, Pastors? Perhaps God will speak to the least likely person. There is a story in Ecclesiastes of a city under siege, which could have been saved if people had heeded the words of a wise old man, but they did not. Professional ministers do not have a monopoly in hearing from God. Maybe there are churches where it is time for the leaders to be more open to the words of the quiet person that we tend to ignore, who may have heard from God. I do not want to cause offence and upset, but it seems to me that over the centuries, church leaders have got it wrong more than they have got it right. This is not a case of a quick fix by the paid staff. We need the wisdom of God as to how to proceed, and Paul helpfully taught that the church was like a human body where every part needs every other part. Discussion and thought about the way ahead should not be limited to the few.

Thirdly, and this is purely a personal feeling, the main resource at the disposal of most people reading this book is their home. Despite the growth of weekly home groups, I still feel this resource is underused. Many of us are used to thinking of the church being the neo-gothic building down the road. Perhaps, in contrast, whole churches should be the size that can fit comfortably into an average living room, say between five and twelve. Most churches want to increase and grow, but it may be good to resist the temptation to play the large and stay small. Such a move would reduce the problem of buildings, and the way they tend to become the central focus of the church. It would also give greater flexibility. There's more chance of everyone being involved in a smaller setting. Most of us need plenty of encouragement, especially if we are going to take the idea of showing love to enemies seriously, and it comes better one to one than in a large meeting. If I'm sitting there feeling totally inadequate, and I hear someone else say how utterly useless they are feeling, then it might help me to think perhaps I can manage something after all. Such things come out best in small groups. Also, meeting in homes was early church practice.

Another way in which our homes could be used more is for us to act on Isaiah's encouragement, "Welcome the homeless poor into your home." Too often, we have only offered those in need an institution. Let's open our homes. This may feel scary. What about my family? They would need to agree. What about my possessions, which might go walkabout? Perhaps they matter too much, and are not so much laid on the open palm as they might be. Might I even have to give up my own bed? Where would I sleep? But Jesus himself had nowhere to lay his head...

Questions like these confront us with an issue of motivation. For most of us, church attendance on a Sunday morning is fairly painless. Adhering to the commands of Jesus may be harder. How committed are we? How much spine have we got? Might it be easier just to carry on in the safe old ways?

I hesitate to say any more. I really have no chart to the new territory. I just know that the religious gatherings we have been holding up to now in our so-called churches, broadly speaking, have been on the wrong lines, as they have not arisen from Jesus' teaching. We need to realise this and be willing to go back to the gospels, and ask Jesus to show us how we could do better.

If you feel daunted by the material in this book, like I do, then let us remember that Jesus understands. The command not to fear comes many times on the list in different forms (numbers 61, 63, 65, 71, 75, 122, 129). He has promised to be with us, and asserts that with God, nothing is impossible. We have focussed on the challenge Jesus

gave to his followers; we should not overlook all the resources he gives to help make it happen, but that would require a separate book. So let us take courage. It's time to get started.

A final thought. I have found that sometimes in life, things which seemed very scary in advance have turned out to be the most worthwhile. It could just be that taking steps along the lines I have suggested will open things up in a way few of us have dreamt of. So let's not hang back, but "strengthen the feeble knees" and set off. Take courage!