

THE TRUE COST

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Imagine a young Christian man who has entered the Anglican (or some other church ministry) in the early to mid 1980s. He moves to a parish that has an evangelical background and there he currently remains. Hard work and loyalty to his denomination appears to have brought ministerial success. The old church building still remains, some parts dating back to Norman times, and a new worship area has been constructed which easily seats 300 and more. On a Lord's Day morning most seats are filled, while in the evening there are approximately 100 to 150 present.

The church complex also comprises a large and serviceable side hall which is well used, not just for children's activities on the Lord's Day but at other times as well. During the week old people's luncheon clubs, youth work, crèches, nurseries and the like take place. At the same time the church has a coffee lounge which is used daily, plus a constant staff of workers who man the office, book room and administrative centre. Besides the "senior" minister, there is a curate (female), assistant minister and youth worker and all are full-time. Children's regular Holiday Clubs attract 100s and are always oversubscribed, and the church's general impact upon the local community is quite considerable. On a Lord's Day morning cars park both sides of all the roads around the church and this, surely, indicates its popularity.

In addition, the leading minister who began his ministry there in the early '80s has made modest progress up the church hierarchy and has considerable Diocesan responsibility. Seen in this light, here is a success story which contrasts with so much apparent failure in the Christian church and ministry today. The one-time young minister saw his denomination as a good place in which to "fish for souls" and he has cast his net and, manifesting evident gifts, has landed much.

What I have described above could be multiplied in other places and churches. Yet as much as I am genuinely heartened to hear of success, and numbers going to a place of worship, I am forced to stop, consider and question the true cost of these achievements. When trying to evaluate the spiritual "price-tag" the following ought to be borne in mind.

Quality not quantity

Numbers are not being disparaged here, and neither is the view taken that a vast company attending any church is immediately suspect. This may not be the case at all, and certainly the history of true revivals ought to convince us all that God can and does work remarkably. Cynicism has no place amongst God's people but, gullibility should be guarded against as well. Success is far from being an indicator of quality and divine blessing. The Lord said, "strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14). As W.E. Vine observed, this pathway to life was "hemmed in like a narrow gorge between rocks." The Apostle Paul could also write of "all they which are of Asia be turned away from me" (2 Timothy 1:15). In John 6:6 we read, "From that time many of his disciples went back, and

walked no more with him." After that, He was left with just the twelve Apostles for a time which reveals the comparative fewness of those truly saved. Some might point to the conversion of about 3,000 on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2) followed by something in the region of 5,000 in Acts 4. Yet it must be remembered that these were exceptional events that displayed God's great power. Of course it is surely the prayer of believing hearts that God would bring many to Himself but, all the same, the danger of looking for mere numbers at the expense of real spiritual worth must be resisted.

Fruit and not just numbers

By fruit I mean the work and graces of the Holy Spirit. In this, great care must be taken, for believers are not to act as judges and censors over the spirituality of other Christians. Even so, discernment needs to be exercised (e.g. 1 John 4:1) and we should not naively accept all that is told us or even appears to the eyes. Why be concerned about the modern Evangelical churches? If all manifested true biblical Christianity, then doubts could justly be put aside but this is far from the case. Consider what many Evangelical churches are like with their contemporary and entertainment style of worship, the use of drama, and the charismatic signs and prophecies that bring nothing but spiritual and moral confusion. Note the following:

Antinomianism is rife. The Moral Law of God is no longer regarded as relevant to the Christian. Sadly, this has produced a gross disregard for the Lord's Day as the Christian Sabbath and, in addition, has created a growth in worldliness amongst the churches. Believers must not dispense with God's Law as summarised in the 10 Commandments and think it to be redundant. It cannot save, but even so, it is the God-given help and guide for how a Christian should live, and in that sense be "under the law to Christ" (1 Corinthians 9:21).

Worship without a Scriptural basis. A great deal that passes for worship in modern days does not derive from the Bible but is "will worship" (Colossians 2:23) - that is, humanly-devised worship which lacks the divine institution and authority. Hence, traditions become authoritative in the church of God and congregations offer to Him what He has not authorised. See Matt 13:1-20 and in particular verses 7-9. The latter states, "But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men." Should there not be a trembling because of what takes place in the average church today? Lest any think that non-evangelical churches are singled out for concern then let them be aware that *all* churches are in mind here. No one is guiltless and all need to examine hearts, consciences, worship-patterns and contents in the light of God's Word.

Sandemanianism. This error began with a Scotsman named John Glas in the 1700s, only to be given added impetus by his son-in-law, Robert Sandeman. There were a number of issues that came to the fore in their teachings, but the important one concerns their belief about the nature of saving faith. To put it simply, they emphasised an intellectual faith as against believing with the whole heart (Roms 10). This is, to be fair to the Sandemanians, an over simplification of their views but space does not permit an extensive study. Here is the nub of the matter: a sinner is exhorted to merely believe and accept the teachings of the church and of the Bible. This approach might be described as "easy-believism," that is a "bare belief of the bare truth" as Fuller described it. The will, holy affections and God's Spirit working upon

the heart, are often excluded altogether in modern evangelism. In addition, the need for holy fruit in the life can be overlooked in the desire to gain converts who provide nothing else but a mental assent to the Gospel. Faith is never alone in a justified person but also enjoys the presence of other graces. See James 2:17,22,26 and Galatians 5:6. The *Alpha Course* and the teaching allied to it can be a perfect example of this. "Accept the teaching, believe the truths and you are a Christian" is basically the approach. Why is all this to be avoided? Firstly, it is not Scriptural. Secondly, it imperils many souls and encourages them to think they are truly regenerate when in fact they may not be at all. Thirdly, the graces of saving faith and repentance may not be present and thus they deceive themselves and are still in their sins.

An experience-based religion. This has supplanted true Christianity in many churches and a false experiential theology now reigns supreme. It feeds upon the existentialism of the modern world and, sadly, has the same basic philosophy as that of humanism, paganism and the New Age movement. I refer essentially to what is known as the *Charismatic Movement* and its governing emphasis of mysticism. This has spread like wild-fire throughout the world and regrettably even Bible-based Christianity is under serious threat. Believers need to spiritually arm themselves against this perversion of the faith and keep to the old standard that Scripture *alone* is the basis for truth, and not mere subjective experience. Until the church returns to this standard, she will know continued powerlessness and be ineffective in the modern world. May God have mercy upon us, purify and reform His church and grant times of refreshing from His hand.

A Troubling attitude

The above might seem enough in itself, but there is another serious matter that requires comment and is to do with a believer's attitude towards certain churches, denominations, fellowships or any other kind of grouping. Are those which are clearly liberal, modernistic, worldly and what we might call "compromised" the place for a true and genuine evangelical Christian "to fish in"? Do such believers have any Scriptural right and justification to be present in these places and ought they to consider their position? How long is it to be acceptable for Christians to remain the "evangelical wing" of a liberal and rationalistic church and be in communion with those who deny the vital and fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith? The church is about fellowship - not a constant contending for truth in her courts. Today the battle is not only about doctrine but about how we behave as Christians. What association can there be with those who promote unbiblical views of sexuality, want closer fellowship with Rome and even have an inter-faith agenda? In *most* cases there is usually charismatic and contemporary worship to contend with as well.

Now it is true that entry into these mixed denominations can give many opportunities for service, but I ask, *Is it right, and is not the cost too great?*

The True Cost

Making common cause with those who deny the faith for the sake of success, service and advancement demands a price. What is it?

A loss of a clear conscience now, and also in the Day of Judgment. All believers shall stand before Christ one day and have to answer to Him as to how they have lived. It

will be no use saying, "I felt led" or take up some other subjective argument or plead that it was done because of the prospects for service. The question to be answered is, "Did I act in accordance with God's Word and the principles laid down there?" (Cf Matthew 7:21). Let 2 Corinthians 6:14 suffice, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers."

Loss of Truth. Christians need to be careful whom they associate with because they can become affected if they are not watchful. Of course, many professing believers deride this, claiming that the Holy Spirit keeps them safe, therefore they can go anywhere and mix with whom they please without fear. Yet this attitude is not in line with Scripture, for the Apostle Paul warns, "Be not deceived: evil communications corrupt good manners" (1 Corinthians 15:33). He is saying that evil companions and fellowship with them pollutes Christian behaviour. Minds and hearts can also be affected and contaminated so that false doctrine is believed, absorbed and adopted. This is one important reason why God's Word exhorts believers to have fellowship together and attend upon the pure worship of God (Hebrews 10:25). Are you prepared to barter the truth and to say that it does not matter too much whom you associate with? The issue is a serious one and no amount of justification for a compromised situation will do. Remember, we must answer directly to God one day. What then?

Forfeiting a good influence upon others. Keep in mind that you are watched and do not live in a vacuum. I can recall that a few times I have been invited to speak in certain churches and situations which could be best described as "questionable." By that I mean that they may have had a tendency to be contemporary and even charismatic in their worship, have denominational links with teachers who promote serious error, or be generally of a worldly nature. I have tended to refuse these invitations for a number of reasons, but mainly for the sake of other churches and Christians who are seriously trying to deal with the present chaotic situation. An important principle emerges here. Spiritual compromise has consequences. A stream today can become a torrent tomorrow. Things thought unthinkable in the church of God 30 or 40 years ago are now happening and becoming acceptable. I would urge you to keep thinking of the cost when Christians are happy to blithely enter into fellowship with others who are not necessarily like-minded.

Loss of faithfulness to Christ. Separation from error and separation to Christ are needed in these evil days, plus a faithful walk with Him. Some will say that we are being judgmental here and must allow men and women to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Let no one misunderstand. I am not seeking to come between you and God regarding where and with whom you worship - but I would plead with you to consider the importance of honouring and loving the Lord in your associations with others. This leads on to the next matter which concerns,

Involvement with compromised communions and fellowships. Whenever a believer becomes involved with such churches or groupings then there are *always* spiritual concessions that must be made. It goes without saying that if a faithful evangelical Christian is a member and even a minister in a liberal and naturalistic church, then it becomes necessary to accept all other ministers and members as fellow believers and tolerate error. This applies not only to churches and congregations but

denominations, fellowships of churches, mission societies, etc. To be a full member of these kinds of communions means that a Christian is automatically yoked with others, whether genuine believers or not, and is bound to a collective authority.

How can a consistent and true Evangelical, a faithful Protestant and one who cleaves to the doctrines of the Reformers do this? Should any think that they can belong to a compromised church or denomination, remain faithful to the Lord and maintain their spiritual integrity then they deceive themselves. Some at this point will want to argue that this is merely a question of "independents" versus those who believe in some kind of connexional church grouping. This, however, is not the issue here. Independents can be just as inconsistent as anyone else, and all Christians must be prepared to maintain doctrinal and spiritual purity regardless of the cost.

The Real issue

All that I have been saying are issues that are not popular among evangelicals and it creates genuine resentment in the hearts of many. The issues are *Separation from error* and *Obedience to, and love for, the Lord*. Note carefully the following Scriptures: 2 Corinthians 6:14-17, "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" ... "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord." Romans 16:17, "Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned: and avoid them." See also 1 Corinthians 5:9-13 which includes the sin of idolatry; Galatians 1:8,9; 1 Timothy 4:1,2; 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:16-21; Ephesians 5:11; 2 John 6-11. Other references and arguments might well be added, but do not these demonstrate the serious state that the church of God is in by her disobedience?

May God cause all His people to be faithful to Him and render up loving obedience. Some might say that the Lord will preserve His church for He has done so in past centuries. That is perfectly true, but He has always used men who were prepared to stand for the truth and not yield to the errors and compromises of the day. May God help each one of us to be faithful and, like David, to serve our own generation by the will of God - and maintain God's Cause and Truth for future generations also, (Acts 13:36).