

## Red herrings

Certain objections are regularly raised by those who have been challenged to move on with God.

For various reasons they feel unable (or is it unwilling?) to change, and some of the arguments used have become so common that they have passed into a kind of religious folklore. They seem to have taken on the authority, if not of Scripture itself, then at least of a kind of widely accepted 'apocrypha'.

I would like to reel in a few of those red herrings – and (in the next chapter) roast some of those old chestnuts. It's high time that religious myths masquerading as spiritual reasons were well and truly exploded.

### **'The church will always be a mixture'**

A favourite compromising attitude takes comfort from the idea that the church is doomed to mixture until Jesus comes back. And therefore whatever stand you make for God, wherever you go, there will always be a mixture of those who want to go on with God and those who don't.

The idea seems to have come from a basic misunderstanding

of Jesus' parable of the weeds in Matthew 13.

Jesus described the kingdom of heaven as being like a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while he slept, along came the enemy and sowed weeds among the wheat. On discovering this, the man's servants wanted to go and pull the weeds out immediately. But he stopped them, explaining that both must grow together until the harvest, when the weeds would be collected and burned.

Many have understood this to mean that we have no alternative but to suffer mixture until Jesus comes back for his church. But that's not what Jesus said. Explaining the parable to his disciples, he told them: 'The good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one' and 'the field is the world' (Matthew 13:37-38).

The field is the *world!* Righteousness and unrighteousness are to be found together in one field – the world, not the church.

The world is inhabited by believers and unbelievers alike, and will be until Jesus returns, but there is no place for mixture in the church. The church is to be peopled only by the redeemed – those who have repented, believed the gospel and been born again by the Spirit of God.

You may recall Kenneth, whom we met back in chapter five. His desire to be true to the Word of God resulted in his leaving a church where many just couldn't see the necessity for it. The majority on the church council were unbelievers and, not surprisingly, these were the ones most anxious to see him leave.

If a person hasn't been born again by the Spirit of God he simply can't understand the things of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:14), so how can you expect to build with him in God's way? It just won't work.

A less radical mixture, but still one that needs avoiding, is the mixing of those envisioned by God with those who hamper his work by refusing to allow the Holy Spirit to guide the church – insisting on retaining their man-made traditions instead.

Mike was one of a number of elders in a church in north-west England. Evidence of mixture was already apparent in

resistance to the Holy Spirit and various biblical practices. But the issue which finally exposed people's attitudes was the elders' proposal to abolish the constitution. The elders were of one mind about this and had given several weeks' notice to allow plenty of opportunity for the presentation and debate of the issues.

'During this period it became clear where loyalties lay – and a split became inevitable,' Mike recalled. 'Rather than push the issue to a formal meeting, thus forcing a split, we elders recognised that, since it was no longer possible for us to function in the light of our convictions either within that congregation or within the denominational framework, we would lay down our eldership. This we announced at the next church meeting, indicating our individual decisions to withdraw from membership.'

'The reaction to our leaving was mixed. For some, it meant a welcome return to more traditional ways. Others felt a genuine sense of loss and grief. While for still others it meant a decision to leave also.'

'Obviously, it was a very difficult time for me, but I have never doubted that I did the right thing,' Mike affirmed. 'We must recognise that mixture and unbelief are the enemies of faith and the fulfilled walk. Either they go, or you must.'

Mike was under no illusions about the issues at stake. It was a case of being either for the Lord or against him. With the Lord or without him. The two couldn't be combined. And as he took that step of faith, God brought him into a whole new spiritual dimension.

'I now belong to a church where I have experienced great spiritual growth – in my faith; my personal vision; my understanding of God's Word and living in the truth of it; and the whole area of order in my personal and family life. One of the main things, though, is that I have been challenged by the reality and integrity of people living by the Scriptures.'

There is no place for mixture in the church. And just in case a lingering doubt still remains, the Lord makes the position

clear in Paul's letter to the Corinthian church: 'Come out from them and be separate.'

Note this, however: *We should not in any way look down on those who haven't seen what we have seen. Neither does the Lord love them any less than he loves us.* It's simply that the Lord is calling us to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to working and walking in his ways. As we have seen over and over again, it inevitably involves cost. But there is no need to be afraid of that cost. As in Mike's case, God gives back to us far more than we can ever give up.

### **'But the church needs me'**

Issuing from a misunderstanding of the nature of the church comes another familiar cry of despair: 'But if I leave, who will bear witness to the truth in this place?'

How many of God's people are held captive in unbelieving situations by a false sense of responsibility? How many are held back, feeling that the church needs them and that, if they leave, the church has even less chance of making it?

It's a genuine concern which many feel when they begin to weigh up the pros and cons of departing from a spiritually dead congregation. That concern is increased when – as is often the case – the one eager to serve well in the circumstances is often the organist, steward, youth leader, Sunday school teacher and missionary secretary, not to mention magazine editor, bookstall manager, flower rota arranger and general dogsbody!

He (or she) feels guilty just entertaining the thought of leaving, even though his enthusiasm has so far produced little, if any, response. Deadlines for evidence of change have come and gone, and still he seeks to convince himself that he is being faithful.

But faithful to what? Certainly not to the Word of God. Jesus himself gave clear instructions as to what our attitude should be towards any community refusing to respond to our sharing of the gospel: 'If any place will not welcome you *or listen to you*, shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony

against them' (Mark 6:11).

Matthew records the same injunction, and Luke has it twice! History shows us that the apostles took it quite literally: when their message was rejected by the religious establishment this was exactly what Paul and Barnabas did (Acts 13:50-51).

Are you in a similar situation? Then maybe it's time to shake the dust off your feet – just like Chris and Tanya had to.

Chris joined the church in his youth and, after marrying Tanya (the minister's daughter), settled down as a youth group leader and lay preacher. But after a while things became very unsatisfactory.

'My father-in-law retired,' he explained, 'and we had a new, more active, minister who promised much but realised little in the way of actual progress. We worked very hard to support him and to help others and ourselves to grow, but we felt more and more isolated as others just settled for routine.

'Much of my preaching was falling on deaf ears and I was being restricted increasingly in what I was allowed to say because of my longing to see God moving among us in a powerful way. We were beginning to dry up and, rather than be forced to compromise any more, we left.

'The situation we were in – always hoping and praying for a positive change – was a real trap for us. And it's a trap for anyone wanting to go on with God. Our spiritual health was suffering but we still tried to fool ourselves that everything would be all right. A false sense of loyalty, and of being "needed", only clouded the real issue of a dying church which only wanted the Holy Spirit on its own terms.'

Chris and Tanya will always be thankful to God that they had their eyes opened to the reality of the situation in time. Realising the trap they had fallen into, they were able to act before their spiritual health suffered any more damage. Firmly shaking the dust off their feet, they refused to be held back in their own walk with God by any false sense of being a lifeline to the church.

So don't be afraid to shake the dust off your feet. It's not

a question of being unfaithful; it's a spiritual principle which Jesus commanded us to observe. All we have to do is be obedient to his Word – and we can leave the consequences to him.

### **'Faithfulness is more important than success'**

Many Christians are terrified of proving 'unfaithful'. I have often heard it preached that faithfulness is more important than success and that the highest commendation from the Lord is 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'

I agree with that one hundred percent. But it has produced in some minds the idea that the person who tenaciously sticks at something (whatever that something may be) with no reaping for his sowing, no return for his investment and no reward for his labour, is somehow on a more spiritual plane than the person who gets results.

But that is to ignore what the Bible teaches. You see, there is a spiritual law in operation which dictates that faithfulness will carry its own success. In the very parable from which we take the Lord's commendation for faithfulness (the parable of the talents in Matthew 25), *the faithful servants are those who have been successful.*

So don't be duped into believing that staying put in a situation, even though it achieves nothing, is the real test of faithfulness. It isn't! If you are being faithful in the truly biblical sense, obedient to God instead of being ruled by your emotions, you will also be successful.