

## You in your small corner?

That God's chosen plan for his church is far removed from what is actually taking place is beyond dispute. But that doesn't mean we have to settle for second best or consider the perfect to be for ever unreachable.

God is constantly giving evidence of the choices he himself has made. Whether it be the raising up of a leader or of a nation, the decisions of the Lord are irresistible. What he has purposed he will perform. All that he intends for his church will be fulfilled. Jesus prayed for it. God planned for it. It *will* happen.

What a source of confidence that is for us! It means that since God has planned for a church without spot or wrinkle, that is what we will be. But, as we have seen, we ourselves have a vital role to play in bringing it about.

How easy it is to bury our heads in the sand. How conveniently we can avoid the cost of making a difficult decision by remaining seated in our own small corners, refusing to listen to, or look at, the reality of what is going on around us.

### **One church**

It only takes a quick glance at Christianity in Britain to see that the church is paralysed by tradition, apathy, ambition, complacency, lethargy and fear of change. Much of this has already been illustrated by the testimonies in this book.

One symptom of the paralysis is division – the result of a reluctance to move forward with God's unfolding purpose. But it was never God's plan for the church to be fragmented. His plan has always been for one church – for one body of people united in him through his Son, Jesus Christ.

That's why the New Testament church, fresh in the excitement of this revelation, couldn't come to terms for a moment with the idea of a fragmented body. The council at Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, reflected the growing tensions between the 'legalists' and the 'liberated'. But overriding all the differences was a strong determination not to polarise into Jewish and Gentile denominations.

As Paul tells us in Ephesians 2, God has made from such naturally prejudiced and segregated companies 'one new man' (v5), having removed all the barriers between them by the blood of Jesus. He had no plans for separate Jewish and Gentile churches, Greek and barbarian churches, free and slave churches. God decided on one church.

So where are we going wrong?

Many have sought comfort in the idea that our historical and traditional differences are really parts of the whole. All too often the church has tried to spiritualise its way out of its dilemmas and discrepancies by smugly declaring, 'We are one – in the Spirit.'

But that does nothing for those of us who know, in the depths of our hearts, that our differences are not so much facets of the whole as broken fragments – with sharp, jagged edges.

We may be one in the Spirit, but the prayer of Jesus for the unity of his church is 'that the world may know' (John 17:23 NASB), and people outside the church cannot understand the

spiritual concepts with which we ourselves are so familiar (see 1 Corinthians 2:13-16). So none of our pious attitudes can excuse us from being anything other than what we ought to be.

Nevertheless we have an uncanny ability to turn our spiritual failings into religious virtues. Human traditions have rapidly become taught as the doctrines of God, and it is amazing how many people who truly love the Word of God have had their minds blurred with all kinds of non-biblical concepts.

It's time to get behind the façade and see the reality. We cannot just accept all that we hear. We must first judge it by the Word of God.

### Some spiritual misconceptions

I can remember, in my own Christian experience, being presented with ideas which sounded spiritually plausible at the time but somehow would not sit easily in my heart.

Within a few weeks of being born again, fired up with zeal to win the whole world for Jesus, I was taken in hand by one of our church leaders. This man, held in great awe in our fellowship, took me aside to explain the principles of evangelism to me.

'It is nothing more than one starving man telling another starving man where to find bread,' he explained.

In the zeal of my immaturity, my mental reaction was, 'That can't be right.' Now, after years of walking with God, learning his ways and growing in wisdom and understanding, I *know* it isn't right.

Evangelism must be one well-fed, satisfied person calling starving people to come and eat. A person lacks credibility if, while claiming to know where food is, he or she continues to display all the symptoms of malnutrition. The Christian must be able to say to the world, 'What I *have* I give you' (Acts 3:6).

Some years later, when I embarked on full-time ministry, I was confronted with some major decisions. An older man with whom I worked at that time counselled me on an infallible way

of discerning the will of God for my life.

'I always know when I'm in the will of God,' he told me. 'It's when I'm doing what I don't really want to do.'

I was horrified. But most of us have probably come across this misconception at some stage in our Christian walk. We allow ourselves to believe the lie that God's will for us cannot possibly match up with what we really want to do.

Fortunately for me, I had already learned from Scripture that the will of God is 'good, pleasing and perfect' (Romans 12:2), and could better identify with David when he testified, 'I *delight* to do thy will, O my God' (Psalm 40:8 NASB).

### **Distorted reflections**

Another great spiritual misconception was propagated by one of the brighter men who studied with me at Bible school. His student career had been a long one. Having won distinction at school, he had gone to university to obtain his degree, and then to college to gain his teaching diploma.

And now, here he was at Bible school with more letters after his name than I had *in* mine! For me, never having attained much at school, such learning was awe-inspiring. Surely, I thought, every opinion he expressed must carry the stamp of divine approval.

However, the clay feet of this intellectual giant were exposed and my idol fell one day when we were discussing the grace of God. Divine grace was wonderfully expressed, he believed, in the provision the Lord had made to accommodate man's diverse backgrounds and personalities.

His theology unfolded something like this. The Anglican Church, he said, had been specifically provided for the cultured upper classes whom he believed were generally more inclined towards respectful, religious solemnity, while the middle classes, he believed, would be more at home in a Baptist, or some other nonconformist, non-liturgical establishment.

Continuing in the same vein, he methodically worked his way

down through the religious denominations and social strata of western civilisation, ending up somewhere near the Salvation Army!

What a shock! But while it is patently ridiculous, it does highlight our natural human tendency to try to recreate God in our own image and conform him to our own likeness.

Often our mental image of God has come about as a result of human thoughts and suggestions picked up from various sources. Receiving them as truth, we fail to check whether they are an accurate reflection of God as he is revealed through his Word and in his Son, Jesus. And instead of seeing God as he really is, all we see is a distortion.

Just as looking at yourself in those convex and concave mirrors you find at funfairs gives you a grossly distorted picture of what you really look like, so we can find ourselves looking at a gross caricature of the real God. When that happens, our thinking, our doctrine and what we have built also become distorted.

We aren't necessarily way off track. It may just be in one or two small areas that we aren't seeing God clearly. But whatever the degree of distortion, there is only one answer: go back to the Word of God, the true mirror, and see what God has said about himself there.

To return to my young colleague's theory, it is true that God will never ride roughshod over personality, or even over our social customs, provided they are not in conflict with his kingdom and his righteousness. But his kingdom will never bow to any culture. On the contrary, all nations, kingdoms and cultures are destined to submit to the kingdom of God (Romans 14:11). And the church, the sharp cutting-edge of that kingdom, must not be tailored to people's cultural or personal preferences.

### **Your small corner or God's great expanse?**

The church issue must be faced. It's no use sitting alone, each of us in his own small corner. Since we are all 'living stones' being built together into a spiritual house, we are an integral

part of each other (1 Peter 2:5). Neither can any one local church manage on its own, aloof from the rest of the body of Christ. We must agree to build together *in alignment with the Word of God*.

God is not multi-optional. Jesus said, 'I am the way' (John 14:6). He depicted the path to life as 'narrow' and the access to it through a 'small' gate. The road which is broad and accommodating, with room for all the diverse and contradictory views of opinionated religion, is invariably the path to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14).

On Mount Carmel Elijah confronted a nation who had abandoned God with the challenge: 'How long will you waver between two opinions?' (1 Kings 18:21). He didn't present them with a catalogue of alternatives or a list of 'take your pick' choices. There were only two options: right or wrong, light or dark, God or idols – life or death.

The nation had been called to make a similar choice in the early days of its history. Poised to cross into the promised land after forty years of wandering through the wilderness, God's word had come to them through his servant Moses. It was an historic word which remains relevant to every generation: 'I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses' (Deuteronomy 30:19).

This, then, is God's bottom line. He does not confuse us with multiple choices but presents us with two clearly defined options on which to make our decision. There are no complexities to wrestle with. There is no need to fast and pray or seek the combined wisdom of many counsellors, because the choice is clear – life or death.

And just in case there remains any lingering doubt, the Lord adds a far from gentle nudge in the right direction, saying, '*Choose life*' (Deuteronomy 30:19).