

## *The Question Which Cannot Be Ducked*

Christendom has ruined the new-covenant *ekklēsia*. I have made no bones about saying so. I have gone further: I have maintained that this past fifty years, evangelicals, by flirting with paganism, have seriously increased this Christendom adulteration of the *ekklēsia*.

The vast majority of believers, of course, never come across my work. And my guess is that most of the tiny minority which have read or heard something of mine on this subject have dismissed it – dismissed it, perhaps, as the mere babbling of some old curmudgeon, that geriatric, moaning, hard-of-hearing, dishevelled embarrassment sitting in the corner, the one who always spoils the family fun, who long ago ought to be have been put out to grass – treated kindly, perhaps, but not for a minute taken seriously.

Nevertheless, a few – and now we really are getting into the region of minuscule – have felt the force of what I have said, but the default position proves too strong for them. Very much like the converted Jews the writer of Hebrews addressed in his letter – those who felt the reclaiming magnetism power of the old covenant – I realise that the default, Christendom grip on most believers is almost unassailable. I feel it myself. Can we be free of it?

How safe Christendom appears! What a lovely face it wears – as long as you overlook its appalling record of hatred against the gospel and those who are determined to live by it and proclaim it. Dissent not allowed! And I am not putting Roman Christendom alone in the dock. Look how Reformed Christendom linked arms with the Roman to destroy the Anabaptists!

Even so, Christendom has the history, the tradition, all the big names, all the major Confessions, and all the rest of it, on its side. After nearly eighteen hundred years – how Christendom has

stood the test of time! – it has flourished, proving that it is here to stay. Many simply like it that way, much as Judah liked their alternative to the Mosaic covenant (Jer. 5:30-31). Christendom is, like a pair of old slippers, just too comfortable.

I know my own heart! The scriptural path is risky; it demands thought; it asks too many questions. The traditional is all mapped out, cut and dried, all the questions answered, answered by experts, no less. Rome would not allow the *hoi polloi* to read Scripture for themselves; just accept what Mother Church says. Protestant Christendom can hardly be said to encourage enquiry. Absorb what you are told. Ritualism rules OK! Stick with what you know! Stick to what you are told! So many people can't be wrong, can they?

For all that, however, I know that I am not alone in issuing my alarms about the loss of *ekklēsia* life. And some, in a tentative hope of a move towards the recovery of the original, want to obey the biblical call for believers to flee from the Christendom Babylon (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1; Rev. 18:4). But I also know that they are puzzled. They have a question. How can we throw off Christendom and recover the *ekklēsia*? It becomes personal. What can I – me, personally – what can I do about promoting this recovery?

I am not inventing this dilemma. It is real; altogether, too real, I am afraid. Such questions have been put to me. Indeed, I have them myself.

I think the short answer must be that there is nothing that we can do to throw off Christendom and get back to the *ekklēsia*; at least, not on any scale. Frankly, I cannot conceive that the Christendom juggernaut is even aware of anything that I can throw at it, let alone be disturbed by any word of mine. The recovery of the *ekklēsia*, the believer's liberation from the toils of Christendom, is beyond the power and wit of man. God's word through Zechariah to Zerubbabel applies: 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts' (Zech. 4:6; see also Hos. 1:7).

In any case, in a sense it is impossible for any individual to return to the *ekklēsia*; *ekklēsia* life needs the two or three (Matt. 18:15-20).

Please do not misunderstand me. Prayer is open to us, prayer, trusting in God's sovereignty. We need look no further than Daniel 9:1-19 for that. Moreover, since Christ loved and died for the *ekklēsia* (Eph. 5:25-32), who can care for the *ekklēsia* more than he?

But that answer, in my view, is still ducking the question.

I am sure that although the unravelling of Christendom and the recovery of the *ekklēsia* is beyond us, in whatever way we can, however feeble our efforts may be, we must go on keeping the issue before our fellow-believers. At times, the prophets must have felt they were flogging a dead horse<sup>1</sup> – Isaiah certainly did (Isa. 49:4; 53:1),<sup>2</sup> but they kept on. And on.

If I may speak personally, although I am no prophet, in my discourses and in my articles and books, I try to keep the issue in the public square. I ask you, reader: What can you do? Whatever it is, 'whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might... In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good' (Eccles. 9:10; 11:6). God is sovereign, but he usually works through instruments, weak instruments at that. Widows can cast their mites into the treasury; a lad can give his picnic lunch; a David with a pebble can defeat a Goliath. Let us go on, even against impossible odds. I draw comfort from – and find a challenge in – 1 Peter 1:10-12. The prophets knew they were prophesying about things they would not live to experience, but even so they laboured on, and were deeply curious and concerned about what God was showing them, even though he told them it was not for their day.

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<sup>1</sup> Useful idioms abound: wall writing, bursting bubbles, wind/whirlwind, and so on. See the later notes.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that at least one of these verses is messianic only adds poignancy.

But even in this there is a dilemma. To help others to see what we have lost by Christendom, I need to approach Christendom, get involved with it, use it in some way or another. This is a paradox I labour with.

Yet, even in admitting that much, I am still evading the real problem, the real issue. It is not the Christendom out there; it's the Christendom in here – that is, in me. As I have hinted in passing, that's the hardest nut of the lot to crack. Me! Self! I know it's true that God works by contraries; I preach it and write about it. I know that in God's terms, small is great, weak is strong, humble is powerful, the despised flourishes (1 Cor. 1:18 – 2:16). I protest against preaching centres, the galaxy of star preachers, watching the ratings, the love of the big, packed auditorium, and all the rest of modern evangelical razzmatazz. But – and here's the real battle – these criticisms of Christendom my head may hold, and my tongue and my pen may proclaim, but Christendom, being ingrained within me, is too powerful for me to throw off; its pernicious and insidious influence is too strong for me. I preach and write about walking in the Spirit in the new covenant, but do I really want to be rid of Christendom's goodies? That's the real issue for me. It's not 'them'; it's me.

Despite all this, I have not lost hope; not quite. Why not?

Because, if I am right in saying that in the past fifty years evangelical opinion-formers, with their dependence on paganised-Christendom, have been in the van of corrupting the *ekklēsia* even more devastatingly than it was, then I draw an odd – even perverse – encouragement from the history of Israel. Israel did something similar in the days of the old covenant: they corrupted their covenant by consorting with pagans and paganism. Well, that in itself is no comfort! No. It is not. But it's what God did about it! God made sure that if Israel would not learn the lesson through the words of the prophets, then Israel would learn the lesson when paganism came back to bite Israel, and bite Israel hard – as it did. One example out of many must suffice. Israel disobeyed God and went to Egypt for help – very much like modern evangelicals have gone to pagans to help them

run the church to make it and its message acceptable to the carnal. God publicly addressed Egypt through the prophet – publicly so that Israel could hear it:

You have been a staff of reed to the house of Israel, when they grasped you with the hand, you broke and tore all their shoulders; and when they leaned on you, you broke and made all their loins to shake (Ezek. 29:6-7).

Although Israel would not listen, God made sure that the chickens came home to roost.<sup>3</sup> It would take time, but Israel and Judah, because of their departure from the covenant, were on the road to captivity. I know that after seventy years Judah returned from Babylon, but it was never the same (Ez. 3:12; Zech. 4:10; Hag. 2:3). And what a wretched seventy years (Ps. 137)!

I am no prophet, as I have said, but it would not surprise me if we are heading for something similar. Indeed, even as I write, straws are blowing in the wind.<sup>4</sup> Paul told the Corinthians that Israel's sin and God's judgment were meant to warn them as believers, and make them reform (1 Cor. 10:1-22). If ever there was a day when believers needed to take this passage seriously, that day is now.

What I am saying is this: having been fawned on by the church, having proved so 'helpful' in the church's drive to make itself and the gospel attractive to pagans, State Christendom will demand its pound of flesh.<sup>5</sup> Take, for instance, tax relief. I speak of what I know in the UK, but I think something similar applies across the Atlantic. The Christendom State is willing to grant churches tax relief, among other benefits, yes, but it expects, it demands, a *quid pro quo*. If the State grants the churches money, or whatever, the churches must conform to the State's dictat over church governance, church discipline, gender issues, safeguarding, sexual behaviour, the content of sermons, guidance and rulings given to members; in all such matters, churches will have to comply with whatever pagans demand. He who pays the

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<sup>3</sup> See earlier note.

<sup>4</sup> See the previous note.

<sup>5</sup> See the previous note.

piper...<sup>6</sup> As I write, these things are happening. The State is beginning to tell the churches what they can and what they can't do. What they must do.

The only hope? That if we believers will not wake up to our disobedience to Scripture, stop our headlong descent into disaster, then, maybe, the State, Christendom, will do it for us. How? By exacting too-high a price for what it is offering, demanding far more from the church than the benefit it offers – thus, at long last, stirring believers to dig their heels in, and pin their ears back, and say enough is enough! Whereupon, Christendom will turn quickly from being a Father Christmas to being a Nero; the present whimsy will be replaced by a terrifying, bleak grimness. And the result? Persecution! This, too, has happened, time and again.<sup>7</sup>

And herein lies my hope for the *ekklēsia*. Persecution! Persecution – not popularity – was always meant to be the norm for the *ekklēsia*.<sup>8</sup> The *ekklēsia* thrives under persecution.<sup>9</sup> Under

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<sup>6</sup> See the previous note.

<sup>7</sup> The history of the persecuted down the centuries is there for all to read. History, of course, is written by the winners, but truth will out. For my small contribution, see my *Battle for the Church: 1517-1644*.

<sup>8</sup> See 'The Fundamental Flaw' in my *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*; 'Separation in the New Covenant' in my *Public Worship: God-Ordained or Man-Invented?* See also my *Battle*.

<sup>9</sup> This teaching can be found throughout the New Testament. Take one example: 'Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing... Blessed is the man who remains steadfast under trial, for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life, which God has promised to those who love him... Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord... As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful' (Jas. 1:2-4,12; 5:7,10-11).

persecution, the church goes underground; it becomes secret, hidden, separate, despised and all the rest, believers really do become ‘strangers’ and ‘aliens’ in the world (Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 1:1,17; 2:11),<sup>10</sup> yes, but this means that the church really does become the *ekklēsia*!<sup>11</sup> Christ made it plain:

If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you (John 15:19).

And, shortly after saying this, in his great prayer he declared:

I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world... I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours... I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world (John 17:6-18).

The trash of Christendom trimmings will drop away from the church when persecution is unleashed upon it, and the church will once again come closer to being what it should be – separate from the world.

I realise persecution will be painful, to put it mildly and to state the glaringly obvious, but this, I am convinced, is the only hope. Knowing my weakness, I dread it. But it may well be God’s way. Consequently, while I understand their concern, I find myself somewhat out of step with believers who endlessly moan about persecution and pray for its removal. Even more resolutely do I

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<sup>10</sup> But not to God: ‘You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit’ (Eph. 2:19-22).

<sup>11</sup> See my *Public Worship* and *Public Worship Notes*.

disagree with their petitioning the State to lift it. It might well be that by persecution God is answering his people's prayer for a recovery of the new covenant. Think of that! While I reject the deliberate courting of persecution, we must stop the present madness – not to say, sinfulness – of soliciting popularity from the world, and coveting the world's help and applause. God doesn't need the world's praise or support! I am bold to say that if believers start to be different to the world, live separated from the world, and churches show a willingness to return to the new covenant, this will in itself lead to persecution, and this will, in turn, advance the further return to the new covenant: a truly virtuous circle.

That is my answer to the question: 'What can we do about throwing off Christendom?'

I realise that this, too, will probably be dismissed as mere hogwash. Or alarmist. But to warn of persecution is not to want it or invite it. There is no need for it. The *ekklēsia* at Corinth had seriously defected from the new covenant but, we may hope, for a time at least it responded to Paul's letters of rebuke, warning and calls for reform. Alas, as for the various *ekklēsias* of Revelation 2 & 3, they, I am afraid, had their candlesticks removed. The lesson from Israel and the *ekklēsias* of the New Testament is patent.

If any readers remain unconvinced, may I close by leaving them with a thought which may cause them to lose some sleep? What if – and in the UK this is not such a laughable suggestion as it would have been a few years back – what if Islam should get its hands on the levers of power in the State? What if the Sharia merchants should replace the present liberal, insipid Christendom hawkers? We in the UK have too long 'enjoyed' the 'protection' of a benign Christendom. What if that summer should give way to winter?

I do not publish this article to close the debate. Rather, I want to provoke it. Reader, what is your answer to the question? How can we believers get free of the Christendom church, and find something at least approximating to the *ekklēsia*? Can we? Will we?