

Why are there so many different churches today?

Part 1

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[00:00:01] I was very glad and a little bit shocked.

Very glad, because there are so many here. A little bit shocked, because when I looked around, as the children were still sitting there especially, it kind of dawned on me, and I've always been thinking of myself as a youngster, that I'm probably above average age.

And that was a bit of a shock. It hasn't happened to me here for quite a while. Now, having said this, the topic we've got is something that is, I think, hopefully interesting for all, but especially for young believers. Why are there so many churches, and which one is right, if any?

I suppose I've, in the draw here, I had the tough one. It's a very puzzling question.

[00:01:02] There were a number of subtitles, or sub-questions to this.

I've mentioned the first two, and then number three is, well, is there a right way to go? Obviously, there are very many different ways today.

Separation and unity, a paradox.

And finally, the place of God's choice. Well, if there is one, where is it?

Now, before I try to give an answer from the Bible to those questions, I'd just like to suggest that there are two ways of looking at the church. And we need to keep those a bit separate. They're both in the Bible, but we need to distinguish. One perspective is to look at the church from God's counsel. [00:02:01] You might say that is, from a high mountaintop, you have God's mind, and you see the church as God sees it.

And then the second question is, well, what is it like practically? And that's what we call the side of man's responsibility.

Now, as to the first, these things have already come up. Brother Hugh has been talking about it and

others. How does God see the church? Well, he sees it as one body, complete, no division in the body. He sees it as the fullness of Christ who fills all in all.

God sees the church headed by Christ.

And all these things are a fact. The other figure is the divine habitation. God sees it as a house, but as a perfect house.

[00:03:01] Not as a house where anything would need to be repaired. A house where the spirit can dwell. And God sees it as the bride of Christ.

And I suggest to you that if we want to learn anything at all about the church, we need to start on that mountaintop before we come down and look round and see what man has actually done to it. Very often, and some of these things have been mentioned, it's quite the opposite. God has made one body. Men have made divisions.

Men are also described as building.

But when man is building, it's not necessarily perfect. It normally isn't. There's a mixture.

Some bring good material. Some bring wood or hay or stubble.

It's a different perspective and it's just as true. [00:04:04] It gets so bad that when Paul writes his last letter, he doesn't call the church the house of God anymore. He talks about a great house.

And in the great house, there's a mixture. Vessels to honour, vessels to dishonour. And if you go to the last book of the Bible, Revelation 2 and 3 gives you an overview of the public testimony of the church. And if you follow that, you find that it actually ends in complete indifference in the state of Laodicea. Now that is the perspective, you might say, from lower down. What has man done in terms of practical testimony?

Now just one point.

I thought you'd enjoy that one. Everything I said before about the divine perspective is still true. [00:05:05] Whatever man does, however many sects man forms, the church is still one body. However insufficient the material, the doctrines that men may bring, the church is still the habitation of God in the spirit. So let's just bear that in mind. I did want you to get this picture wrong.

I suppose everybody has understood that when we talk about the church, we're not talking about a physical building. But this building here is meant to illustrate something. It says there, the church is one body.

But this building here is meant to illustrate something. It says there, the church is in ruins.

Now how can you tell?

[00:06:01] Well, if you had the original plans of the architect, an original photo of what it looked like in the beginning, you could spot the difference.

There used to be a roof. There used to be windows. There used to be a door. And that's all gone.

Now, if we don't realize that the Christian testimony today is in ruins, I don't think that we will understand much about the church at all.

I can't tell you how often this happens. I sometimes have seminars with believers who are interested to learn more about Christ and the church.

And you tell them things and you say, well, actually there is only one church. And someone goes like, no, no, no, in my village there are ten. Then you go on and you say, well, Christ is the head of the church. [00:07:06] And they say, no, actually my church is headed by so-and-so. And so it goes on.

And you have to try and explain, actually we're talking about two different subjects. I'm talking about what the Bible says. You are talking about what people do in your village. Apparently these things are quite different. And that's what we mean when we say the church of God is in ruins.

Here's some evidence. Most of these things have been mentioned before. I was quite stunned by the number. 1,500 Christian denominations.

Over. And it can go down the list. The one pastor of a church concept. The membership idea of some organization. And so on and so forth. Even things are tolerated which perhaps 20, 30 years would not have been tolerated in any Christian church.

[00:08:14] But let's bear in mind, this does not mean that everything ended up differently from what God thought it would. The ruin of the testimony, the Christian testimony, hasn't come by surprise. It was predicted.

And I'd like to give you some examples of this from different writers of the New Testament. And these writers have all spoken about the future. And I haven't found any who have said over the time of the Christian period, things will get better and better. What I do find is that Paul said, after my departure, grievous wolves will come, not sparing the flock.

[00:09:06] He also wrote to Timothy about the last days.

And he didn't say the last days will be brighter days. He said the last days will be difficult days. Now what did Peter say?

Peter said, you know, among the people of Israel, there were false prophets. And so it's going to be among Christians, there will be false teachers. We have been forewarned.

Now what about John then?

Well, John said, it's the last hour. And you want to know how you can tell it's the last hour? The last hour is characterized by many antichrists, many people attacking Christ, going against Christ's glory.

Actually, even of the early church in Ephesus, it was said that they very soon had left their first love. [00:10:06] And they had been in a very good condition before. And I mentioned Laodicea, complete indifference at the end. Now that has been predicted. So we shouldn't be surprised to see it happen.

I'm not saying it doesn't matter. I'm not saying it shouldn't humble us. I'm just saying God knew it in advance.

Now, given all the references here, David and Ruth kindly printed a handout of the complete series. So please check out the references for yourselves.

Now, you might say, well, that's a little bit negative. And what do we do now? If things are in ruin, if the Christian testimony has gone away from what God has said, well, what can we do about it? Now, what I want to suggest to you, and now it's starting to become a bit more positive, is that God has a way. [00:11:09] And however difficult the time is going to get, God will have a way for those who want to go that way. And I just want to show you the principle. If you think of these examples, think of Daniel's friends. They were youngsters. They were far away from home.

And if they didn't live in a time that was a time of ruin, then I don't know who did. Nothing of what God had set up in Jerusalem was still there. The people had been led away. They were surrounded by idolatry.

And they could really say, well, it doesn't work anymore, does it? We can't live our faith here in Babylon.

And what did they do? They remained faithful. [00:12:01] When the image was put up, Daniel's three friends didn't bow. Daniel himself, no longer allowed to pray. Now, how much worse can it get? And what was God's way? God had a way.

It was to remain faithful. And these men have really become monuments to this fact that however bad it gets, God has a way. Think of the Jewish people after the captivity.

They had been led away to Babylon, and then the 70 years were over. Now God had a way for them.

I'm not saying it was an easy way, but God had one. What they had to do is go back to the place of God's choice, to Jerusalem. And they were only a minority, and yet they did exactly that. And you could give other examples. Nehemiah.

[00:13:01] Think of Timothy.

You know, you find this recurring expression, but thou, O man of God.

It's all the same message. God has a way, however difficult it's going to get. Now, let me just give you one or two more verses on this, that God has a way, because I think it's extremely encouraging and important. Take Jude's epistle, and what does it say? Jude talks about the complete apostasy from Christianity.

And what he says in the end is this. But unto him that is able to keep you without stumbling.

Did you get that?

The last time, complete apostasy and without stumbling. And set you with exaltation, blameless before his glory.

[00:14:05] Now, the flip side of this is that if I go wrong, I can't blame the ruin around me. Because the word says actually, he can keep you blameless without stumbling. Now, there have of course been quite a few ideas about what we can do in the time of ruin. One idea is, well, we have to undo the ruin.

That's like taking a bucket and trying to empty the River Nile.

Perhaps it's a noble ambition. You can't undo the ruin of Christianity.

The other natural idea is, well, compromise.

If everybody does it, it's got to be all right. And I believe that that one is just as wrong. [00:15:01] Now, what is God looking for? God is looking for faithfulness in the time of ruin.

Now, I've only got ten minutes left, and I haven't told you anything about what we think that way of God is. Sometimes it may look a little bit like this picture here of the motorway spaghetti junction, where you just wonder, well, which is the way to go?

Some have said, well, go with the flow.

Some have said, well, you've got a choice now. Just take your pick.

Some have said, start a new church.

Now, I firmly believe that all of these are wrong.

Now, what is God's way in the time of ruin?

And perhaps this picture here conveys a little bit of it to us.

[00:16:05] Perhaps the first point in the time of ruin, after we have recognised that it is ruin, is humiliation. We've mentioned a few things where we think many believers sadly go away that is not scriptural. But really, we're not doing that to feel better about ourselves.

You find that, actually, even among the men we mentioned, this was always God's way. Confession and prayer.

Think of Daniel 9. We have sinned.

He didn't say the others.

Think of Ezra 9, Nehemiah 9.

For those who were here last week, they may remember Ezekiel 9. Those who mourned about the condition. And I believe that this is the first step God wants us to go, to actually say, we haven't helped things either.

[00:17:11] But then God wants us to move on.

He wants us to actually try and find out what the way is.

Because there are principles laid down in the Word of God, especially for the last time. And God wants us to study those and to try and follow those.

I had to look for a long time to find a picture of Jerusalem that didn't have the dome of rocks on it, because I wanted one without it.

This picture is to remind you of the scripture in Deuteronomy 12, where God says to the people, actually, when you come into the land, you can't just take your pick. You can't just go where you like. [00:18:01] I've already chosen a place.

Now, there is a bit of a dilemma here, because that place is a unique place. There's only one.

Now, if that means anything to us today, it means that you can't take your pick. God says there is one right way.

Now, in history, how did this happen afterwards?

The people had got into the land. The people fell into idolatry. The people were cast out of the land. Did that change anything about the unique place? Well, it didn't.

When the captivity was over, there was only one place to go, and that was still Jerusalem. It was still the place God has chosen.

[00:19:03] It's helped me a lot that the people who went back to Jerusalem, they were a minority. Now, some could have said to them, well, what do you think of yourselves? Well, they didn't think much of themselves. They thought much of God. And they said, if God has chosen that place, that's where we'd like to be. You actually find the same. There is, again, a unique place, the place where the Lord wants his name to dwell, and that's where Christians, two or three or more, are gathered unto the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, that means they recognize his authority. They want him to be central, and they want him to direct. Now, you can't just say that.

If we just claim we recognize his authority, but we don't at least aim at being in line with the New Testament, with the Bible, [00:20:06] well, that would be a false claim. But the concept is still there, one place where God wants to see believers. Now, that takes us to the question, well, if that one place is there in the New Testament time, what is that place? And these two words had come up, unity and separation, and that has been a problem to some. They said, well, the people who talk very much of unity, they keep mentioning the body of Christ, and these are the same people who talk about separation, and that must be wrong. Now, is it?

Let's see.

There is one body, Ephesians 4 verse 4.

Now, that tells us, I might say, this is the first beacon of two I want to suggest to you that show the way, the unity of the body. [00:21:07] That tells you that you don't need to found a church. You don't need to apply somewhere to become a member, and it means that when you break bread, you break

bread as a member of the brethren, yeah?

Ah, somebody's awake.

You break bread as a member of the body of Christ.

Now, on the other hand, it says in 2 Timothy 2, depart from iniquity.

So that's the second beacon, if you like, separation from evil, different types of it, moral, doctrinal associations, and it has already been mentioned that to do this, you also need, A, a personal matter, and B, you need church discipline. [00:22:01] Now, the Bible really enjoins both.

It says there is the unity. You need to act in a way that is in harmony with it. On the other hand, you are under an obligation to stay away from that which is evil. Now, is that a paradox?

Well, let's just look at some examples.

Coming back to the example of Ezra, you might say, well, yes, they were separate. They went away from Babylon, the seat of idolatry, of course, but where was the unity? Well, let me tell you that they were the ones who built an altar and who sacrificed the 12 he goats and the 12 bullocks. It actually says, for the whole people of Israel.

I've never read of anyone in Babylon who did that there. And I dare say that the only expression of unity you could find was actually among this minority that had gone back to the place of God's choice.

[00:23:13] I want to give you a second example where you find both principles. 1 Corinthians 10, the bread which we break.

There you have it again, beacon one, the one body, unity.

And yet, in that very passage, it says you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the demon's table. It says you can't be associated with a Christian fellowship and with a fellowship that is not compatible with Christian fellowship. So the two principles seem to go together, actually. And a third example is 2 Timothy 2. You find a seal there. You can check it out for yourself. The seal has two sides. The one side is God knows those who are his. [00:24:04] It's a bit sad that we don't always, but God does. That's all who belong to the body of Christ. And then it says, as mentioned, depart from iniquity. Again, very close together, the two principles, each a beacon to guide us through. So let's just revisit the questions.

First one, why are there so many churches today? Well, the simple answer is because the church is in ruins. It was never God's thought.

Second question, who is right and does it matter? Well, God is right, and you and I can be right in the measure that we follow what God tells us.

Is there a right way to go? Does a time come when things get so difficult that you say, no, you can't go the right way? I find that very encouraging. [00:25:02] The Bible says no.

The Bible says there always is.

Number four was separation and unity. Is it a paradox?

Well, I trust we've seen it isn't. These are two guiding principles which help us find our way.

Finally, the place of God's choice, do you know it?

We're not going to give you an address, not telling you where to go or where we think you should go. We're just trying to give you principles, and we trust that you find a place where you can say with a measure of conviction, I hope with full conviction, actually, I believe that this is the place God has shown me, and it is a place where perhaps not all is perfect. As has been said, if you find a church that's perfect, don't join it because it won't be perfect anymore. [00:26:05] Where you have people, things won't be perfect, but I trust you'll be able to find a place where you can gather and you can say, well, I believe here's a desire to actually go that way which God has shown in his word.