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**North Road Chapel (Evangelical)
BIDEFORD**

FORTY MOMENTOUS DAYS

“And after eight days again His disciples were within, and Thomas with them: then came Jesus, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, Peace be unto you. Then saith He to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold My hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into My side: and be not faithless, but believing. And Thomas answered and said unto Him, My Lord and my God.”
(John 20:26-28)

The next post-resurrection appearance of the Lord occurred on the second observance of the Christian Sabbath. John 20:26 begins *“And after eight days”*. Commentators and linguists are generally agreed that this term was used among the Jews to express a period of exactly one week; the time from the first day of one week, to the first day of the next week being counted as eight days. Such an interpretation is consistent with Scripture, and further emphasises the vital doctrine of the Church’s weekly gathering.

The sixth appearance of the risen Christ fell on the Lord’s Day. No manifestations are recorded during the intervening time. His whereabouts and activities are not documented in Scripture, so speculation is unprofitable. This absence of detail in itself implies further information regarding the Lord’s resurrection body. Whilst it was indeed a material and corporeal form – the very same body in which He had lived, died and been buried – it could now vanish from sight in the same manner as it appeared. It was a body freed from the restrictions of place and time, which had no need of food or natural nourishment.

Thomas’s location in the course of that week is also unknown, though he was clearly out of regular contact with his fellow disciples. He was absent from their first Sabbath assembly, though some meeting must have happened subsequently, when they told

him, “*We have seen the Lord*” (John 20:25). To which their erstwhile companion replied: “*Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe*”. In consequence of his withdrawal, Thomas had grown quite sceptical, to the point of mistrusting the ten men with whom he had worked for over three years. During Thomas’s week of seclusion, the Lord knew where he was, and his state of heart; yet the Saviour never went and sought him out privately. On any one of those six days, Christ could have gone and dealt with this erring man – but did not do so – not until Thomas was **assembled on the Lord’s Day**. “*And after eight days again His disciples were within, and Thomas with them: **then** came Jesus*” (John 20:26). Divine order and regulation is again apparent. The Sabbath is a day apart; sanctified unto **God**, to be observed by man. The day was divinely appointed **for man** – for his spiritual good and blessing (cf Mark 2:27). As the believer sets this day aside and assembles in the Lord’s name, so does the Lord come into the midst to bless. Here is further pertinent teaching concerning the Kingdom of God – the central place of the Lord’s Day in the divine pattern for blessing.

The Scriptures give certain hints and pointers to the character of Thomas. From what is revealed, he seems to be a man with a gloomy disposition and pessimistic outlook; more ready to receive bad news than good, and quick to jump to unfavourable conclusions. Upon the death of Lazarus, the Lord resolved to visit the two bereaved sisters – a journey which would take Him back to the hostile region of Judea. “*His disciples say unto Him, Master, the Jews of late sought to stone Thee; and goest Thou thither again?*” (John 11:8). They were well aware of the risks involved in such an undertaking. “*Then said Thomas, which is called Didymus, unto his fellowdisciples, Let us also go, that we may die with Him*” (v.16). Here was Thomas’s melancholy and almost fatalistic forecast – such was the temperament of the man.

Further to which, he had a **wrong standard of belief**. Consider again his words in John 20:25: “*Except I shall see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into His side, I will not believe*”. This was an unreasonable and impertinent demand which belied an erroneous and conditional type of belief. Thomas already had the avowed testimony of ten men who had actually seen the Lord; to reject their evidence and insist upon his own sense of touch was absurd. One writer says: “he would trust his ten fingers, but not the word of ten apostles”. He seems almost to glory in his doubts as though they were a superior quality in his character. “I am not believing such a story as you ten fellows are propounding! I want far more proof! In fact, unless I may physically put my finger into the nail prints, and my hand into the wound in His side, I simply cannot believe”. Perhaps Thomas prided himself in such impressive-sounding talk. There is a note of **rationalism** in his approach, which is still common today. There are many who incredulously ask: “Must I believe the Bible; and merely accept that which is put over by preachers? No! I want to **see** what I am going to believe in”. In this, men adopt a wrong standard of belief. They make their own reason and senses the governing factors, instead of the one and only spiritual criterion, which is **faith** – heart-belief in the sure testimony of the Word of God.

The primary cause of Thomas’s scepticism was his absence from the gathering of the disciples. Had he been present on the first Lord’s Day, this situation would never have arisen. There can be no doubt that if only men and women were gathered beneath the sound preaching of the Word of God on the Sabbath, the rationalism and humanism which blight the church today would not be nearly so prevalent. Many will retort “But I can meditate on my own in private” – this is precisely what Thomas had been ineffectually doing. Others will protest “I can worship God just as well in the

garden, or in the pursuit of my chosen hobby. I don't need the regimentation of regular Church attendance". The truth set out in this New Testament account is that the Lord met with the assembled ten – but **not** with Thomas. God has ordained the corporate meetings of His people, and the exposition of His Word in their midst through the foolishness of preaching (cf 1 Corinthians 1:21); this ordinance He has pledged to bless. The neglect of this **means of grace** will commonly confirm the absentee in their state of spiritual lethargy, which quickly develops into unbelief.

The foregoing statement requires some qualification – for there are believers in locations of great spiritual barrenness, where it is impossible to find a congregation among whom the truth is preached, and the Headship of Christ realised and openly acknowledged. In such circumstances it is different, for Christ expressly forbids fellowship with apostate Churches (cf 2 Corinthians 6:14-18), and gives stern warning against false teachers. Saints who find themselves in such a situation may have to tread a lonely pathway – but God's grace will ever prove sufficient. The grave declension of the present day necessitates this qualification – but isolation is not the norm in the spiritual Kingdom of God, and wherever it is humanly possible, though considerable distance be involved, Christians must endeavour to be corporately gathered on the Sabbath. For it is there that the Lord meets with His people in a special and real way; invariably it is there that the blessing comes.

When at length Thomas met with the others, and the Lord was present among them, how did He deal with this doubting, unbelieving man? When the risen Christ suddenly appeared, exactly as the ten had previously described, Thomas may well have expected a strong rebuke. But no such reproof came. The Lord's salutation was "*Peace be unto you*", and in utter tenderness, He even stooped to Thomas's rash demand: "*Thomas, Reach hither thy*

finger, and behold My hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into My side: and be not faithless, but believing” (John 20:27). What love and understanding is here displayed – and yet how wounding to Thomas to hear his own words repeated by the Saviour. The Lord knew all that had been in his heart and mind from the beginning; He knew his whereabouts through the past week, and his secret thoughts afar off (cf Psalm 139:2), and Thomas was now made painfully aware of it!

The harsh reprimand never came. Thomas had been very rationalistic in his deductions, but the Lord made no appeal to his reasoning mind, coming instead in grace and love. Why should this be? Thomas’s trouble was unbelief, and this is not a disease of the head, but a sad malady of the heart. In this case **love** is far more effective than **logic**. The account is told of a certain Christian who was very concerned for a colleague with whom he worked. Time and again he tried to convince this hardened sceptic of the truth of Christianity, but all his arguments and discussions were to no avail. At length, after much time in prayer for his workfellow, this Christian was moved to emotion, and with tears said simply, “I am deeply concerned for your salvation”. That was all that was said, but those words were the means of melting a hard heart, and bringing the unbeliever to know the Lord. The approach of the Saviour to Thomas is a great lesson and example in how the saints should deal with doubters and deniers. It is instruction pertaining to the Kingdom of God, all contained in these 40 days of post-resurrection ministry.

Consider the effect which this loving approach had upon Thomas: “*And Thomas answered and said unto Him, My Lord and My God*” (John 20:28). He forgot his former insistence, and never availed himself of the opportunity which Christ gave to enact the proposed examination of His wounds. Thomas was rendered speechless, except for this wonderful confession of faith – “***My Lord and My God***”. One commentator said that the beauty of the Bible lay in its

pronouns: “It is not that that we can affirm that there is a God, rather can we say ‘This God is **our** God for ever and ever’”. Thus it was with Thomas, who made confession and profession with all the boldness of a living faith.

Let every reader examine themselves. The message of salvation is sounded forth again from these pages – not with logical arguments to convince the sceptical mind, but with gospel simplicity. Not with a word of reprimand, but with the truth of a crucified and risen Saviour, whose never-fading wounds declare His finished, sacrificial work. Still he says: “*Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*” (Matthew 11:28). “*And the Spirit and the [Church] say, Come*”, uniting in the glorious invitation. Would that all into whose hands these words fall might share the testimony of Thomas, “And cry, with joy unspeakable, ‘Thou art my Lord, my God!’”

W. H. Molland
(transcribed by R. J. Steward)

Doubts and Fears

Do not deceive yourselves by imagining that there may be something rather gracious in your doubts and fears; your unsettled and unassured frame of mind; as if it betokened humility and a low esteem of yourselves. Beware lest God see in it only a low esteem of His Son Jesus Christ. Beware of guile. May not your staggering, hesitating faith be but half-faith after all? May it not be that you are unwilling to be wholly Christ’s and to have Christ wholly yours? Can that be pleasing to God? “*What shall we do that we might work the works of God?*” asked the Jews, and the Lord replied “*This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him who He has sent*”. Therefore let us believe; and let us be “*strong in the faith, giving glory to God.*”

Robert Candlish

Attending Places of Entertainment

“As I look abroad I am grieved and have great heaviness of heart at what I see among professing Christians. A very serious matter concerns the amusements engaged in by them. I see it publicly stated, by some who call themselves God’s people, that it is good for them to attend the theatre, so that the tone and character of the productions may be improved. The suggestion is about as sensible as if we were bidden to pour a bottle of lavender water in the main sewer to improve its aroma.

If the church is now to raise the tone of the world by imitating it, things have strangely altered since the day when our Lord said, “*Come out from among them...and touch not the unclean thing*”. Is Heaven to descend to the infernal lake to raise its tone? Such has been the moral condition of the theatre for many a year that it has become too bad for mending; and if it were mended it would soon become corrupt again. Pass by it with averted gaze, for the house of the strange woman is there. It has not been my lot ever to enter a theatre during the performance of a play, but I have seen enough when I have come home from journeys at night, while riding past the theatres, to make me pray that our sons and daughters may never go within their doors. It must be a strange school for virtue which attracts the harlot and the debauched. It is no place for a Christian if it is best appreciated by the irreligious and worldly.

If our church members fall into the habit of frequenting the theatre, we shall soon have them going much further in the direction of vice, and they will lose all relish for the ways of God. If theatre-going became general among professing Christians, it would be the death of piety. Yet one finds the taste for such things increasing on every hand. We cannot even enter places once dedicated to science and art without finding ourselves in the presence of something like a theatrical performance. Such gimmickry, though in itself harmless

enough, has helped to foster the taste which leads ultimately to the theatre and its surroundings.

Who can suppose amusements surrounded with the seductions of vice to be fit recreation for the pure mind? Who could draw near to God after sitting to admire the performances of the debauched? When behaviour is growing every day more lax and licentious, shall believers lower the standard of their lives? If they do so their spiritual power will depart, and their reason for existence will be over. If there could be a time when Christians might relax their rigidity, it surely is not now when the very air is tainted with pollution, and when our streets ring with the newsboys' cries vending filthy papers.

It is profoundly saddening to hear how people talk about acts of sin nowadays; how young men and women without blushing talk of deeds which deprave and destroy, as though they were trifles, or themes for joking. It is a great pity that the ends of justice should require the publishing of unsavoury details. As for those who not only commit lewdness, but who take pleasure in those who do it – "*O my soul, come not thou into their secret*". My heart often cries, "*Oh that I had wings like a dove! For then would I fly away, and be at rest*".

It will certainly be disastrous for the church of God if her members should become impure. In these days we must be doubly strict, lest any looseness of conduct should come in among us. Actual sin must be repressed with a strong hand, but even the appearance of evil must be avoided. My dear brothers and sisters, whatever your deficiencies, be pure in heart and lip and life. Never indulge an evil imagination, or speak about things which are unclean. Let them not once be named among you, as becometh saints. A lascivious glance, a doubtful word, a questionable act must be strenuously

avoided. Anything and everything that verges upon the unchaste must be rejected.

Only the pure in heart shall see God. We are all subject to human passions, and this wretched flesh of ours is too easily fascinated by those who would pander to its indulgences. In seconds the soul may be lead into captivity. Watch unto prayer, especially in these evil days. Cry, "*Lead us not into temptation*", and if the prayer is sincere you will also keep far from doubtful places. Make a covenant with your eyes that you will not look upon that which pollutes, and stop your ears from hearing about it. Watch your lips lest they spread corruption when speaking of sin. I am not afraid that you will step directly into gross sin, but that you may take a very small step on the road that leads to it. Then it will only be a matter of time.

Beware of the leaven of worldly pleasure, for its working is silent but sure, and a little of it will leaven the whole lump. Keep up the distinction between a Christian and an unbeliever and make it clearer every day. Have you heard of the minister who complained to the devil for running off with one of his church members? The fiend replied, 'I found him on my premises, and therefore I claimed him'. I also, may say 'Stop!' to the arch-deceiver, but it will be no use if he finds you on his territory. Every fowler claims the bird which he finds in his own net. This is the argument: 'I caught him in my net, and therefore he is mine'. We shall try in vain to dispute this right of property with the arch-enemy, for possession is nine points of the law.

Avoid the appearance of evil. 'But we must not be too rigid', says one. There is no fear of that in these days. You will never go too far in holiness, nor become too like your Lord Jesus. If anybody accuses you of being too strict and precise, do not grieve, but try to deserve the charge. I cannot suppose that at the last great day our

Lord Jesus Christ will say to anyone, ‘You were not worldly enough. You were too jealous over your conduct, and did not sufficiently conform to the world’. No, my brethren, such a wrong is impossible. He who said, “*be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect*”, has set before you a standard beyond which you can never go. ‘Well, but’, says one, ‘are we to have no enjoyments?’ My dear friend, the enjoyments which are prepared for Christians are many and great, but they never include sin and folly. Do you call vice and folly, amusements?

When I go down into the country I see farmers carrying out great pails of hogwash for the swine, and I never grudge them their dainty meal. I do not protest against their having a full trough twice over. But do I partake with them? Certainly not! It never struck me that there was anything desirable in their rich mixture. I have no doubt that it has a fine flavour to the creatures for whom it is prepared. It certainly seems to be appreciated. If worldlings enjoy the pleasures of the world and sin, let them have them, poor souls. They have nothing else to enjoy. They have no paradise for the everlasting future. They have no Christ and Saviour to lean their heads upon. Let them have that which makes them happy while they can be happy. But when I am talking to the children of God I adopt another tone, since for you these things have no charms, if you truly tasted the high delights of fellowship with God.

‘But’, you say, ‘I would greatly enjoy a little of the pleasures of sin’. Judge yourselves then, to be falsely called the children of God. “*Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin*”, by which is not meant that he does not fall into sin through weakness, but that it is not his desire or plan or delight to commit sin. It is not his way, because he is a new creature, and he finds his joy and pleasure in living as near to God as possible.”

C. H. Spurgeon

A Play-House Church

Imitating, false and make-believe religion always follows hard on the heels of true religion. The history of man shows this prevailing pattern, that where there has been given some measure of spiritual light and truth to a people, the following generations degenerate into mere form and ceremony. But God, in Divine Providence, has ruled that this process shall not continue forever; there must and shall come the final and last ‘departing’ from the right ways of the Lord.

In view of God’s account of man’s history and “*the signs of the times*”, I firmly believe that this present ‘church-going’ play-church generation is not just another age of apostates – but next to the last, if not the last one before the Lord’s return. Whether it is the last or not, we now see the complete profession of so-called worshippers of God sunk into a hideous caricature of what it ought to be. And whether or not we are in the final apostasy, it behoves us to recognise the fact that we **are** in a serious departure from the faith once delivered, and from the life-pattern of a God-fearing people.

The true worshippers in the “*new and living way*” were manifested first as an humble **God-fearing** people. They were born of the Spirit, ‘new creatures in Christ’; they were “*filled with the Spirit*” and manifested the “*unity of the Spirit*”; and consequently they sought ‘everyone his brother’s welfare’. They were dead to the love of sin, and made ‘alive unto righteousness’. Being now cut loose from this “*present evil world*” and its course, they found themselves to be only strangers and sojourners in this world, with ‘no certain dwelling place’. Their whole affections and desires were daily set on that other country. Therefore, they wanted as little to do with the world as possible. By contrast to such a humble people, the present

generation has **no** resemblance to those harmless pilgrims “*of whom the world was not worthy*” (Hebrews 11:38).

In ancient times God described a people who were continuing **outwardly** the worship of their God-fearing fathers. Concerning them He said, “*This people draw near Me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour Me, but have removed their heart far from Me; and their fear toward Me is taught by the precept of men*” (Isaiah 29:13). These people occupied the place and position of being – by profession – the **only** true worshippers of God in the earth! But this worship had degenerated into outward form only; for truth and spirit, they had substituted an empty show of long prayers and meaningless words. They had actually used the sacred things of God outwardly to make a play-house of make-believe religion, [which resulted in] their Babylonian captivity. Then under Zerubbabel the temple was rebuilt with a partial restoration of the true worship, followed again by another fall, and the last rebuilding of the temple by Herod under the Romans.

It was at this time that Jesus the Messiah came and found the people and temple-worshippers in the same state of play-church worship that had been so displeasing to God. However, both the people and the temple priest, with their rulers, were blind to their hypocritical state – still pretending to be the only true worshippers of God and keepers of His Law. It was under these circumstances that certain of the scribes and Pharisees came up to Jesus with this question: “*Why do Thy disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? For they wash not their hands when they eat bread*” (Matthew 15:1-2). Here erupts an issue of the ages – to show the difference “*between him that serveth God and him that serveth Him not*” (Malachi 3:18). Notice carefully the proposed issue between the play-house worshippers, and the followers of Christ, namely, a petty ruling or tradition of the temple rulers pertaining to washing hands! The false, make-believe religion, in all ages, is noted by the importance

attached to its outward, frivolous expressions of a “*form of godliness*”. It always omits the “*weightier matters of the law*”, and substitutes the easy, man-pleasing imitation.

Note now the reply of Him who brings in the “*new and living way*”; “*But He answered and said unto them, Why do you transgress the commandment of God by your traditions?*” He then goes back into their own history and repeats the rebuke of God to “*this people*”. “*Ye hypocrites, well did Esais prophesy of you, saying: This people draweth nigh unto Me with their mouth, and honoureth Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. But in vain they do worship Me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men*” (Matthew 15:7-9). In this one concise statement, our Lord sums up the revealing evidence of a deceptive, make-believe religion. Its adherents do not openly despise but rather profess to believe in God, by their coming to His service in pretence of worship. They draw near, or present themselves by bodily exercise, and even by using orthodox words spoken by the tongue – from *the mouth*”. Thus do they pretend, or go through a ceremonial service – to honour God – from “*the lips*” only.

The apostle warned, that among other departures, professing Christians would be lovers of themselves, high minded, lovers of pleasure more than lovers of God – having a **form** of godliness, but denying the power thereof. This prediction clearly identifies these characters as zealous ‘church-goers’, pretending to be godly followers of Christ and His teaching. But they are here exposed to be imitators with a form only; and by the fruits of their own formal profession, they manifest themselves to be devoid of the true grace of God.

A form can be very misleading, especially when it resembles the real thing. One may be baptised and become identified with a professing Church of Christ, take communion and otherwise engage

in all the usual marks and activities of a Christian and still be ‘far from God’ in the heart. That was the Lord’s chief objection to the church at Laodicea. She had all the outward form of a true gospel church – as she thought. It could not be said that she was cold, because she was noted for zeal in formal worship; but neither was she hot, or fervently motivated from the heart in the things of godliness; but because she [gave] the outward appearance of a living, loving, true body of believers – when she was **not**, the Lord said He would spew her out of His mouth. Even to honest men and women, there is nothing more detestable than a sham and a cheat, a hypocritical deception, a counterfeit or a phoney – which pretends to be the real thing. In fact, such pretence borders on ‘betraying the Master with a kiss’.

The play-church exposes itself especially in the matter of Christian fellowship. The early saints were noted for their genuine love and care for one another. This is a Christian grace that cannot be imitated beyond detection; there are of course, many false substitutes, but they fall short in every detail. There is so much today going under the name of ‘Christian fellowship’ that is nothing more than a cheap caricature of the true. Professing Christians often meet together to eat and drink, then refer to this as ‘having a time of fellowship’! Worldly and carnal men and women gather to hear some preacher, and call it ‘fellowship in the Lord’. Others who are as far apart as the poles in the faith of God’s elect, yet say they ‘enjoy loving fellowship’! Many ‘church members’ can saturate their hearts and minds with a TV show in worldly company, then claim to have fellowship for an hour or two on Sunday. The vast majority of church members and church-goers can attend their regular church meetings and feel they have what is called ‘church fellowship’ – by which is meant an unidentified ‘something’, that is produced by virtue of the church congregation itself.

All these, and more, are make-believe substitutes of a true fellowship that is in Christ Jesus and with His children. The fellowship of God, the fellowship of the saints, the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ cannot be created, organised or contained, nor can it be imitated closely enough to pass for the real thing.

Now the fearful word comes. After our Lord had told how they worshipped Him with the mouth, from the lips, the disciples later said to Him: Do you know that the Pharisees were offended at what you said? Then our Lord “*answered and said, Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted, shall be rooted up! Let them alone, they be blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch*”.

How many today who are following the play-church religion would admit that **they** are guilty of a make-believe profession? According to the account of our Lord, there were none of those on the ‘left side’ who admitted to failing to carry out His teaching. He then told them they had made a vain show of their profession in a mere play-house religion. As James says of another class: ‘You say you have faith, that you are sound and orthodox in doctrine and practice – yet you will not even go out of your way to help a brother in need; you have nothing more than a dead, make-believe religion! You pretend to fear God, but the devils do as much, and your fear is the kind that is ‘taught by the precept (or teaching) of men’.

We may, indeed, even boasting, tell how the Lord has blessed our churches and ministers, how He has enabled them to build and enlarge their membership, etc. – but “*every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted, shall be rooted up*”. His word has never failed yet, as daily demonstrated in all the religious activities and works of men and women over the land.

[There is still a small remnant who] understand what is involved in this ‘falling away’ from the faith; others may wish to have some specific things pointed out. The subject of Christian fellowship has been mentioned. Another serious departure took place when ministers failed to declare “*all the counsel of God*”, to warn against sin in the household, and the necessity of a regenerated membership. The pastors and the church working for a large membership receive those who show no evidence of grace or a spiritual change; modern, unscriptural methods are used to influence people to ‘join’, including overtures to youth, and receiving for baptism little children as young as seven years old; all violating the principle of **believer’s** baptism and a **regenerated** church membership. Such carnal professors continue a carnal life; divorcing and remarrying, with many other loose-living patterns in the parents and children. The women follow too much the world’s society in forwardness and immodest apparel, usurping authority over the brethren, thus contributing in so many ways to departure from God’s order in the family and in the churches.

An hierarchical order has developed, similar to what has always existed in the denominations. Ministers who are to be servants, have been exalted to a higher order; too much is made of ordination or the setting apart of servants in the local body; the preacher visiting the most churches is esteemed the most popular, hence there has developed an unhealthy, God-dishonouring condition with many related irregularities so contrary to the simplicity in Christ.

The modern movement to become popular and friendly with the world is reflected in the thinking and activities of the people, manifesting much pride, envying and jealousies with its fruits. Too much is spent on buildings and their upkeep, attaching a carnal and an unholy worshiping of the premises – not knowing that it is no part of the spiritual ‘house of God’ – even adopting the practice of

honouring with memorials and giving the ‘church’ a man’s name in his memory, etc.

In the absence of a God-fearing worship and fellowship, many other un-Christian practices have come into the churches and the people, such as celebration of Christmas and Easter. To these are added all manner of events and anniversaries which cater to the whole play-church program, essentially appealing to the “*lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life*” which “*is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away and the lust thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever*” (1 John 2:16-17).

It was the faithful saints of the Early Church who were warned of any departure from the faith; and it is to these people in the Last Times that Christ and His apostles warned concerning ‘The Apostasy’ (cf 2 Thessalonians 2:3). This is the reason it becomes a very solemn and fearful thing, for any such people, who have enjoyed this favour of heaven in being His true witnesses in the earth – to “*fall from their steadfastness*” and “*go a whoring from under their God*” (Hosea 4:12). It has been His people that God rebuked for ‘playing the harlot’, and it was she He warned: “*How is the faithful city become a harlot! It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it; but now murderers*” (Isaiah 1:21). In times like these, when every brand of false religion is being offered and sold to the world, it is nothing short of appalling and horrifying to see a people, known to have once lived uprightly and contended for the faith, to depart from it – but the apostasy is here! This generation does not realise that it is following the ideas invented by Rome, continued by Protestants, and perpetuated by modern Baptists [and many others]. Surely “*all that will live godly*” and remain “*steadfast in the faith*”, are facing very serious times.

W. J. Berry
from *The Old Faith Contender* (1978)

Editorial

What is **false religion**? In answering such a question, the average Christian could quite easily point out the diverse cults, sects and systems which proliferate all over the world. These can be readily identified by certain features: they all “*have inherited lies, vanity and things wherein there is no profit*” and man-made ‘deities’ which “*are no gods*” (Jeremiah 16:19-20). They go under names and titles which belie their erroneous origins; their founders and propagators are earthly, fallible, long-dead men; they promote entirely alien views concerning life, death and eternity. In every case they are characterised by a radical variance from the Truth. When held up to the ultimate standard of “*the Law and...the Testimony; they speak not according to this word...because there is no light in them*” (Isaiah 8:20). No right-thinking Christian could fail to make a positive identification here.

But the definition of ‘false religion’ is not limited to those systems of belief which are called by different names, or worship foreign gods. It includes **all** religious forms that fall short of the Divine standard. A supreme measure of Truth and orthodoxy is given in the Bible. There is not a scale of relative merit upon which the world’s religions may be ranked, but rather the sword-like Word of God which divides them all into two categories – true or false.

All falsehood and deception is dangerous to the people of God. It was the ploy of the Devil from the very outset, and continues to be his chief tactic (cf John 8:44). Most perilous of all are fallacies in matters of **faith and practice**; Paul for example stresses the dire consequences of changing “*the truth of God into a lie*”, and worshipping the creature more than the Creator (cf Romans 1:25). It is in this area that the Adversary is particularly active, striving to introduce error where it will be most injurious to the saints. His

object is to make them believe that which is in fact a lie, and thus turn them from “*pure religion and undefiled*”, to false religion.

If a forgery is to be successful and a victim defrauded, the counterfeit must be realistic and believable, and as close to genuineness as possible. For this reason, outlandish religious orders, and the heretical excesses of ‘other faiths’ present less of a risk to the child of God, as they can be quickly identified, and actively avoided. But Satan has more insidious and deceptive weapons in his arsenal – forms of religion which outwardly resemble Christianity, and seem accurate in many particulars, yet fall short of the Biblical pattern in other respects. These too, for all their superficial orthodoxy, are **false religions**, and present a greater hazard for their admixture of part-truth.

Take for example, the religion practised in numerous nominal churches throughout the land, and popularly called ‘Christianity’. Secular commentators believe it to be the modern successor to the first-century system described in the New Testament; and many of its adherents and attendees think so too. Yet it does not worship the true God, but an alternative being, described as a detached, impotent and indulgent benefactor, who loves indiscriminately, connives at sin, and makes no demands of his people. It does not read the Bible, but another version and form of words which bear no resemblance to the Divine Original. It does not follow Christ, but the creeds, notions and opinions of men – men who unworthily assume such titles as ‘Bishop’, ‘Reverend’, ‘Priest’, and the like. Thus, “*laying aside the commandment of God [they] hold the tradition of men*” (Mark 7:8). This is not true religion, but a **false** system, going by the name of Christianity, and thereby deceiving many.

Thankfully through the mercies of God, there are saints in these days who see the falsehood in ‘established’, national churches, and

heed the command of Scripture to separate themselves from such parody and dissimulation (cf Revelation 18:4). However, a still more subtle system of false religion exists, which can find expression even in those assemblies which might be called ‘independent’, ‘evangelical’ or ‘reformed’. Indeed it blighted the Church soon after its institution in the early years A.D. Namely – that sort of Christianity which consists in the externals of religion, and comprises all the forms of godliness, but lacks power (cf 2 Timothy 3:5), knowledge (cf Romans 10:2) and obedience (cf James 1:22). Such was the case at Sardis, which commanded good opinion and popular acclaim, having a name to ‘live’: and yet was ‘dead’ (cf Revelation 3:1). Similarly, the Laodicean church considered themselves to be rich and wanting for nothing, whilst being spiritually the very opposite of its boasts (cf Revelation 3:17). It is sadly possible for respectable local churches to pursue this false religion of ‘**unreality**’, under the guise of Christianity, and remain deluded.

There are though, some unmistakable symptoms of this pretentiousness. A lack of **consistency** is inevitable. Professions of this kind quickly wane when away from the routine of public worship, and the comfort of church meetings. The rampant worldliness of so many who take the name ‘Christian’, and their unashamed love of the world and its things (cf 1 John 2:15) is suggestive of a disingenuous claim to faith. Those who are ‘saintly’ on Sundays only, may not be ‘saints’ at all.

Artificial religion is also evidenced by a shortage of **continuance**. When a child of God has come to their position through regeneration and conviction, and by the uphill path of ‘growth in grace’, they will not quit it for any price. Having bought the truth so dearly, they will “*sell it not*” (Proverbs 23:23). By contrast, those who lack this reality of belief can, with alarming rapidity, change their views completely. Thus it is not unusual today, to hear

of whole congregations shifting from one denomination to another, without hesitation or complaint, moving from pretended orthodoxy to undisguised error.

Biblical **conformity** is the other component invariably missing from the imitation. The condition of every Christian – nominal or genuine – may be determined by their attitude to Holy Scripture. Either it is to them authoritative and imperative, demanding their obedience, exciting their adoration, and becomes their sole, absolute rule in faith and practice. Or it is regarded as a lesser work, containing certain useful guidelines, which may be interpreted and applied at man’s discretion, supplemented with articles and confessions from other sources as tradition may dictate. The true children of God are manifested by their **submission to the Word of God**.

Conscious of the multiplicity of religious practices that existed around her, a concerned woman once asked the Lord how “*men ought to worship*”. His timeless answer applies in every age and place: “*the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship Him*” (John 4:23). But this begs a further question: “*What is truth?*” an enquiry answered elsewhere by the Saviour, who prayed to the Father concerning His people “*Sanctify them through Thy Truth: Thy Word is Truth*” (John 17:17). God must be worshipped in the prescribed, Biblical way, and **that alone**.

Falseness of religion is a continual and ongoing threat for every believer, and in its more subtle forms, spiritual duplicity continues to invade the churches. One sure way exists whereby they may be guarded against, and spared from, such an imposture: the Lord says, “*observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.*” However great the challenges the Divine charge presents, it is upon this vital prerequisite that the glorious promise hangs: “*and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world*” (Matthew 28:20).