

Two Questions

History and experience teach the same lesson. There are two questions that need to be faced and answered. The first is: What is the Church? And the second is: What is a Christian?

It can be safely said that failure to arrive at a correct answer to these questions results in confusion and decay. Some see such a claim as extreme. Is it?

What is the Church?

Some provide an all-inclusive answer to this question. They say that Jesus died to repair mankind's broken relationship with God. He has done that. As a result all of mankind now belongs to him. We all are members of his church. It is true some do not

yet own or follow the teaching Jesus gave. At present they may follow a different set of beliefs and morals. But it is what Jesus has done that matters, and not what we believe. Thus in due time we will all be embraced by him no matter what belief system, philosophy or religion we follow.

Others provide a narrower definition. They think the church consists of all who claim to be Christian. So it does not matter, they say, if you are Anglican, Coptic, Free Church, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Protestant or Roman Catholic. These are just different expressions of the same body.

And yet others provide a more precise answer to this essential question. In the *Westminster Larger Catechism* of 1647 we are informed that "the visible church is a society of all such as in all ages and places of the world do profess the true religion and of their children" (*Answer to Question 61*). In the *Geneva Catechism* of 1545 the Church is described as "The body and society of believers whom God has

predestined to eternal life" (*Answer to Question 90*).

What emerges in these definitions is an emphasis on faith. There is something specific which believers believe (*the true religion*). There is also something specific which a believer enjoys. He or she is predestined to life by God. In other words the true Church is made up of people within whom a change is wrought by God. The change is directly related to his purpose. In eternity he chose that he would have from amongst mankind a people who belong to him. Moreover his choice was definite in that it includes specific individuals. This is the theme the apostle Paul takes up in his letter to the Christians of Ephesus.

Now some hate this narrower definition of the church. They find it too challenging and it unsettles them. However ultimately it is not our feelings that are decisive. Rather it is what God has revealed. So the key thing is to discover what the Bible teaches. It is there alone that we find what it is that God wants us

to know and believe. We are not to rely on our own ideas or wisdom. We are to let God's written word assess the accuracy or otherwise of them. Put another way, we are to recognise that God has appointed that his word is to rule in all matters of belief and conduct.

It should come as no surprise then to discover what the Church of England officially teaches about the church. "The visible Church of Christ" we are told in Article 19 of the Thirty Nine Articles, "is a congregation of faithful men in which the pure Word of God is preached." The term 'men' is used generically and therefore includes all people, male and female. More importantly we should appreciate how the word is qualified. We do not find here a reference to all people irrespective of what they think or believe. Instead we are informed that the Church is made up of 'faithful' people. Men and women, that is, of faith.

This begs a significant question: What is their faith? What is its content? The article points us to the answer. It is that which we find

revealed in the 'Word of God'. And, please note, that term is also qualified. It is preceded by the word 'pure'. And thus we are reminded of a passionate concern every true believer is to have. It is to see the people of God own a proper understanding of God's written Word.

Archbishop Cranmer and his colleagues were not content that we should let our own understanding rule the day. Our thinking and knowledge of matters Divine is, they argued, to be ruled by and defined by what God has revealed.

It is at this point we do well to note two other aspects of the church. Article 19, as well as highlighting the preaching of the pure Word of God as an essential feature of the Church, points to a proper administration of (1) the sacraments (*baptism and the Lord's Supper*) and (2) discipline. Some object that the Article does not explicitly mention discipline. They accept that preaching and the sacraments are given as fundamental features of Christ's Church but they argue that the English Reformers differ from the continental reformers

in that they did not underline the necessity for discipline as was done elsewhere. However such thinking sidesteps the fact that discipline is an implicit theme in the article. The second part of it makes an explicit reference to the fact that the churches of Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch and Rome fell into error in matters of both ceremony and faith. A careful reading of *Articles 20 and 21*, the *Homilies*, and the Creeds (most obviously the creed called *Athanasian*) show that discipline is a third feature of the Church of Jesus Christ alongside the preaching of the pure Word of God and the proper administration of the sacraments.

What is a Christian?

In every generation this question arises. It is essential that we have a right definition. Why is it essential? Because our individual and corporate well-being are closely bound up with how we define a Christian.

During the middle decades of the 20th century - we may highlight the 1950s and 60s especially - this issue came to the fore amongst evangelicals. That is not to say it

was not an important question at other times. Like our first question, this is always a matter about which we and all professing Christians need to be clear. So how would you define a Christian.

There are two elements that need to be stressed. They have to do with belief and experience. Both must go hand in hand. They belong together.

Thus, as has already been stated, there are fundamental truths to be believed. The Athanasian Creed reminds us of the need to be clear about (1) who God is and (2) who Jesus Christ is. There is one God (not three) who exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is fully God and man. The eternal Son became a man in the womb of Mary, was born, lived a perfect life, took the sins of his people upon himself and bore the punishment for them so that all who have faith in him might enjoy forgiveness, reconciliation with God and eternal life.

There are also experiences to be enjoyed. Three should be especially noted. Christians (1) know

conviction of sin, (2) repentance, and (3) new life as result of a new birth. As a result they love God for who he is and what he has done for them. They also love his Word (which speaks of his works and contains his promises). Furthermore they desire to know these things more.

Belief and experience go together. A wedge is not to be driven between them. Nor should people shy away from seeking to answer the two questions we have addressed (albeit briefly) above.

Clarity on what is the Church and who is a Christian leads to happiness and stimulates useful, productive service in both the church and world.