

IDENTIFYING THE TRUE CHURCH

THE Church of God, wherever it is established in any part of the world, is never divided but one in faith, fellowship, love and in preaching God's word – the truth. Jesus Christ was fully aware that Christianity, which he founded by the power of God, would in process of time be counterfeited by some people at the instance of Satan, the arch-enemy of God and man. And so, he did not leave his disciples without setting out the marks by which his true Church could be identified.

In the first place, we wish to correct the wrong view of some Christians who refer to a building as a church. One of the definitions given by The Catholic Encyclopedic Dictionary is that a church is "a place of Christian worship". Very often we come across publications stating that a certain amount of money has been earmarked or contributed for the building of a church. Or that the foundation stone of a new church to be built at a cost of £10,000 or so, has been or is to be laid by such and such reverend gentleman. Also, we find some people pointing at a building and saying, "This is our church."

The Bible does not refer to a house as church. Neither Jesus Christ nor any of his early apostles used the word to mean a building or place of worship. It is because of the continuous wrong usage of the word by priests and theologians that makers of dictionaries have also been biased to misconstrue it in that regard.

Christian

According to the Scripture, the word church, which was translated from the Greek word *ekklesia* or *ecclesia*, means a congregation or body or an assembly of Christians. The word was first used by Jesus Christ as recorded in the eighteenth verse of the sixteenth chapter of the gospel according to St. Matthew. The occasion was when Jesus Christ asked his disciples certain questions, and Peter gave a correct answer. To Peter, he said: "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." – Matthew 16: 13-18.

That the rock upon which the church is built is not Peter but Jesus Christ who himself is the head of the Church (1 Corinthians 10: 4; Colossians 1: 18) has been proved beyond argument in The Weekly Sermon (Vol. 1, No.9) issue of November 3, 1968. The point we are now making is that Jesus Christ did not use the word church to mean a literal house or place of worship.

In the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 14, a lucid account is given about how Paul and Barnabas worked unitedly for the furtherance of the gospel of Christ. When they were come to Antioch as stated in verse 27, "and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how He had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles". The church that was gathered means the Christians, collectively, (not houses) that were assembled! When St. Paul said that "it is a shame for women to speak in the church" (1 Corinthians 14: 34, 35) he was not making reference to a building set aside for worship but to a congregation of Christians

Furthermore, St Paul wrote in his epistle to the Romans thus: "Likewise greet the church that is in their house... The churches of Christ salute you." (Romans 16: 5, 16) Can anybody show that the apostle was asking his fellow Christians to greet a house? how can a sane person do that? it is unthinkable! Or can a house, an inanimate object, salute persons? it cannot, except a demon in it. This is just to show how ridiculous and meaningless it will sound if the word church is reduced to mean a place of worship.

By the clause, "the church that is in their house", St. Paul meant the disciples of Christ that met in their house. And when he stated "the churches of Christ salute you" he was referring to the congregations of Christian believers. See also 1 Corinthians 16: 19.

It should be understood, therefore, that our reference to the "true Church" in the caption of this sermon, has to do with a group or body or a society of genuine Christians. The epithet true would have been superfluous if there had not existed groups of professed Christians which are counterfeit.

Denominations

With regard to the number of church denominations in the world, it is difficult to speak with exactitude. They are very many, and new ones spring up almost everyday. In Nigeria, there were two in particular that did not last long: they were the "Do Me I Do You Church" and "Adam and Eve Church". The former was founded on the principle of retaliation as enunciated in the laws of Moses. Its members claimed that if they did not return evil for evil, God would be angry in that it was a sin. In the case of "Adam and Eve Church", nakedness was their doctrine and practice. There is a similar church in England known as "The Guild Church of the Naturian Kindred". (Vide Sunday Pictorial, May 19, 1957, page 15).

Considering the degree of variance among the churches in doctrines and methods of worship, it will be a very silly conclusion to say that all of them belong to Jesus Christ and are serving the one true God.

The Roman Catholic Church claims to be the only true Church, and mother of all others. In a pamphlet entitled, *Can I Change My Religion?* published by the "Catholic Truth Society" in London, it is stated: "Catholics do not want to change their religion, because they are quite sure that their religion is the true one.... You must accept everything that has been defined by her in the past, and be ready to accept without question anything that she may define in the future." (Pages 3-4).

Other church groups do disagree and pooh-pooh the claim of the Roman Catholics which cannot be supported with or proved from the Bible.

There are some groups in Nigeria and elsewhere whose members' activities, rather than turning men's minds to God, are causing some people to reproach Christianity. In some of the groups almost every other member is either an apostle or a prophet or prophetess. Some take pride in high-sounding appellations such as "Senior Apostle", "Most Senior Apostle" and so on. They prophesy and see visions almost everyday. The visions do not concern the purpose of God and are not such that tend to lead to righteousness but visions

about riches or of the women the “spirit” wants them to marry, or of who is a witch and what not.

It is common knowledge that fornication and adultery are perpetrated in some of these mushroom groups where certain prophets can spend a whole day with women in private rooms under the cover of prayer! Some of these prophets take certain deluded women to rivers where they pretend to wash away their sins and to invoke angels through prayer to drive away devils or demons from them. It is frequently alleged that the prophets strip them stark naked and make immoral advances to them in “holy” water!

It was during one of their spirit-vision expeditions that some of these prophets killed a certain poor woman in the Western State as published.

The other day one of their prophets claimed to have seen a vision that the Western State of Nigeria would sink if the people paid more than 7/6 per head as tax; he actually went out to spread this satan-inspired message. But on investigation, it was discovered that the anti-tax preacher had himself paid tax and kept his receipt quite intact. He was of course, justly convicted for 18 months. (Daily Times, February 1, 1969) Since Jesus Christ and his disciples paid tax in his days, do we still need any more proof before we can know that the anti-tax gospeler is a fake?

Variance

All the churches cannot be true while they are at variance on several points of doctrine, and divided in their methods of worship, we repeat. St. Paul stated: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” (1 Corinthians 1: 10) The fact that some have deviated from the truth of God in the Bible and do not speak the same thing and are divided leaves no room for doubt that such ones only call the name of Christ in pretence.

False Prophets

Jesus Christ knew very well that false prophets with their characteristic propensity for fantastic claims would proliferate in this age of the last day, and he warned against them. Said he: “And many false prophets shall rise, and shall deceive many. For there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall shew great signs and wonders; insomuch that if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect. Behold, I have told you before.” (Matthew 24: 11, 24-25.) Bible students are not surprised to see them and hear of them all over the world. It is a proof that the last day is here!

Within the past few years the rate at which false Christs sprang up is fantastic. Like a shooting star, they appear suddenly in the mood of sanctimoniousness and, after a short while, fade away into oblivion. Where now is the “Jesus of Oyingbo” (Lagos)? Where is that of France who predicted that the world would end on August 15, 1954? (Vide the Illustrated of May, 1954) and where is that “Jesus of Ogbunike” near Onitsha? One of them claimed to be God and the very Jesus the Son of God, and at the same time he said he was Abraham. Yet some of those who had been stupefied with the strokes of his cane by which he

“baptised” his adherents, believed everything he said. God said: “A wonderful and horrible thing is committed in the land; the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?” – Jeremiah 5: 30, 31.

There is no doubt that Nigeria, and the world at large, is in danger of false prophets. They are dangerous because they lead people to destruction. – Isaiah. 9: 16; Matthew 15: 12-14.

When we examine the root of the encomium or praise and the credit given to certain churches for their achievements we find that they do not relate to the purity of doctrine or the reformation of character in converted souls. Rather, such a praise or credit is based on the number of schools, colleges or hospitals they have established or on the scholarships they have given to people. These institutions are not bad. But they are no standards or qualities by which genuine Christianity can be distinguished. The most important thing is the preaching of the truth of God’s word – the gospel – to the sheep of God so that they may be free from Satan’s works and be saved in God’s Kingdom. – Mark 16: 15-16, 19-20; John 8: 31, 32, 36.

The pride of certain churches is that they have existed for a very long time. Because of this they regard others which are not as old to be false. On this, we also hold the view that it is not how long but how well. Jesus did say: “But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.” – Matthew 19: 30.

In order to know which church is true and which is not, we must examine the doctrines and practices of the various groups – using the Holy Bible as our yardstick. Jesus gave this warning: “Beware of false teachers, who come disguised as harmless sheep but are wolves and will tear you apart. You can detect them by the way they act, just as you can identify a tree by its fruit. You need never confuse grapevines with thorn bushes! Or figs with thistles! Different kinds of fruit trees can quickly be identified by examining their fruit. For a variety producing delicious fruit doesn’t produce a kind that is inedible! And a tree producing an inedible variety can’t produce what is good! So the trees having the inedible fruit are chopped down and thrown on the fire. Yes, the way to identify a tree, or a person, is by the kind of fruit produced.” – Matthew 7: 15-20, Living Gospels.

The Authorised Version puts verse 20 thus: “Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.” Jesus Christ further said: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.” -Matthew 7: 21.

It is wrong, therefore, to accept every church denomination as true and as belonging to Jesus Christ. We must follow strictly the guidelines given in the Scriptures in order not to be deceived especially in these days when many are claiming to be prophets, apostles and prophetesses who see spirits. John the apostle admonished: “Beloved. believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone on into the world.” (1 John 4: 1) And St. Paul also warned: “Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.” – I Thessalonians 5: 21.

To close our eyes to or ignore the reality of the presence of false churches among us is nothing but self-deceit. Said St. Paul; "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth...." (1 Timothy 4; 1-5.) Just look around, it will not take you any pains to find the church groups that come under the category of the apostle's predictive description.

True Church

The fruit by which we can know the true Church is not the doing of wonders, seeing of visions, dreaming of dreams or the saying of many prayers but the preaching of the TRUTH in particular, and the showing of Christian love. (John 13: 34,35) False prophets can do wonders, see visions and do some other things, but they CAN NEVER preach the TRUTH without adulterating it. (Matthew 7: 20-23) Once the doctrine of any religious body is tainted with a lie that group is not a true church. St. John stated "that no lie is of the truth". (1 John 2: 21) It was on this ground St. Paul wrote to Timothy: "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself." – 1 Timothy 6: 3-5.

The trouble with many people is that they take things for granted. They do not care to ascertain whether what they are taught to believe in the churches are in harmony with the holy scripture. For example, the teaching that St. Peter is the head of the church is not true; JESUS CHRIST IS THE HEAD. (Ephesians 5: 22,23) The teaching that the soul is immortal is wrong; the baptism of infants is unchristian, and the teaching that baptism washes away sins is unscriptural; the teaching that women are ordained by God to preach the gospel is unbiblical. There are a lot of other false doctrines and beliefs which space will not permit us to mention here.

Any church denomination, or even an angel from heaven, that teaches any doctrine unsupported in the Scripture, has no right to claim to be the true church. Said St. Paul: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed..." – Galatians 1: 8, 9.

The true Church, therefore, is the Christian Organisation in any part of the world that preaches the truth, nothing but the whole truth, as contained in the Holy Bible. Jesus said to the Jews who believed on him: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8: 31, 32) It is the truth that will bring us the salvation of God, but the absence of it means the loss of everything good.

As we must be honest and true to ourselves and other persons of goodwill toward God, we cannot hide the fact that the God's Kingdom Society (GKS) is preaching the truth which has enlightened many people and brought them God's blessings; she is therefore -like any other

church organisation preaching the truth-the true Church of Christ. Some may frown upon this claim but the onus of proof rests upon them to show from the Scriptures (not their opinions) that we are not. And where they cannot let them say, as commanded by God, "It is truth."-Isaiah. 43: 9; see also John 8: 45, 46.