

Discernment Issues Facing the Contemporary Church

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Introduction

Many things are consistently happening in and around the Christian. With the advent of globalization (Steger 2003; Hill 2002; O'hara-Deveraux 1994) and integration of systems, cultures and to some extent, syncretic religions, the terrain is no longer predictable for the Christian as it once was. In one sense, Satan is essentially the same as before, actively seeking out who he may devour (I Peter 5:8), except that now he appears more vicious, aggressive and widely spreads his net to over throw the faith of some. For instance, he keeps some too busy for God and in the end, they settle for pragmatic solutions in the quest to garner instant results. If it works, they assume God is pleased when in fact they have relegated God to the terraces unawares. There is so much going on in God's world. This paper sets out to highlight many discernment-related issues that confront the Christian and if not well handled may lead Christians to carrying themselves as functional atheists, living as "fools," borrowing scriptural language (Ephesians 5:15; Romans 1:22; Psalm 14:1). The paper does not exhaustively tackle issues it raises but is designed to be a mere trigger to further meticulous thought, prudence, research and reading for the Church. The days in which our lot is cast are indeed evil (Ephesians 5:15-16) demanding a crisp clear mind to safely navigate these dark troubled waters as we traverse this terrestrial ball.

Why Discernment Issues?

Why should we spend time discussing recurrent discernment issues? What is the rationale and justification? What are they after all? Well, these are first of all 'issues' meaning they have or will come up demanding an immediate response failure to which may trigger trouble into the future. Issues are such that they occur, show flashes of danger beckoning immediate attention. Issues may come once or repeatedly return in different forms. This latter scenario is our interest; they return in different garbs to affect the Christian Church. Examples of issues would include ancient heresies that have vexed the Church in the past. They may have at some point been defeated or even stamped out perhaps but then many years later show up in a different form! They behave like some diseases (or viruses) that were once declared wiped out from planet Earth but then make a

sudden return with a bang! The Christian Church, for instance, has wrestled with Arianism in the past but it has showed up in the Jehovah's witnesses¹ or in some other 'respectable' form such as Sabellianism; a form of modalism (Gunton 1997). The Christian must be sufficiently trained and alert to quickly detect applying the right remedy. John the Apostle discerned Gnostic teaching in His day and alerted the Church (I John 2 ff), Paul equally noted the Colossian heresy and blew the trumpet (Colossians 2:16-23). Without a sensitive trained conscience, error will have a field day with terrible repercussions. This, in part, necessitates consideration of menacing recurrent issues.

The Issues Before Us

The issues here highlighted often bug Christians in one way or the other. Although they are not troubled to the same degree, they do none the less have to grapple with some or most of them at one point or other in their lives. We highlight what we perceive as key issues drawn from different sources within the Christian fraternity²:

God's will in relation to Christian Liberty

God has a will that comes to pass irrespective. He has planned all things from all eternity and ensures that all events, through his providence, come to pass. At the risk of sounding fatalistic, God knows all things from the minutest to the greatest events, so Psalm 139 states. He knows not only the general events but also the minutest detail of individuals. Though he is the sovereign Lord over creation and its sustenance, in His decree, he has left some things to take place through secondary causes and yet remains the ruler of the skies (Berkhof 1949). Although we can argue that God's plan or decree is one, there are several things that we need to know. God has within his Decree willed that certain things take place when he allows and by His express permission. His will can thus be discerned through several ways including providential occurrences. Bob Dewaay (2003), in talking about God's will and Christian liberty, highlights some important points worth noting. He posits, and rightly so, that there are four important categories in discussing God's will namely; God's revealed will, Providential will, Christian liberty and God's offering wisdom. Though we may not agree with him on all his well-argued points, he presents a somewhat detailed treatment of each of these is available elsewhere but here, we simply state them in summary form here.

¹ For example, their 2015 book *What can the Bible Teach us?* clearly spells out the Arian heresy as claimed by the Movement on pages 40-50 and 105-115 among others that out-rightly rejects orthodox teaching including the Trinity.

² Mark Dever, in his book *Twelve Challenges Churches Face*, has highlighted some of these problems say on page 37 or 171.

1. God's revealed will is what He has expressly revealed in His word and is to be accepted³. What Yahweh has said comes to pass and no one dares question or disregard it. They do so at their own peril. For instance, I Thessalonians 4:3 states that it is God's will that the saints be sanctified, abstain from sin, walk worthy or flee from immorality. God's word also states that the Christian should work hard (I Thessalonians 4:11-12), not be a busy body or slanderer (2 Thessalonians 3:11) and pay taxes among others (Romans 13:6). God is so clear on these and other matters although He does not prescribe when, how or where these should be done. The Christian is to figure this out in their respective contexts knowing that the whole Earth is the Lord's.
2. God's providential will is that which becomes evident and manifest in due course as He sustains the world. God orchestrates things to take place in His most wise counsel so that what He has decreed comes to pass. For instance, if one is to keep a particular job, it may be that they of necessity must upgrade their credentials. Although the person never initially planned to upgrade but the 'circumstances' dictate that the person does so. Another example could be that one is looking for a house to rent in a particular locality but finds one just outside the preferred locality and yet near enough to what is required, that could be interpreted as God allowing them to live in that place. Paul wanted to share the Gospel in Acts 16: 6-10 in Asia but God closed the door and sent them to Macedonia. God's will thus eventually becomes clearer as one goes along.
3. Christian liberty is the liberty that a Christian exercises in relation to God's will. This is outside what God has explicitly revealed in His word, not forbidden or sinful either. In this space, the options for the Christian are such that they have the liberty to choose what they wish to do, because things are in what has been called '*matters indifferent*' or things that are right in themselves but the individual, using their best judgment chooses to do or not. Included in this would be who we marry (from among saints of course!), what car or colour of car we buy, how big a house we occupy etc. The Christian should not feel bound or fear sinning as long as they do not cause someone else to stumble. Christian liberty comes along then when matters are not directly revealed and not forbidden by God but a decision has to be made in relation to matters indifferent as we see in Romans 14. In that case, Christians must not judge or condemn one another. Due consideration and sensitivity must however be exercised lest saints stumble others in the quest to exercise their liberty.

³ The revealed will is to be contrasted with the secret will, things yet future that Yahweh has chosen not to reveal. This could include predictive things which of course must be tested against the touch stone of scripture. Deuteronomy 29:29 comes to mind, though it has grossly been misunderstood or misapplied by many.

4. Divine wisdom⁴ comes along to the Christian so that they apply the best judgment or course of action given the Knowledge about something, premised on the word of God. Two options may be equally legitimate and correct but the Christian thinks, prays and then takes the best route towards an end. God grants wisdom in such matters (James 1:5-6) but He will not respond in an audible voice. God still speaks⁵ and works in His people even today but His children must seek His will, where wisdom is needed. James, talking in the context of suffering, advises Christians to seek divine wisdom so that they best handle the situation, although affliction has a purpose to achieve in their lives.

Christians in the 21st century encounter many things round about them. Things are consistently in rapid flux and a whirlwind surrounds them at every turn. Knowing the four aspects highlighted above should help the Christian to safely navigate through the complex web of life.

The Gospel: It's Preaching; Troubling Trends in Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism

The Baptist Confession (Chapter 20), as does the Westminster Confession of faith, pays attention to defining the Gospel, its nature and what it accomplishes. The Gospel is defined as the '*good news*' about a saviour that came into the world to save a lost humanity. He did this by incarnating, taking the form of a servant, preached repentance and then died as a substitute for a sinful people. His once and for all sacrifice paid for all sin of all people; past, present and future. This saviour indeed died, was buried and rose again on the third day only to appear before the disciples prior to ascending to Heaven. He now sits at the right hand of God and will return to judge the world. At His first coming, Jesus was a saviour who redeemed the lost but at His second coming, He returns as a Judge. Salvation is deliverance not only from the wrath of God but from sin and its consequences (Boston). A person is saved when they cry out for mercy to the Lord Jesus Christ in faith receiving justification and therefore forgiveness of all sin. The forgiven sinner now walks in the newness of life daily thanking God for such a great deliverance from certain eternal death. Although they remain sinners, fallen in Adam, they are regenerated, transformed and pardoned of all their sins. This is the good news to be spread abroad devoid of works of any kind. The Christian receives the Spirit of adoption and walks freely into the throne room of God because another has paid for all their sins. No longer do they need to annually offer bulls and goats or any sacrifice to receive piecemeal atonement for that year but after justification in Christ, a person can confidently go before the throne of Grace themselves without any human priests to represent them. No

⁴ Dewaay (2003) defines 'Wisdom' as the application of Biblically informed knowledge to life situations' This is a good definition for the context

⁵ Although he does not dictate or give direct revelations! The Christian must apply Christian prudence in all matters of life.

mortal is essential. Jesus Christ is now the advocate before the father and as such, they can approach God through Him. The Protestant Church, led by Martin Luther, had somewhat clear views about the great doctrine of Justification which fired up the Reformation. '*Solar fidei*' among other solas defined the Christian faith for over three hundred years.

The Gospel is to be preached to all flesh as Jesus commanded his Disciples (Matthew 28:16-20) till He returns. After they believe, converts are to be taught as well as make a public confession through Baptism. In the Acts, Dr Luke narrates how the Church explicitly or formally⁶ begun from the time of Christ's ascension. In Acts 2, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descends in tongues of fire on the Jewish Christians but later on the Samaritans and Gentile world as the Acts narrative unfolds. Within the 30 years that the Acts narrative covers, the Gospel has gone beyond the bounds of Palestine. For instance, in Acts 16, we have Paul breaking into Greek Neapolis, Philippi, Amphipolis and Thessalonica among other towns and cities. The first recorded convert in Europe is probably Lydia (who incidentally is from another town in Asia but resident at Philippi) and onwards runs the Gospel! Today, this gospel has gone to many parts of the world but not to all flesh before Christ returns.

The troubling thing however is that the Christian Church is fast compromising and turning away from the Gospel as it has been revealed. From the early stages in Acts and onward into the early times of the organized, structured visible Church, the Gospel was fervently preached and believed. With the passage of time, the Dark ages enveloped the truth only to be recovered nearly a thousand years later, during the Reformation. The Roman Catholic Church became a huge potent empire with both ecclesiastical and political underpinnings. Any one that daring Papal authority or institution was speedily flushed out through avenues such as the inquisitions. But God raised the fore runners to the reformation such as John Wycliffe, William Tyndale and to some extent men like Savonarola. These men, through their blood, sent the gospel star to the next generation until Martin Luther rediscovered the Great Doctrine of Justification by faith. This would change the world forever. Sadly, as earlier intimated, this pure doctrine is under attack both from the Roman Catholics (through the Council of Trent's counter Reformation of 1545-63) as well as within its ranks. Rome seems to have incipiently crept into the Protestant ranks, waylaid some of the leaders and is now reclaiming the long lost prodigals. They claim that there was a needless misunderstanding that has now been resolved. We now have the many once valiant churches marching back to Rome with virtually no difference between the two institutions. The Anglican Church for instance, by all intents and purposes, is much like the Roman Catholic Church, if not worse. The Evangelicals for a season appeared to offer hope as they insisted on the scriptures, regeneration and conversion among others but alas, even these have been waylaid. Within the Evangelicals have arisen the Charismatics and other syncretic groups that pay lip

⁶ Some argue that the Church (and rightly so) has always been whether OT or NT. They refer to the word '*assembly*' or in Greek '*Ekklessia*' that refers to Israel as they journeyed to the Promised land.

service to the Scriptures. Today, New Age thinking defines Christianity is several circles.

The troubling features about all this is the following:

- a. The gospel is watered down if not outrightly denied.
- b. Gospel preaching is relegated to a small space and even in that limited space, very little authentic gospel content is allowed. Many once sound conservative Churches have turned into entertainment houses.
- c. The solid doctrine of Justification by faith has been relegated to the terraces in preference for a works based Christianity.
- d. Holiness of life is not crucial any more.
- e. Syncretism in doctrine and practice is near normal in these degenerate days.
- f. Christ's atonement and opening of a new and living way into the throne room of Christ is neglected if not rejected.
- g. Priest craft in its various forms (whether prophet or Priest etc.) is on the rise. Animism of some sort is the order of the day.
- h. Gross ignorance is rife among God's people with no sign of desiring God or His word.
- i. The word of man is weightier than God's. People know more of what the Man of the cloth says rather than what God says in His word.
- j. Practices such as ordaining women Pastors/Church officers are increasingly accepted as normal, if not expected. The Church seeks political correctness over fidelity to God's truth.
- k. Post-modern thought has invaded and hijacked the Church. Everything is relative, including absolute truths.
- l. Evangelicals and Catholics now call each other as saints and brothers, when Rome has never changed a whit.
- m. Gospel preaching is relegated to the shadows and instead replaced by humanistic social needs, psychology, rituals or entertainment.
- n. With the influence of Charles Finney, Evangelicalism has given way to pragmatism, claiming that Revival does not need God but generating the right conditions for people to respond.

These and many other (negative) changes makes one bleed as the core gospel is no longer the priority as it probably once was (note that not all change is necessarily evil). Interestingly, even among those claiming to remain true to the core essentials of the gospel, compromise, including Ecumenism has set in leading in different directions. Only the gospel can change nations turning them to God in Christ. Before Paul went to Rome, he wrote a letter in which he declared that God's righteousness was only in the Gospel and its power (Romans 1:16-17). The church does not seem to believe this anymore but instead turns to innovations. There is need for a return to the Old time religion as fostered by the Protestant reformation not that by Robert Schuller, Rick Warren or any other modern day pragmatist whether Pelagian or semi-Pelagian inclined.

Mysticism, Pietism and the Christian: Its Snare and Inroads into The Church

The Church of Jesus Christ has gone through several epochs. Rarely has it had a season free of any error or some troubling heresy. Being spiritual in nature, the Church has tended to either grow or attract people to its fold that wish to exercise some form of mysticism, pietism or outright pursuit of charismatic experiences. These experiences are now generally the desire of the times and if for some reason are absent, a Church is presumed to be either dead or just a mere traditional arrangement/ organization. But are these experiences harmless and alright? Should the Christian seek after these? It must be known that some form of emotional experience is present in every spiritual activity but this should be regulated by the word of God. Second, this should be in line with the word as well as a servant of truth. God must be at the centre of that activity and not be drawn from or directed at some other object than God. Additionally, it needs to be noted that Christianity is not all about good emotional experiences but truth. At times, someone may not 'feel' like praying for instance, that does not make them devoid of the Spirit or unspiritual for that matter.

Mysticism involves one being caught up into some mystical experience or practices either outside the body or some altered state of mind. Often, it starts from some innocent premise appearing harmless such as prayer and then eventually grabs the person to levels where they begin to feel they have not 'connected' unless they have a certain feeling or experience which they may mistakenly call "God". That experience in the fullness of time becomes an idol to be sought after unawares. On the other hand, Dewaay (2007) talks about people who claim to be experts at prayer and have secret access to God. Mystics claim to possess powers, answers or links to the divine. The Christian church is infested with such mystics offering solutions to common struggles that Christians face. These mystics often claim to have discovered the panacea to success or an improved spiritual experience. If they are to succeed, one must know the prayer secrets that 'twist the arm of God' to respond. Bob states the following in relation

to the established mystics: *'Practitioners claim to have discovered new avenues of prayer that can create power, excitement, success, and even new revelations from Go'*. Clearly, everyone wants these extended potencies that would generate countless benefits. To acquire these secrets, one must be initiated into some secret keys which turn out to be some form of Gnosticism.

It would interest readers that mystics are not new. They have been there all along (Dewaay, 2007). In the medieval times for instance, these have been there. All we see in the recent times are a new manifestation of the same old error or practice. Someone needs to have a trained eye or a good grasp of Church history to detect what we presently experience or observe.

On the other hand, Pietism has equally been on the rise. Its basic tenets hover around practices leading to experiences that give one a feeling of being close to God. All others not engaging in the said ritual or practice are perceived far from God and His Kingdom. Bob Dweaay (2007) says it better when he says:

Pietism is difficult to define because it can be taught and practiced in unlimited number of ways....the essence of pietism is this: it is a practice designed to lead to an experience that purports to give one an elite or special status compared to ordinary Christians.

Essentially, that is what some Gnostics taught and had people to follow them. One version of this Gnosticism is what we encounter in Colossians. These teachers taught that Christ was not sufficient for salvation as one needed a secret knowledge to reach the highest orbs of salvation. That sounded piously good but was in fact undermining not only the gospel but the sufficiency and superiority of Christ. Paul dealt it a death blow by not only asserting but demonstrating that Jesus was all in all. It must be stated here that Church history is littered with Pietism of different sorts and inclinations. Mysticism and Pietism are somewhat related but can be teased apart. Often these arose in history as a reaction to perceived 'dead orthodoxy' or in the quest to have a deeper experience with the divine. The down side, as evident of Mysticism, is that it takes people's minds away from the Gospel. Jesus alone is sufficient. The Deeper life Church was in some way a Pietistic entity in its early days in Zambia. Perhaps it still is.

In recent years however, the Church has been plagued, yea, invaded by mystics and pietism promising much, if only people can come to them. They take various forms such as Prophets, 'Witch Doctors', Mediators or some such figures promising to 'bless' the adherents. Naturally, there is a price to be paid. People are blinded because these mystics come dressed in a religious garment and thus appear harmlessly helpful. Many innocent and well-meaning Christians have been deceived into believing that they can be made more consecrated and therefore more holy. Thousands are caught up with this and spend countless hours, resources and energy pursuing these mystical experiences. They invest

all they can to reap wealth, (emotional or at times out of body) experiences, success and promotion among other things. What people do not stop to find out is whether these experiences are taught in the word of God and indeed, if they are safe at all. Sadly, even fewer people know the source of some of these mystic powers and processes. Dave Hunt (1986) suggests that some of these have occult sources, oriental eastern religions as encapsulated in the New Age Movement (NAM). If this is true then these people risk exposing themselves to Demons that eventually may possess or demonize them possibly wrecking havoc in their lives. Second, this breeds dependence, which is another form of bondage. Christ sets one free so why should they return to take on other clutches? Bob Dewaay has reviewed several books⁷ on mysticism worth reading to get a hold of what mysticism is all about and how it departs from God's word.

Dangers of Mysticism and Pietism

Mysticism is dangerous for various reasons. We highlight some of the perceived dangers in point form:

1. It comes garbed in prayer antics and thus appears harmless when in fact venomously deadly.
2. Makes people depend on their subjective experiences to feel they have connected with God when in fact may not have. They want to hear inner voices whose source may be unclear when God has laid down that He hears His children regardless.
3. It can be addictive and initiates one into all sorts of things including connection to spirits.
4. It thrives well by first implanting fear and dependence in an individual.
5. It is unbiblical and misleads the People of God.
6. It grows to proportions where the person enters bondage and cannot escape unless Christ sets them free.
7. At times, these mystical books or teachers incorporate practices derived from the New Age Movement, Eastern Religion or some such sources. One can be initiated into these unawares. An example would be the breathing techniques from *Yoga*. They seem to work and make one feel good but are they innocent?

⁷ He mentions the following authors and their books: Henry T. Blackaby (*Experiencing God*), Doug Pagitt (*Body Prayer*), Dee Duke (*Prayer Quest*). All these have a mystical tone and point to various rituals and practices that may not exactly be in line with God's word.

8. People are deceived into believing that they will be more holy and consecrated to God as they pursue mystical experiences. Only the finished work of Christ is sufficient.
9. Pietism captures people's attention away from the Gospel. People think coming to Christ is only the first step but need to go into 'deeper things', myths and mysteries of the faith.

Antidotes

Christians should seek to grow in discernment by feeding on the word of God. If they become mature, they will no longer be tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:14).

The Church needs to sensitize its members on the dangers and nature of mysticism.

Christians must avoid all excesses by knowing what is true and acceptable by God.

Christians need to learn to trust God and believe his word. We do not need anything beyond what Christ has accomplished in our lives.

The Christian Church is under attack from several fronts. The Church needs to respond quickly lest the deception continues, grows and over takes the body of Christ. It is not new but ancient only in a different garb. Christians need to beware of this practice and return to the simple trust in God's word. Jesus came and lived among us and taught us to pray. He hears when we pray and will answer in His time. We need not resort to wrong things in order to be heard. God can be trusted to do what He has promised.

False Prophets And Their Emergence

In the past, God spoke in various ways at various times (Hebrews 1:1-2). He spoke through the Prophets as He revealed His word. However, in the last days He has spoken through His son, Jesus Christ who is the exact representation of God. When the last surviving Apostle (i.e. John) was gathered to his fathers, God completed revealing His will in the Scriptures. The Bible is the authoritative word of God and anything outside it is of men and therefore not inspired. The Bible is complete and everything we need for life and godliness has therein been revealed. God inspired the scripture writers to only pen what He deemed essential for His people and when this was done, the canon was complete. No extra Biblical revelation is to be entertained.

However, in these latter days, many have arisen claiming to receive fresh direct revelation from God which they equate with the authoritative word. They claim that just as God spoke in the past through Elijah, Moses or any other prophets, He still speaks today. Thus, they expect that once they speak a word of 'truth' into one's life, that person must believe without question. To hesitate is to demonstrate unbelief and therefore lose the blessing. These kinds of pundits effectively add to the word of God and will not hear any suggestion of cessation of revelatory gifts or rejection of their anointed word. In effect, these Prophets function like mediaries or mediators between God and His people. So powerful have these prophets grown that any one that dares question them is threatened with a curse; anathema.

But is this in line with God's word? Can such claims be justified? A careful study of the Bible suggests that these claims are false, unbiblical and therefore misleading. The unsuspecting Christian is not only deceived but drawn back into bondage. These prophets come with various motives including manipulating or extracting resources from their victims. They do this by initially instilling fear in the subjects and then proceed to control them. But there are others who may not necessarily threaten a person. They courteously show concern but in the end persuade some into their ways. These schemers slyly introduce a thought suggesting an immediate solution to a person's need for which they have an answer. Once the person is hooked, then the exploitation begins. These prophets progressively grow from strength to strength suggesting and demanding all sorts of things. The dependant victim goes out of their way to meet these unrealistic demands believing that their destiny and prosperity is tied up with the prophet they are connected to. I once heard of a couple that nearly sold their farm (constituting their entire life's earnings) and then hand the proceeds to the man of God for a blessing. They were stopped in their tracks just before they carried out the transaction. When asked, it was evident that they had bought into the lie. In another case, an old work mate of mine surrendered his shirt and shoes to the Prophet walking home barefooted after the event. Asking him of his crazy act, my colleague stated that he expected a blessing which I knew nothing of! I marvelled at such faith!

Once God revealed His word which is now written, we do not need or accept extra biblical revelation. Dewaay (2007) calls this extra Biblical revelation as Personal Words From God (PWFGs) which he dubs as unbiblical because they are not authoritative. They are not authoritative in the sense that they are not at par with the scripture nor are they inspired in the sense the scriptures are. After creating the world, God runs the world through His providence and as such, human beings can be led by God through providential occurrences, although they need to know how to read providence. What God has directly revealed in His word is clear and must be obeyed. What he has not is within His secret will while what is not sinful but allowable is where saints exercise sanctified Christian liberty. Those that claim to have extra ordinary revelatory gifts (such as prophecy) speaking directly into people's lives are to be disregarded or classed

within the providential will of God, as long as they do not contradict the Bible. Special revelation is God's word that is infallible and inerrant while PWFG are of human origin and can never be equated to the word of God. In an animistic context, the Prophet functions like the intermediary who has contact with the spirit world. In my context, he functions like the witch doctor or some such agent. In the scriptures, prophets were servants of God who spoke the word to God's covenant people. They called back people to God's ways and were 100% accurate in their predictive prophecy. They passed the test of Deuteronomy 13 & 18.

Therefore, the mushrooming of many Prophets in the Churches is to be regretted because much error or misleading is taking place. The Christian Church needs to be clear what true revelation is and how God operates in providence. His word is to be treated as it is, authoritative, inspired and therefore inerrant. The danger with allowing this to continue is that the written word is watered down or eventually disregarded in preference for more exciting emotional ends. Having given the caution, it needs to be mentioned that some kind of prophecy does take place today, forth telling rather than foretelling as was in the apostolic times. If the current crop of prophets is let to run around, they turn unto a law unto themselves. They are false Prophets!

The True Church versus the Church Growth Movement (CGM): Its Premise Queried

The Church of Jesus Christ has been in the world for many years. From the time Jesus left the Disciples with the Great Commission, He promised to be with them to the very end. The Spirit was sent into the world to remind them of the things of Christ as well as empower them to boldly spread the gospel to all flesh. While the apostles were around, the Church advanced in interesting ways despite the challenges. At one time, 3,000 people were converted in one period (Acts 2:41, 47 etc.) and many added to the number of the disciples. At another time, the Apostle's words were rejected and thus had to shake the dust off their feet and proceed to the next (Acts 13:50-51). In short, the Church has had mixed fortunes over its existence. From a frail, timid and scared lot to a bold and conquering team, this Church has marched on. The gates of Hell have not prevailed (Matthew 16:18). The seasons have been varied right across history.

The times when the Church, over the centuries, has prospered numerically, the worry has been how to effectively and qualitatively manage all the people that got converted. In seasons when there has been a spiritual drought, the Church has tended to engage in some serious introspection or even birthed pragmatic ways to draw in people. With the advent and growth of secularism in the Western world, a number of Churches (and denominations even!) have been dying. Secularism is basically an anti God system that hurls out God replacing him with materialism. The push from the world has made serious inroads into the

Seminaries and ultimately into the Churches. In reaction, several people have come up with innovative ways to counter this. One way is the Church growth movement fostered and peddled by Robert Schuller (probably learnt his antics from the likes of Charles G Finney centuries before). The Church Growth Movement basically posits that to get people into Church, all that the Church needs to do is to work their Model of Ministry to ensure that felt needs of people are met within the confines of the Church. This has bred other branches such as the Seeker Sensitive Churches by Bill Hybels among others. The said Church Growth Movement (CGM), begun in the 1950s by Donald McGavran (dubbed the intellectual behind the movement). Independently, Robert Schuller (dubbed the popularizer) began his Ministry and runs the Crystal Cathedral (California). Schuller founded the Robert Schuller Institute which then churned out people like Rick Warren (Saddleback Church) and Bill Hybels (Willow Creek) that run mega Churches. These Churches are huge magnificent entities (humanly speaking) servicing thousands of people whether saved or not. Others like C Peter Wagner were to emerge and have had a great impact on the world. These men and entities are most careful with the messages they churn out, never or scarcely directly addressing sin or opt to use other less offensive words. They believe in drawing people in first and then eventually introduce the word, in whatever form it is dressed. These mortals have even gone so far as to change meanings (or even altered the choice of words to those viewed politically correct; at other times, use the same words but attach a different meaning or import) of words or eliminated them altogether as being inappropriate in the contemporary scene. One of these CGM leaders once asserted that preaching the Gospel in the old way was incorrect but *people need to focus on what people need to hear...and how they best can hear it*. They focus on physical or Spiritual felt needs instead making the Church strategy dwell around what the customers needed, in this case the unconverted. Numbers and relevance are their mantras. If anyone fails to rise to those standards, then they are viewed as failures, negative energy in the equation, unhealthy or plain unserious! The pure gospel is thus relegated to the terraces or even rejected altogether (Dewaay 2007). At other times, a syncretic ecumenical version of the scriptures is churned out making it difficult to the less trained eye to clearly detect the errors, drifts or incipient shifts. That said, can we say the idea of numbers crowding our Churches is entirely wrong? Should we throw the water with the bucket? Not at all! We need the numbers but the Biblically right approaches, motives and aims should be pursued. That's the point of this argument here.

That said, the CGM is on the wrong path as it does not reflect Biblical thinking or approaches. They are on faulty ground (though seemingly good and give the desired instant results in the short run) because of the following reasons:

1. They are pragmatic and use sociology or psychology rather than the word of God. Granted, we cannot entirely avoid some degree of pragmatism or exercise Christian liberty but these rely more on humanistic plans.

2. The movement is about methods, meeting human needs rather than preaching the word of God, although may claim to be Gospel centred.
3. The leaders claim that they can get a person converted easily only when they discover the *felt need* of the individual. This is Pelagian way of thinking and effectively denying the new birth.
4. The motivation of these churches is not to glorify God but to be of (social?) *relevance* to the context and thus offering social services. These Churches are huge machines operating like corporations. The Machinery is awesome but is it to the glory of God?
5. Their primary objective is to raise numbers. Quality of life is secondary issue, if ever raised. In their thinking, Church should be guided by what the unconverted want or need, not the glory of God or spread of the gospel, necessarily.
6. The CGM claims that because churches are getting smaller, there is therefore need of a new reformation, though not doctrinal in nature. Wagner and Warren push this agenda. Warren has written the best seller series '*The purpose Driven Church*' and '*The purpose driven life*' where he weaves an argument that appears biblical when in fact not. On closer meticulous examination, it is a set of cleverly set rules laced with apparently Biblical content when in fact not Biblical, So Deeway argues.

These and several other reasons demonstrate that the CGM is not in line with God's word. Though we should yearn for numbers, as hinted at earlier, this should be achieved in a biblical way rather than through pragmatic route. Once a prayer bulletin ran an article entitled "*Pragmatism will not do*" by Ray Warwick in relation to Christian thinking. This article immensely opened my eyes.

Ecumenism & Christian Unity: Basis and Effect

The word '*ecumenism*' is derived from Greek⁸ carrying the idea of peace or working together. If applied to religion, it carries the connotation of various religions working together in spite of (or overlooking) clearly existing differences. What binds them together are the common threads while their particular distinctive are relegated to the shadows, never mentioned or allowed into the conversation. The reason is that these distinctives are perceived to generate acrimony, separation and in some contexts, fighting (Stenhouse 1981 pages 1-6; Pollitt 1986 pages 27-65; Dever 2008 pages 25-36). From a rational humanistic premise, such reasoning appears grand, wise, caring, current, progressive and innovative. The Ecumenical Movement first had its formal organizational

⁸ Derived from the word *oikoumene /oikoumenikos* and later used in Latin as 'Ecumenical' or belonging to the Universal Church

structure in 1975 when the movement was registered (Pollitt 1996, page 82). It drew people from different faiths, persuasions and platforms with a view to unite the world. Ecumenism, as syncretism⁹, can be categorised into at least two, the first being the *interfaith* and the second *intra-faith*.

Interfaith ecumenism is the one that we alluded to where different faiths come together, throwing away their distinctives and resolving to converge around the essentials and common features such as 'god', 'faith', or some such things defined in the broadest sense to avoid, eliminate or mitigate offence. These collaborating entities work together to generate (or preserve?) peace, run joint collaborative projects as well as facilitate dialogue. Often, these activities or entities have a humanistic agenda rather than seeking to know a particular deity. In fact, members are forever looking out for similarities and the good in the other faith. For instance, Christians and Muslims agree on the idea that "God" exists and thus drop their guards. Intra-faith ecumenism on the other hand, is what denominations/sects or groupings within the same faith foster. While acknowledging that differences of opinion exist, parties resolve to ignore or minimize the distinctives for the sake of achieving unity, in whatever form or shape. Often, this unity is cosmetic but fine looking on the outside. Some parties somewhere must compromise somewhere. Again, the parties look at the common features and capitalize on them. Agreement around the essentials fosters collaboration such as the Trinity, Christ, Salvation or some such doctrine in the case of Christians. This shows up in the interdenominational forums or some such platforms where the essentials are held in common but the rough edges kept at bay. In Zambia, at one time the interdenominational (Para Church) movement was very strong. Making significant contribution and impact on the land but eventually cracked, breaking apart as each party sought to drive their own agenda unhindered. Evangelicals have in recent times sought to re-group sharing platforms despite disagreeing on the distinctives. For instance, the various kinds of Baptists agree to focus on the doctrines of Grace (i.e. Soteriology) while agreeing to disagree (differ) on other matters, considered either preferences, opinions or matters indifferent. This has been coined as '*Evangelical Ecumenism*' by some¹⁰.

If one reads the above narrative, the rationale definitely sounds impressive for who does not wish to have a united Christian Church? But is this what God says in His word as the basis of unity? What exactly would be the sound basis for unity? Martyn Lloyd Jones preached a series on Church unity from Ephesians 4¹¹ in which he among other things rejected the idea of ecumenism. He asserts that unity should be based on truth without which, no true unity will be achieved. Further, unity with unbelievers? That is out of the question! So clearly, the

⁹ Herbert Pollitt in his landmark volume *The Interfaith Movement: The New Age enters the Church*, on page 13 gives some helpful insights into the two types of syncretism.

¹⁰ In Zambia, names like Ronald Kalifungwa, Isaac Makashinyi or even Dr. Conrad Mbewe come to mind.

¹¹ See DM Lloyd-Jones' Ephesians expositions published by the Banner of Truth Trust, great series! In Another work, Lloyd-Jones makes landmark definitions of Who an Evangelical is or should be.

broader ecumenical movement cannot be accepted by Bible believing Christians. No matter how plausible, it is not correct because the world views are different, with truth suppressed or compromised ensues in the long run.

What about Evangelical ecumenicalism? This also needs to be carefully assessed and watched. If truth is not compromised in any way, then some level of interaction may be considered but with the necessary cautions. The problem with this kind of Ecumenism, is that some form of compromise eventually sets in, especially if the money carrot is introduced. What was previously viewed as wrong is tolerated, if not supported in due season. Another danger is that differing world views will come into play and whether we like it or not, one eventually becomes dominant. Further, although they may make some allusions to the gospel, the good news will not be preached in its purest form for fear of offending others. Another offshoot of this transition is the definition and understanding of 'Church' shifts. What was a correct view based on scripture is laid aside.

Some have argued that: "*we need each other and the age of squabbling over doctrine is long gone!*" In our view, such sentiments are a sign of spiritual declension, shifting and compromise. The basis of unity is Truth as it is in Jesus Christ, period! Unity must be '*theo*' rather than '*anthropo-centred*' Dewaay, suggests the following as basis for Unity: Should be Gospel centric, commanded to seek Unity (Eph 4), nurtured through pure scriptural teaching and should be deeply 'Theocentric.' We could not agree with him more.

Discernment, The Church and The Individual in a Slippery Age

Discernment is the desperate needs of the times. The Church needs discernment if it is going to succeed in the times in which we live. So much is going on, a time in which things are relative, mixture of truth and error, and where distinct absolutes are abhorred. Post modernism will not permit assertiveness or the notion of objective truth reality. Without the ability to tell what is right or wrong, it leaves the Christian and Church vulnerable.

Post modernism replaced modernism and has progressively crept into about every part of our lives (Hulse n.d). It removes or eliminates the hard and fast boundaries making everything appear relativistic, dependant on what an individual decides to be right and acceptable rather than what God says. Deontological thinking is hurled out of the window by that token in preference for the Teleological. If anything, the thinking of the age leans towards antinomianism and is quick to lash out at what appears legalistic no matter how mild (Dever 2008). The resulting effect is that it becomes hard to come up with any universal standards as people are dubbed to have different value systems that must be respected. What was once frowned upon is not only defended but applauded by the majority. The person resolute to stand on truth is viewed archaic, fossilized,

unprogressive, old school and a danger to society! This often happens in clear view of all to see. There is a side that is however hard to detect or see, often lying between what God has prescribed and Christian liberty. It is not exactly wrong in and of itself and yet causes others to stumble or subtly violates one truth or other from God's word. For instance, the Church Growth Movement (CGM) earlier alluded to has several tenets that at face value appear innocent, harmless and inherently good. However, once meticulously analysed are reduced to rank pragmatism, sociology and psychology plus marketing antics of the times, good as some of these disciplines may be in the right context. On the one side, works well, draws people making them the 'Churched' but the down side is that it violates God's word in that compromise creeps in as well as does not rely on God. Further, it re-introduces some form of semi-pelagian thought into the Christian faith. To handle such, the Church needs discernment to detect and expel error from afar.

An illustration will do. Recently, in Zambia recently, a subtle error called *New Calvinism*¹² has subtly but progressively crept in among us¹³. It is a mixture of truth and error in one pot and promises to do much to advance the cause of Christ. It has resulted in much good but at the heart of it, it is antinomian, combines worldliness and Christianity as well as man centred rather than God. In addition, it emphasizes numerical growth over faithfulness or fidelity to truth. While some have sought to sanitise it, it is essentially an error with potent supporters (some prominent in nature) globally. Logan Nyasulu, the prime whistle blower (in Zambia), detected this in 2018 and raised alarm. While many cried him down as a needless alarmist, he pressed on and demonstrated that this was indeed a deadly error worth resisting. How did Logan detect that New Calvinism was in fact different from historic Calvinism? He read much and acquired an understanding, in addition to his hind reading that informed his thinking. Without consistently training oneself, people cannot grow in discernment.

Another error, or even heresy in our times is the Charismatic explosion in Africa (Mbugua, Maura, Mbewe, Grudem and Piper 2015). These Churches and practices are flourishing everywhere! Their strategy is to appeal what resonates culturally. In Animistic Africa, intermediaries into the unseen spirit world of ancestors easily finds fertile ground (Chalk 2013; Blaschke 2004; Welford 1999). The Charismatics have syncretically mixed the Bible with the African psyche of consulting mediums using divination or some such methods. These have secretly

¹² You need to read or listen to different sources to get an approximation of what this movement is all about. At best, it is a mixed bag of both the good and the bad. Read Williams, Nyasulu, Burke, Walker, Masters and others to come up with your opinion. Further, you could refer listen to audio presentations by Saidi Chishimba and Logan Nyasulu at: <https://podpoint.com/kambule-virtual-institute/new-calvinism-around-the-block>.

¹³ As in Zambian Reformed Baptists. The Phenomenon itself started way back, as far as 2002. See the article by Collin Hanson at: https://www.academia.edu/37650405/Collin_Hanson_Young_Restless_and_Reformed_A_Journalists_Journey_with_the_New_Calvinists.

been introduced into the Church unawares leading to people lining up to have a word spoken into their lives. Many people are sold out to this because it appears innocent, bathed (sanitized) in scriptural language and practiced in a Church building! One needs to develop a discerning mind to detect what is at play.

While we all know that God forbids divination, human sacrifices, astrology, necromancy, idol worship including any other sort of magic arts, many Christians do not connect other subtle practices as being in the similar or same category (Deuteronomy 18:14; Acts 8 & 9). For instance, the New Age thinking and practice, Ecumenism, Yoga practices and others appearing harmlessly innocent in and of themselves and yet lead away from God. God is very clear on most of these and yet for some reason, Christians forget or ignore the cautions in the quest to meet or solve an immediate need.

The Christian Church needs to develop discernment. This could be developed in various ways. One of them, as already suggested, is the need to train ourselves, ingest the word of God, knowing what is right or wrong. In that way, the Christian will be able to judge¹⁴/test all things rightly. The other is to read much about the various errors and heresies as well as to trace them through Church History. Often heresies often come back in different forms but remains essentially the same at their core. The New Age thinking for instance, is a mixture of Hinduism and other Eastern oriental religions. It has wormed itself into even the scientific community and people are not even aware! The idea of multiple Universes is from the eastern religions for instance! Gnosticism has made repeated visits in different garbs including asceticism or the quest for a special kind of knowledge in order to acquire emancipation. Some come from Humanistic socialism appearing in sync with the Christian faith when infact not. Liberation theology is one such having subtle connections to the Socialist cause(s).

Cleansing the Conscience

At regeneration, God not only delivers one from sin and its pollution but cleanses their hearts and consciences too (Hebrews 9:14). No longer are they held guilty of their past sins and commence on a new page living for the glory of God. Although Christians are not perfect in this life, they none the less aim to please God in all they do. As they progress in their lives as saints, occasionally, the evil one may trouble or stumble them. Whenever this happens, they often resiliently rise up again to run the race to the glory of God.

However, in recent years, Christians have been made to believe that the God does not really cleanse them and thus need further cleansing. They argue that at regeneration, while God forgives them, they need to be set free from bondages in

¹⁴ We need to be cognizant of the warnings of Judging someone on matters indifferent. In this context, we use it in the sense of testing as well as being able to tell what is the right thing in a given context. Passages such as Matthew 7, Romans 14 and I Corinthians 4 come to mind.

their history or curses of men. In syncretic contexts where the knowledge of God is minimal, people soon get threatened and succumb into bondage to the whims of men. Their fragile consciences are troubled and easily succumb to the accusations especially from the past that has already been dealt with in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). Others invent ways of cleansing their consciences so that they are not only pure but feel consecrated before God. One such example is Agness Sanford, a missionary's daughter in the 1940s. While she meant well, she opened the door to wrong teaching (Dewaay 2006). Her 'out of body' experience teaching was not only wrong but exposed people to all sorts of dangers including mysticism, demon oppression or even possession! She went so far as having travelled into the past, yea a past life, which sounds like New Age thought, or Psychology teachings including some form of Hindu kind of theology! She taught inner healing in the quest to solve current frustrations. Her thesis was something like this: *'your current undesirable aspects of your life can be traced back to your conscious or unconscious memories. These need to be confronted and corrected.'* Sound more like what we hear from Freud and Jung's Psychology right?

What is the right response by the Christian? The Bible offers some suggestions including what we here mention. First, at regeneration, God not only justifies one but washes them clean, including their Consciences. God in Christ sets one free and thus do not need anything outside Him. The Christian who returns to troubling things of the past has lost focus on Christ and plunged into troubles. Second, Christians need to know the privileges and promises that God has for His covenant people. Yahweh loves and cares for His own, ensuring that He protects them for His own ends, purposes and outworking of His decree. Third, the Christian needs to be aware of their default world view that often subtly inclines them towards what they have been socialised. They are from a pragmatic, materialistic, syncretic or Pantheistic, or Animistic back ground, then they may likely easily identify with these unawares. Developing a Biblical world view premised on the Biblical meta-narrative is the way to go. There is such a thing as Biblical world view that Paul insisted on in a good number of his writings. Fourth, the Bible talks about sanctification that is life long and needs to be pursued (Romans 6, 7 & 12; Colossians 3 etc.). The Bible is replete with motivations to renewing our minds in sanctification not memory healings as taught by Sanford. These four solutions should suffice for now.

Clearly, the constant danger of the world's influence on the Church ought not to be minimised or underrated. True freedom comes only in Jesus Christ who sets people free. Gnosticism or any other such teachings will not do. The Church needs to invest more into the Ministry of Discernment far more than it has hitherto done.

Definition of "*The Church*" in the Postmodern Context

The Church of Jesus Christ continues to rub shoulders with the world context until Christ returns. The quest to win the world over to the Lordship of Christ never ends. Through much trouble, the Christian Church marches on. No cease fire is ever signed between Christ and the world.

In recent times however, some pockets of the Church appear to be at ease in Zion. They seem to be sampling the garlic of Egypt and have evidently vowed to be part of the world regardless (Burke 2018; Williams 2017; Dever 2008; Ryle 1967 & 2001). They seem to be wiser than the scriptures that have warned against bad corrupting good morals. The world is a very potent force, all pervasive in nature and yet must be pushed back whilst wise interaction takes place. The Christian should have one motive, to win over someone to Christ while moving around as wisely as a serpent, harmless as a dove. The Christian should be mindful that the terrain upon which they travel is exceedingly slippery and can easily cause one to slide to the way side, stuck in the mud.

In the scriptures, the Church is defined, if not assumed. Its characteristics, nature, purpose and mission are very clear for all to note. Any one that cares to read the Bible will soon realise that God has certain expectations and how the members thereof should conduct themselves, spreading the Kingdom message. Some (including this author) have argued that the Church was present in the Old Testament as well as in the New though others have opposed. This latter group have instead proposed that the Church only commenced in the New Testament times and is distinct from Israel. They argue that the Church is inaugurated in Acts 2 onwards and is to be active till Jesus comes while the Physical Israel is reactivated to the Covenant promises. The Church and Israel are said to be distinct, so it is argued. Another interesting group called the hyper-dispenationalists argue that the Church in fact commenced in Acts 15, there about. There is no end to these debates but certainly worth knowing.

The key question however is what the Church exactly is and why it exists. As earlier hinted at, the Church is styled 'the body of Christ', 'the Assembly' or simply 'the People of God'. The Greek word is '*Ecclesia*' carrying the idea of 'the called out ones' or in some instances 'the assembly'. These people have been transformed by the power of grace and thus engrafted into the organic body of Christ. This body has structure, order and purpose with the Elders at the helm supported by the Deacons (no more levels!¹⁵ For the "one among equals" doctrine is a human construct foreign to scripture). The Church can be viewed as universal, militant, triumphant, visible or invisible. The visible Church is the one we see composed of believers at a given place in a given locality. The Church's main goal is to glorify God by spreading the word, as well as sanctifying the believers. Further, the Church is composed of people bought by the blood of Christ who laid his life as a ransom for many, the children of God. Whoever claims to be a child of God must lay aside the sinful ways and live worthy of God

¹⁵ Some, including Alexander Strauch, John Owen and Conrad Mbewe seem to suggest a third level: the Pastor above the Elders.

in sanctification and service to the King of Kings. Christ, not the Pope or any other sovereign is the head of the Church (Colossians 1:18).

In recent times however, the clear Christian distinctives have been systematically rubbed off. With the advent of postmodern thinking, the Church is not as clearly different from the world (Williams 2017; Burke 2018; Nyasulu 2019). Its sound is uncertain as is fragile. The context and slippery times affects the light that is being sent out, a mixture of truth and error in some instances! Further, the Church is actually changing the meaning of some words to fit into a 'politically correct strategy.' Some words are downgraded, changed or rejected. Other terms remain the same but different meanings are attached, which makes it hard for the undiscerning eye to detect. Robert Schuller and Rick Warren for instance are most meticulous which words are used and which ones to debug. They avoid directly confronting people over their sins and instead decide to exploit other terms. Their philosophy is to bring in numbers at a minimum cost, on their (i.e. sinners') terms! The duo use business corporate ideas to draw people in first, befriend and later introduce the gospel, if at all they do speak the gospel in its purest form. The Gospel in its essential nature is offensive (I Corinthians 1:18). Paul, writing to the Galatians, warned about changing the gospel as well as adopting a works based gospel rather than that which is by faith (Galatians 1: 6-10). Sadly, the declension and down grade progresses at rapid rate and soon makes the world define or perceive Christianity differently. What is authentic and consistent with scripture is viewed or regarded as archaic, corrosive, old school, out of step with the times or clearly not acceptable. But How does the visible Church grow? It grows as the people hear the gospel, are converted and join the visible Church. This preaching is carried out in different ways including person to person Evangelism, Preaching or Teaching. The Church growth movement has wrongly added another dimension-that of getting numbers at any cost. It has in fact been guilty of going against scripture by focusing on numbers rather than qualitative aspects to the faith such as faithfulness to preaching the truth. In as much as numerical growth is desirable, it must not be achieved at the expense of God ordained means and ways. The outcome based kind of Ministry has no place in the Christian Church, at least the Biblical church. Granted, some level of liberty is allowed to innovate; this should be done correctly and to the glory of God. Further, the Church should ensure it guards the truth by ensuring only what God has commanded and sanctioned is sent forth whilst rebutting error or even heresy.

The true Church of Christ needs to regenerate and fight for its survival. A fresh awakening is needed and that soon! That said, God always has a remnant in every age (Pink 1997).

The Christian and Paganism: Divination and Inherent Dangers in Perspective

Paganism is a real threat to the Christian faith. It comes in different clothes and many times appears not only innocent but pragmatically helpful. In Africa, if a person visits a witch doctor, sometimes their prescriptions seem to work. In the western world, if one engages in some harmless *yoga*, their health improves tremendously. Their longevity is assured if they are consistent. In a rational context, reason is what seems to carry the day. Others settle for syncretism, pantheism or some such related avenues to sort out life issues.

The Christian is caught up in all these things. They must process and sift what is acceptable to God or not. The trouble is, some of these things which God disapproves are increasingly being accepted into mainstream living, if not heralded as true. For instance, *Yoga* was far from the Christian mind and dared not get closer but today, even some business offices offer *yoga* classes! Paganism is all pervasive and can cripple the Christian if not well handled.

Paganism is loosely defined as *the adoption of lifestyle and practices opposed to God and humanistic in nature*. Materialism and other matters take the centre stage while God is hurled out of the picture. While remaining ethical in some cases, paganism toys around with matters which may be in the Christian liberty realm. For instance, some Christians argue that *yoga* is of different sorts (religious or not) and is within the Christian liberty orbit. It is classified as indifferent. Smoking, and drinking alcohol comes in too in some contexts, though the principle is clear (Proverbs 20:1). While the scripture may be silent on some issues, as earlier mentioned, there is a principle to be observed, nothing should take the place of God and whatever is done should be exclusively to His glory.

But then there are other clearly pagan practices which the scriptures expressly forbid. We have here things like Divination, astrology, some forms of Meditation such as Transcendental (TM), necromancy, consulting mediums, idolatry, mysticism, and sorcery among others (Deuteronomy 18:14). For these, no sane Christian needs persuading because God has made these plain. However, this could be a wrong assumption because unsuspecting Christians are sometimes caught up with the wrong things. They engage in activities that would ordinarily be unacceptable to the most high. These are not only detestable but have terrible effects on the believer.

What then are the inherent dangers in the clearly wrong things mentioned in the previous paragraph? Well here are some: First, these trigger the wrath of God. Second, they take one captive drawing them into bondage. Third, they bring about fear, and at times an altered state of mind. Fourth, may bring about demon possession (for unbelievers) or demon oppression for the saint. Toying around with these can be deadly! Fifth, makes one dependant on something else other than God. Sixth, God's glory is not reflected as it ought to be. In fact, the light is dimmed, if not snuffed out! Believers need to steer clear of these sinful practices no matter what form. They need to ask key questions as well as find out what

pleases the Lord (Ephesians 5:8) so that they sin not against the Ancient of Days.

“Deeper” Ecumenism: Evangelicals and Roman Catholics

Ecumenism, as earlier hinted at in this paper, has made a huge come back, though in a different form. At face value appears helpful and in sync with the times. *‘We do not need to needlessly fight’* some will argue, *‘because we are civilised, you see.’* They further argue that the problems that rocked and divided the Church are now resolved, suggesting that the Protestant Reformation is irrelevant or even never happened! They go further to state that the Reformation was needless as it triggered the 30 years’ war with little or no tangible differences for the context. The Enlightenment and other movements did much more good than the reformation.

But that is not correct! The Great Protestant Reformation achieved much. It cast out superstition, lies and wrong ways of interpreting scripture. Beyond the return of good sound Biblical hermeneutics and Church order, the reformation spirit changed the world for ever. Nothing is the same because the Church as long as it remained true to God’s word was different and more God honouring. It prevailed against evil and set the world on a more prosperous trajectory. Scan where the Protestant work ethic prevailed, wealth, human rights and all were fostered bequeathing the prosperity we now see!

In recent years, the broader Evangelical Church has begun to make concessions with Rome. This is a very dark day because this goes against the very grain of the Reformation! If Calvin, Luther and others were to wake up, they would turn in their graves! Now some evangelicals regard Roman Catholics as brothers and sisters, co-workers in sharing the Gospel! Graham and others aligned themselves with the Roman Catholics! The root cause could be when the saints began to back down, compromise and lose sight of what Scripture is all about. The New birth is slowly replaced by social gospels, philanthropy or even works! Evangelicals now want to be politically correct and thus tone down on their assertions, rhetoric or some such sharp Biblical statements. In some cases, some have been bribed with money, which thing the Roman Catholic failed to get out of Luther! The Pope once remarked in apparent reference to Luther that *‘not even gold can move this fool!’* today, many are easily moved at the prospects or sight of money! We need to heed the warning of James Henley Thornwell that aptly stated in 1846 thus:

Where money is the great want, numbers must be sought; and where an ambition for numbers prevails, doctrinal purity must be sacrificed. The root of evil is the secular spirit of all our ecclesiastical institutions. What we want is a spiritual body; a Church whose power lies in the truth, and the presence of the Holy Ghost... (Murray 200, page ix).

The Theological down grade has progressively been making inroads as Catholics and Evangelicals engage in Ecumenical arrangements. These unequal collaborations and partnership have been to the undoing of the Evangelical movement. Another way that has weakened the Evangelicals is within itself. Stronger and more financially resourced parts of the evangelical movement have entered pacts and alliances premised on what have been termed 'core issues' at the relegation of the distinctives. Gullible Christians now easily follow someone who is earnest, passionate and zealous about something, irrespective of whether it is right or wrong. They are blinded by eloquence at the cost of truth. This is a sad blot in current thinking of the times. As money flows and friendships warmup, they have begun to make decisions based on friendships rather than truth. But that is not all, these compromised brethren have now been spreading their tents to all parts of the world, including the once spiritually healthy contexts like Southern Africa. Perhaps a voice from the past would be handy at this point just to buttress what we here claim. The Famed BB Warfield said the following in 1894:

The Chief dangers to Christianity do not come from anti-Christian systems. Mohammedanism (i.e. Islam) has never made inroads upon Christianity save by the sword. No body fears that Christianity will be swallowed up by Buddhism. It is corrupt forms of Christianity itself which menace from time to time the life of Christianity. Why make much of minor points of difference between those who serve to one Christ? Because a pure gospel is worth preserving; and is not only worth preserving, but is logically (and logic will always work itself out into history) the only saving gospel... (Murray 2000, page X).

Liberal and pluralistic thinking ways of the times do not help (Pollitt 1986). Discernment is neglected or even opposed. In the end, the Counter Reformation of the 1545 onwards triumphs. The Evangelical Church has sold its birth right.

But what ought we to do? We ought to return to the potent words/catch phrases of the Reformation and mean them. There is need to wrestle with truth and its implications before we engage with any parties. We also need to weigh carefully from a Christian perspective before we partner or work with parties that do not exactly have the same agenda that we do. We need to walk circumspectly lest we enter into battles that are not ours. Truth must not be minimised or treated as unimportant. In a day where truth is an individual constructive paradigm, there is need to reassert that there is such a thing as objective truth, derived from God's word. We need to choose our battles and mass resources in the right places. One of these battles is to yearly preach against the Roman Catholic Church as the venerable JC Ryle¹⁶ once advised! We dare not forget or neglect this charge! Our consciences need repeated reminders lest we forget! The time is short and we need to redeem the time! We dare not march back to Rome as some wings of

¹⁶ Ryle, 'Warnings to the Churches'

the Church has already done. J.C Ryle would lament back into death were he to wake up and see how far the Anglican Church¹⁷ has slid, effectively fallen off the doctrinal cliff into Romanism!

We have now scaled all the major discernment issues we set out to explore. I am sure the reader has noted that these matters are by no means easy issues to easily handle. We could have tackled other (ethical & other) issues such as Euthanasia, Abortion, Artificial insemination, Suicide, genetic Engineering, cloning among others but these are projects for another day. The Christian has no option but to engage in serious thinking and acting as night cometh soon when no man can labour (John 9:4). May that day come soonest!

What Others Have Written or Said On the Recurrent Issues Confronting the Church

Bob Dewaay has written extensively in the *Critical Issues Commentary* on many of the points mentioned in this paper. For instance, he has written on Mysticism, Divination, and Discernment as well as what the True Church should be among many. His penetrating analytical eye highlights many troubling issues Christians ignore at their own peril. Others, including Dave Hunt, Gordon Lewis and Dr Walter Martin have written on a number of menacing items raised in this paper relating to the cults and occult and their deleterious effects. In more recent times, John F MacArthur (1996) has added his voice on the concern of discernment. We here read him verbatim:

I am convinced that this is only the beginning of a rather larger movement which is going to continue to escalate. This is happening because of the reigning cry for tolerance, because of the abysmal lack of discernment in the church, and because of the tremendous impetus which the unity movement has... (Murray 2000; page X).

MacArthur is dead right on this one point, though we may not agree with him on several other points. Dr Pollitt has given insights into the advent of the New Age Movement with its all-pervasive global tentacles. He traces the origins, progress and growth of the Ecumenical movement riding on postmodern thought and flanked by New Age thought. Geisler thinks New Age thought is the single deadliest threat to Christianity in the current times. We do well to pay attention to

¹⁷ The reader should note that there are at least four categories of Anglicans within one Established Church namely: High Church, Liberal and Low Church (Reformed/evangelical and some such in between). We love and generally respect the low Church because of its connections to the Reformed faith and Theology. JC Ryle was from amongst them!!! In this paper therefore, we primarily aim at the High Church with its Roman Catholic relics pouring out from every pore, nature and practice. External religion, tradition, liturgy, rituals etc. are hyper important to this lot. That said, the others are affected in some way for how can two walk together unless they be agreed?? Could it be a marriage of convenience? Someone to help us unravel this puzzle.

his cautions lest we realise too late. Logan Nyasulu's book on *New Calvinism* is well worth reading flanked by other penetrating potent books such as Enock Burke's *Pied Piper* among others. To be fair, one may need to glean attempted objective write ups by Jeremy Walker to get a broader picture. Walker is evidently weak on his conclusion. Often, post Modernism has badly affected objective analysis or prescriptions. Men prefer to remain politically correct over stating truth. Errol Hulse has done the Church great good in his little work on *Postmodernism* printed by Chapel library. It's a little volume but effectively gives all the necessary key details in a small campus. There is need to raise spiritual discernment in these degenerate days. Granted, we may not see things in the same light on all matters but the Bible should be the lenses through which we judge all things. These writers attempted to do just that.

General Proposed Ways on How Best to Handle Discernment Issues

The recurrent issues here presented no doubt need attention there and then or on an ongoing basis. The form and approach may differ but must be pursued none the less. Some issues are easy to identify, isolate and treat while others are fluid, slippery and difficult to define or handle. Some are erroneous while others are clear heresies demanding more drastic reactions, if not proactive actions. Be that as it may, something needs to be done. Whatever route we pursue, wisdom and prudence are enjoined bereft of compromise. A number of suggestions come to the fore. The first is to ensure we are proactive. This may entail spending time preparing, having spiritual drills in the right things as it were. Christians must inoculate themselves with truth and scripture so that they are sufficiently armed to detect, repel or treat erroneous infections that may from time to time bug the Church. Although there is not one universal approach to proactive response, the basic is to know what is important and what the Bible teaches. Having a biblical *meta-narrative* on one's chest is so important so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. Another option is to consistently keep abreast with what is happening within and without the Church. Christians need to come out of their cocoons to interface with the world. They need to track and monitor what the times demand akin to the men of Issachar (I Chronicles 12:32). Francis Schaeffer was right in calling Christians to come out of their enclaves, yea comfort zones, to face the world head on, after all, this is entirely God's world. '*The Great Evangelical Disaster*' was a correct clarion call to action when it came along. To interact with the world implies the Christian must both be equipped and equal to the task, whilst consistently wearing the full armour of God (Ephesians 6:10-18). They must interact with the world as a Chemist does while handling deadly toxic chemicals in a lab, and yet fully engaged! MChayne's illustration was apt. Third, the Christian must be aware what is harmful or not. For instance, the current Educational curriculums in about every level is laced with humanistic evolutionary tenets (Anthony 2001; Dockery & Thornbury 2002; Craig 1984). Theism has been shoved to the way side in preference for the wrong thing. Christians, unawares grab this poison, ingest and little wonder they argue

as rational atheists, at times no fault of theirs! They not only imbibe wrong thinking but take in deadly soup as well! Next, they then pass it on to their children. The best way is to be aware as well as develop alternative curriculums premised on God's word. This points to home schooling at the critical stages of Children's development. A further option would for Christians to research, write and develop Christian enterprises where saints could be gainfully employed. Although this may not eliminate recurring or discernment problems for that matter, this may none the less mitigate the propensity to compromise or remaining idly vulnerable. Christians need to be made aware of the dangers inherent in various innocent looking structures or means such as Social Media, Cable News, books or movies. Granted, each serves a purpose, having an agenda to fulfil. All these are avenues to spread various world views. Professor Fackson Banda rightly called for cyber holiness while using these avenues, good and helpful as they may be. Spiritual discernment is the need of the times. Discernment Ministries are definite avenues to help warn, alert and equip the Church.

Key take away lessons

There are so many lessons that this paper generates because they daily affect the Christian in one way or the other. That mysticism and divination for instance, have made a potent comeback is beyond debate. We see it all around us irrespective of context¹⁸. We however highlight only the key lessons that come to the fore arising from a consideration of the many issues alluded to or tackled in this paper.

- God has a will expressed in various ways. Four of things could be through the revealed will (His word), Providential will, Christian liberty or through divine wisdom given in due season.
- God's will is both in the revealed or secret. The revealed is explicitly expressed in scripture while the secret is yet future and not yet revealed.
- Through God's providence, His will eventually becomes clear. Circumstances and necessity come together to make God' will evident to the discerning Christian.
- Christian Liberty issues are matters not directly revealed but not forbidden by God.
- Christian Liberty matters includes matters indifferent so Christians should not judge each other.

¹⁸ Evidence of its resurgence even in the civilized postmodern Western world is the popularity of the epic stories based on wizardry. The 7 series Harry Potter chronicles (as at 2020 by J.K. Rowling) are a case in point. A check on its Wizarding World site shows how this has blossomed.

- To best know the will of God, one has to first ensure they know the Lord and His word.

- Although Christians are not perfect, they will do everything possible to walk worthy of the Lord. They do this partly by finding out what pleases the Lord and within His will.

- Things in God's revealed will are clear for all and must be obeyed. Christians for instance know that they must serve one another in love. Matters in the secret will must be discerned and are yet future, away from our view. They become known after the fact or may not be known at all!

- The Providence of God is defined by Dewaay thus: '*Providence is God's sovereign oversight over all of History, including things He directly decrees and things He allows.*' This appears a simple basic definition but is definitely pregnant and loaded. In the Providence of God as demonstrated in Romans 8:28; 39, God ensures that All things work out according to His purpose.

- Some suggest that Providence suggests fatalism but not so, only to state that God not only knows all things but sustains them as well.

- Even in sinning, people fulfil the providential will of God. They are none the less Culpable for their transgression. Judas was guilty of sin and yet fulfilled what had been prophesied beforehand. Joseph's brothers sinned in selling him and yet worked God's will (Genesis 50:20).

- Christians need to work hard to understand God's will even when it proves difficult to comprehend.

- Dewaay says "*Christian Liberty is the freedom to make decisions about matters that are not revealed in scriptures without fear of sinning against God.*" Dewaay claims that in fact, Christians enjoy more liberty than before conversion. Further, the action may be right in and of itself but if the motive is wrong, then it is sin. Examples of areas of Christian liberty include marriage, food, circumcision, holy day observation among others. There is need to know which items fall within the Christian liberty category so that the Christian does things with a clear mind.

- The Roman Catholic Church has in recent years experienced multiple scandals leaving many communicants disillusioned. That notwithstanding, it still wields a magnetic pull on scores of people globally.

- The Evangelicals have not been spared either (from scandals) because as they have veered away from the Gospel, they have opened the door for error, scandals and lowered standards of living. Many heart rending examples come to mind with many more waiting to happen.

- The Evangelical Church has increasingly marched back to Rome in that the differences between the institutions are increasingly narrower by the day. Rome has never changed, it is essentially the same just mutating what it does over the years to re-invent itself.

- The Gospel is the good news of God's grace which must be preached to all people and when they believe to be taught and Baptised.

- Christ's command and commission is to all churches in every generation. Though some reject the idea that the gospel is for the Church to own & disseminate, this is none the less an urgent matter with no exceptions. The Hyper-dispensationalists fall into this category of those denying the commission is for all Christians.

- Roman Catholic Doctrine is deadly and Christians need to know this. It is basically a works based kind of salvation which leads to Universalism where all people are ultimately saved in the end. For a while, they may fall into purgatory but after paying or someone prays for them, they suddenly leap into Heaven! The Bible never teaches anything like this! Its either someone repents or perishes while in this life!

- Salvation is by Grace alone through faith. The book of Romans makes this abundantly clear for all to see. Once a person is converted, they are immediately justified in the course of heaven. Regeneration precedes conversion in that sense.

- Repentance and Faith (collectively called Conversion) is essential to salvation apart from works (Titus 3:5-7). Jesus is the one that effectually calls and draws people to himself (John 6:33-37) as well as gives life to the once dead soul.

- Once a person is converted, the person commences a new life of faith. Only then do they begin to produce fruit meet for repentance as scripture declares.

- A person is Justified once and for all, never to be charged again before the Courts of Heaven.

- Jesus is the only way, truth and life. No one has a relationship with God except through Jesus. Not even Mary or the Priest can take us to God, Jesus must do it. Christ's exclusive claims are real and valid (Acts 4:12).

- The atonement in Jesus was essential for the forgiveness of sin. Christ paid for the sins of the world by paying a ransom. He died the death that we should have died.

- People need not trust in the arm of Flesh for this is curse (Jeremiah 17:5-7) but invited to come to Jesus for salvation. Dewaay explains what it means to be saved thus: '*To be saved means to be rescued from the penalty of sin and the wrath of God.*' What a glorious salvation awaits the sinner!
- Christ invites sinners to come to him for salvation. He stands ready to accept any penitent sinner.
- God's word is authoritative rather than suggestive. All other human claims cannot be equated to Go.
- The Pope claims to speak authoritatively and decrees scripture *ex-cathedra*. This is false and unbiblical.
- Not even modern day prophecy which claims to be authoritative or in addition to what is already revealed in the word is to be accepted or respected. Forth telling is acceptable, as long as it is in line with scripture.
- The test for the truthfulness of Prophecy is found in Deuteronomy 13 & 18. People must speak truthfully and from God.
- The Apostle Paul, for some reason did not heed the Prophecy given by Agabus (Acts 21:10-14). Was -he rebelling against God? Not quite. He had received a commission in which he was to suffer, if not die for the cause of Christ.
- Christians need to be discerning to tell what is good or bad. Hebrews 5:12-14 comes to mind. Training that is needed. From milk, the Christian should progress to bones or maturity.
- Mysticism comes in different ways and appears innocent and harmless when in fact unbiblical.
- Christian mystics have been around right along the corridors of History. Not new but in another garb.

Conclusion

There are many troubling issues needing discernment confronting the Christian in the current age. At every turn, they encounter a challenge that needs a skilful saint to handle. The Church does itself great harm if it ignores the emerging issues. We live in perilous days for sure. Oh for a mighty awakening! Oh Revive thy work O Lord, in the midst of the years!

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