

CHAPTER ONE

The Most Powerful Force on Earth

This book is about the church.

Not the church as it often is, but the church as it originally was. The church as it can be. And yes, the church as it *must* be again.

What sort of image does the word *church* bring to your mind? Does it suggest to you--

- A snooty religious country club, bound by strange, almost secret rituals, traditions, and jargon?
- A political action group, waging war on behalf of a political agenda (of either the left or the right)?
- A waiting room, where people wait expectantly but rather passively for the next bus to heaven?
- A collection of hypocrites who care more about expensive pipe organs, stained glass, and stone buildings than they do about the hurting and hungry in the world?
- A place where "religious junkies" gather to get their weekend "feel-good fix" so they can get through another week?
- A collection of sanctimonious kill-joys who want to legislate morality for the rest of the world?

Let's be honest: The church has been all of these things at one time or another. Again and again, it has justified every bitter charge, every gripe and criticism that was ever leveled against it by angry atheists and disillusioned agnostics.

Yet--despite all its obvious flaws, weaknesses, hypocrisies, sins, and excesses--the church has been the most powerful force for good on the face of the earth, century after century, from the time of the apostles right up to this present moment. It has been light in the midst of the blackest darkness. It has been salt--both a preservative and a delightful seasoning--in a corruption-prone, unsavory society.

A paradox? Absolutely! Many of the most wonderful truths of God come packaged in a paradox, wrapped in a mystery. As we unravel the seeming contradictions of God's church--as He designed it and created it to be--we will find some of the deepest, most exhilarating, and life-changing of all of God's truths.

The truths of *Body Life* .

Two churches

How can we unravel this paradox? How can the church be both sin-ridden and salt *and* light? How can the church be both a source of disillusionment and a source of illumination at the same time? The answer, as found in the Bible, is this: What we call "the church" is really two churches! One is selfish, power-hungry, and sinful. The other is loving, forgiving, and godly. One has a long history of stirring up hatred, conflict, and bloody persecution, all in the name of God and religion. The other has always sought to heal human hurts, break down barriers of race and class, and deliver men and women from their guilt, shame, fear, and ignorance.

One is a false church, a counterfeit, masquerading as Christianity, but whose head is Satan. The other is the true church, founded by Jesus Christ, mirroring His authentic character through acts of love, self-sacrifice, courage, and truth.

For some reason, we are continually surprised when we are confronted by this counterfeit church. For some of us, a painful encounter with this *false* church creates so much pain and disillusionment that we actually begin to doubt the reality of God and His *true* church! But we shouldn't be surprised or disillusioned when we bump up against counterfeit Christianity. Jesus Himself predicted that the false church would come.

In Matthew 13, Jesus uses a series of parables (that is, allegorical stories) to describe conditions in the world during the interval between His first coming and His second coming. That interval is the age in which we now live, and one of the parables he told is called the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. Another word for "tares" is "weeds." In this story, Jesus says that He Himself, as the Son of Man, plants wheat in the field of the world. The wheat, He says, represents Christians, whom he calls "the sons of the kingdom."

But after the wheat is planted, the Devil comes in and plants weeds. These weeds, or "tares," look like wheat but produce no grain. The "tares" are, in effect, false or counterfeit wheat. These "tares" represent false or counterfeit Christians, whom Jesus calls "sons of the evil one." Outwardly, these false Christians look like the genuine article, just as the "tares" look like real wheat. The wheat and "tares" grow up together, and are completely indistinguishable from each other--for a while.

Soon, workers notice the weeds growing among the wheat and come asking if they should dig up the weeds. The Lord's answer: *Absolutely not!* Uprooting the "tares" would destroy the wheat along with the weeds. Instead, "let both grow together until the harvest" (Matt. 13:30).

The harvest, Jesus concludes, will take place at the close of the age when He sends His angels (not men) into the field to separate the weeds from the wheat. The weeds will be burned in judgment, but the wheat will be gathered into His father's barns. The wheat--the true Christians, the sons of the kingdom--are those who have experienced what the Bible calls the new birth. As Jesus says in another passage, "Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

The apostle Peter later describes the genuine Christians as being "born anew, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). The sons of the evil one are the false Christians, never born again by the power of the Spirit of God through faith in the Word of God, but who purport to be Christians because:

- They have fulfilled some outward religious ritual;
- Have joined a local church;
- Are relying on outward moral conduct; or
- They want to cloak their own evil and sin in an outward covering of religiousness.

In the sight of God, they are children of Satan. To other people, and even to themselves, they are indistinguishable from the true Christians.

No wonder the church presents such a confused picture to the world! If we ignore the biblical picture, as illustrated by the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, then the church appears confusing even to those who love and defend it!

If we are unable to recognize the dual, "true-and-false" nature of the church, if we insist on viewing these two distinct churches as one and the same, then we are doomed to a kind of "ecclesiastical schizophrenia" that will leave us baffled and confused.

"But," you may ask, "isn't there *any* way we can separate the true church from the false?" It has been tried many times before, and every such attempt has failed because the separation has been attempted on the basis of external factors: doctrinal purity, moral conduct, ritualistic practices, and even affiliation with the government! Roman Catholics have insisted they had the true church. Baptists have scorned such claims and declared that they have the true pattern. Other sects and denominations have arisen and declared, "A plague on both your houses--we are the true church!" And so the battle has raged for centuries.

The result of all this confusion and bickering has been that the church has increasingly been robbed of its sense of identity. Like someone suffering from amnesia, the church is asking, "Who am I and what am I here for?"

Two-in-one Christians

The truth is, of course, that no religious organization or denomination can be the true church. The division between true church and counterfeit church does not lie along denominational lines. True Christianity is not a matter of organizations or groups.

"Well, then," you might say, "it must be an individual matter. What we have to do is examine the lives of individual Christians. Those who manifest counterfeit Christianity are counterfeit Christians. Those who manifest true Christianity are true Christians."

If only it were that simple! According to the Bible, however, it's a lot more complicated than that. It's true that, biblically, counterfeit Christians can only manifest counterfeit Christianity. However, *true* Christians are capable of displaying *both* true *and* false Christianity-- though not at the same time. Genuine Christians can, through ignorance or willful disobedience, display a false and counterfeit Christianity in their lives. When they do, they cause as much harm as the irreligious, self-centered pagans around them! They bring the Gospel into disrepute, and they bring shame and dishonor to their Lord.

The sad truth is that it is deceptively easy to be a Christian yet not live a Christian life. Even though living in disobedience is dull, barren, and deadly, and even though the true Christian life is vital, exciting, and effective, many Christians choose disobedience. They bring hurt to themselves and the people around them--and they grieve the heart of Jesus.

As the twentieth century draws to a close, as a new millennium looms on the horizon, the great masses of people across this world are confused and afraid. They are searching for reality. They are desperate for a place of safety in a world beset with terrorism, rampant crime, racial unrest, AIDS, the threat of nuclear and biological warfare, the threat to the environment, and more. Today's headlines seem to be moving us toward the last days foretold by Jesus, Daniel, and John's Revelation--and toward the "harvest" of the "wheat" and the "tares."

So it is all the more urgent today that we search out from Scripture the true nature and function of authentic Christianity, and that we recover the dynamic energy and power of the early church. As we cross the threshold which divides the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the world seems to be a terribly complicated place--especially when compared with the world of the early church. And yet, there is no reason why the church in the twenty-first century should not be what it was in the first century. True Christianity operates on exactly the same basis now as it did then. The same power which turned the world upside-down in the book of Acts is available to us today.

What keeps us from experiencing that power today? I believe the major barrier we face is *ignorance*. Most Christians are tragically unaware of the biblical pattern for the church. Even true Christians, the true "wheat," still vainly attempt to do what their Master told them was hopeless and counterproductive: to physically separate the "wheat" from the "weeds" (see Matt. 13:24-30). We need to realize that elements of true and false Christianity will be intermingled in the same world, in the same church, even in the same person. Any attempt to "weed out" the false runs the risk of uprooting the true as well. Our goal as Christians should not be to go on a search and destroy mission against all the "tares" in the church, but to do everything we can to make the true "wheat" in the church so strong and healthy that the "tares" are powerless to damage it.

Jesus declared that He would build His church upon a rock, an unshakable foundation. That rock was the fact of his Messiahship and deity, as the apostle Peter confessed (see Matt. 16:16). Subsequently, on the day of Pentecost, His church came into being by the power of the Spirit of God. At first there was no sign of the presence of false Christianity. The true Christian life which was displayed shook the entire city of Jerusalem and soon spread to other cities and villages. Then, as Jesus predicted, the false seeds of the Satan's weeds took root and began to appear, not only as counterfeit Christians within the church, but as sin and counterfeit Christianity in the lives of true Christians (see the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5; the story of Simon

Magus in Acts 8).

Once these "weeds" began to appear, it became the task of the apostles to instruct Christians in how to recognize the counterfeit Christianity that was in them along with the true, so that they could purify themselves, repudiating sin by the power of the crucified Lord while yielding themselves by faith to the resurrection life and power of Jesus Christ. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the early apostles developed and laid down the pattern of operation intended by the Lord for His body, the church. This timeless pattern, when closely followed, would make the church of any age, of any millennium, the most powerful force on earth!

Invisible and visible governments

Do we truly realize the power that is available to us? Do we have any concept of the power Jesus intended for His church to wield in this dark and dangerous world? Or has our vision of the church become so dimmed that the word "church" suggests to us only a building on the corner where we go once a week to sing hymns and hear sermons?

The church, as God designed it and as the Bible describes it, is an amazing, dynamic, world-changing force. It is, in fact, a kind of invisible government, influencing and moving the visible governments of the earth. Because of the powerful influence of the church, the people of this planet are able to experience the benefits of social stability, law and order, justice and peace. Yes, the world is troubled and in turmoil--but we haven't seen even a fraction of one percent of the tribulation, tyranny, anarchy, and slaughter that would take place if the church were suddenly taken out of this world! (See Matt. 5:13,14; Phil. 2:14,15; 1 Tim. 2:1,2.)

Whenever the church has followed the biblical pattern and become more of what God designed it to be, righteous conditions have spread throughout society. When the church has abandoned this divine pat'tern, relying on worldly power, becoming proud, rich and tyrannical, then it has become weak and despised--and terrible forces of evil have been unleashed in the world.

"When all else fails, follow directions!" says the popular slogan. God has given us a set of directions for building a powerful, functional, dynamically effective church. In this book, we will open the Scriptures and examine God's directions for the church--which, as it turns out, are also God's directions for building a rewarding, effective, dynamic life. It is through the koinonia-fellowship of the church that we truly become all God intended us to be.

We find God's truth and instructions about His church throughout the New Testament, and especially in the writings of the apostle Paul--his letters are, after all, written specifically to individual churches and to church leaders, such as Timothy and Titus. Paul's masterpiece of the church is his letter to the Ephesians, which deals almost exclusively with the origin, nature, and function of the church, and its essential relationship to the Lord. So it is to this letter that we now turn, and especially to the first sixteen verses of chapter 4. There we will find our guideline to God's truth about the life of the body of Christ, the church.

[Body Life](#), [Table of Contents](#) | [Next Chapter](#) | [The Ray Stedman Library Index Page](#) | [Biography of Ray Stedman](#) | [Peninsula Bible Church](#)

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