



***CHURCH
BAD EXPERIENCES***

Some people who have had a bad experience at church feel as if God has let them down. Well, although God hasn't let you down, Christians *may* have. Let's look at why this can happen, and what can be done.

WHAT IS A CHURCH?

This pamphlet uses the word 'church' in one of the ways the first Christians used it: a local meeting of followers of Jesus. Jesus himself made this meaning clear when he said "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them".

After Jesus was put to death he rose from the dead. People took this message from Jerusalem (where Jesus was killed) throughout the region, telling people about the event. The message had an incredible effect. Some said that it "caused trouble everywhere" and turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). In fact this message changed the history of the world. The date on your calendar plants it firmly in the record books.

As the apostles went out through the Roman Empire, they formed local groups who believed this great news about Christ. These were the first churches. Their members were a very mixed bunch. Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, said, "Remember what you were, my brothers, when God called you. From the human point of view, few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing" (I Corinthians 1:26), and later, in the same letter, he says that some of them, before they became Christians, had been sexually immoral, idol worshippers, adulterers, male prostitutes, practising homosexuals, thieves, gluttons, drunks, slanderers and swindlers (I Corinthians 6:9-11).

Almost 2000 years later, these are still good descriptions of church membership! Human nature hasn't changed. We all rebel against God's loving wishes for us, we all need forgiveness. Unfortunately we also have short memories.

PEOPLE AREN'T PERFECT. NEITHER ARE CHURCHES

Some people go into churches or local meetings of Christians, and have bad experiences. After such

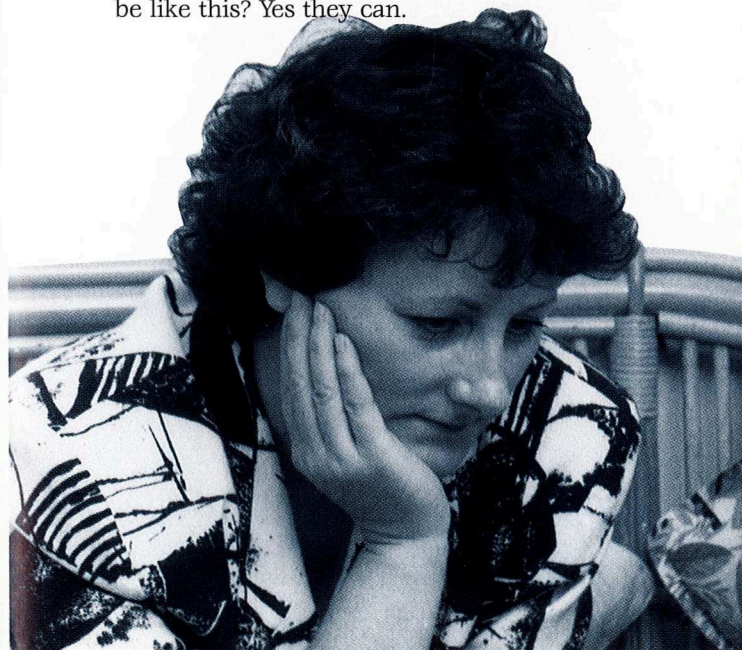
bad experiences they walk out and sometimes never go back. Which is a shame. It's a bit like going to a restaurant, getting food poisoning, and never going back into any restaurant again. It's understandable, but you end up missing a lot.

Nobody's perfect. No driver is perfect. No golfer always goes round in 36. No student always gets 100 per cent, and even Don Bradman got out nearly every innings he played. And no *Christian* is perfect.

Bad experiences in churches mostly fall into two categories: "I went there and they were too bad for my taste"; or "I went there and they were too good to be true."

CHURCHES COME IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES

1. *Like St Laidback's.* You go there and find that the minister's a womanising drunk, the treasurer is fiddling the books, and your children are given dope at fellowship. You get the impression that Christianity hasn't altered these people's lives much. They've asked for God's forgiveness. But they've forgotten that being forgiven by God means trying to live under his authority, according to his standards. You reel back in horror from St Laidback's. Can Christians really be like this? Yes they can.



2. *So you try St Holy's.* At St Holy's, they rule over you. Is your occupation really appropriate for a Christian? You mean you're divorced? We don't really want our kid to play with your kid because your kid wears jeans and earrings and listens to rock music. In fact, if your kid does those things, are you really Christians at all? Now these people have forgotten something too. They have forgotten that their own crimes against God were so bad that the only price which could get them out of the mess was the sacrificial death of God's eternal Son on the cross.
3. *So you move down to St Hypocrite's.* Here you find that they behave like St Holy's people on Sundays and St Laidback's for the rest of the week.
4. *If you haven't had enough, you might even try St Clone's.* At St Clone's they have ways of doing things, and these ways can't change. St Clone's people don't really mind what their tradition is: the important thing is that you conform. If you don't fit in, you will find out fast. The problem with the people at St Clone's is that they've added their own traditions to the message of Jesus.

PEOPLE AREN'T PERFECT EITHER

Bad experiences in churches come in all shapes and sizes: the minister didn't visit me in hospital; he wouldn't baptise our baby; they weren't friendly; they were so friendly they frightened us; they were too religious; they were not religious at all; the minister behaved as though only poor people were Christians; the minister behaved as though only rich people were Christians; and so on. Most churches contain most of these types of people. Sometimes they might provide all these bad experiences. To be frank, many Christians have been all of these types of people at one stage or another. And while we're being frank, so can you. Because you're not perfect either.

And when you start defending yourself by saying "Well, maybe, but at least I've never done . . ." you've just joined the people at St Hypocrite's. The way Jesus wants us to live seems very simple. He wants us to love God with everything we've got and

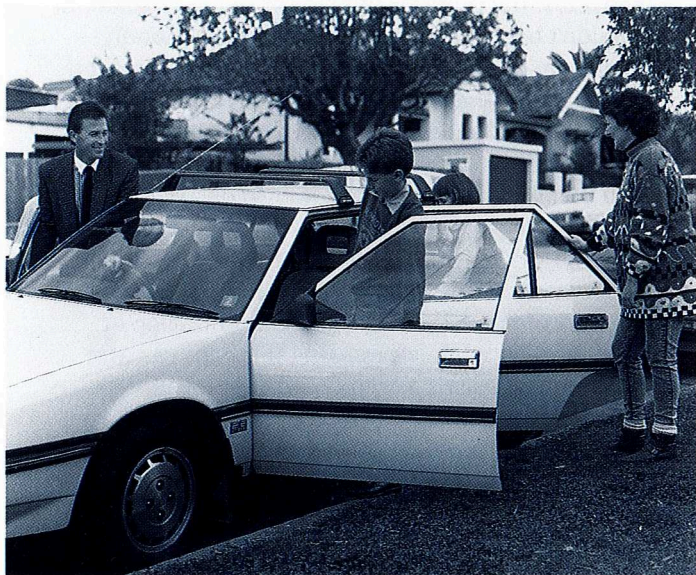
love our neighbours the way we love ourselves (Matthew 22:37-40). If we all did that the world would be pretty near perfect. It isn't, because we can't. No one can. All we can do is try. But if we try to do it in our own strength we fail. In Christ's strength it's possible.

Jesus takes a very tough line. Even if, on the surface, we seem to be pretty good people, he says that an angry heart is as bad as an angry action. Anger is as serious a matter as murder, lust as serious as adultery (Matthew 5:21-28). That makes all of us, without exception, murderers and adulterers, in need of God's forgiveness. So none of us is in a position to judge the people at St Laidback's. Or St Holy's. Or even those wretches at St Hypocrite's.

LET'S START AGAIN

Let's look at those first Christian churches, made up of people like ourselves. They took Jesus' demands seriously: they wanted to be 'remodelled'. They knew they'd never live perfect lives, but they

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wanted to try, and they knew they needed help.

We should take every opportunity to encourage each other in our relationship with God. We ought to meet regularly with each other (Hebrews 10:24, 25). Church is a sort of weekly training session for the Christian life.

You can be a Christian without going to church meetings in the same way that you can play sport without training. But you won't grow as fast — you're unlikely to be as strong — as the Christian who meets where there's support and teaching and the benefits of the Lord's Supper. Jesus founded a community of people, bringing us into relationship with one another and into relationship with God. Missing out on time with other people is missing out on half the action.

SOMEWHERE, THERE'S A CHURCH WHERE YOU'LL FIT

You might be a Christian who's too hurt by your experiences ever to go to a church meeting again. If so, we're sorry. We understand that anger and hurt can sometimes last a very long time. But it's almost certain that there's a group of Christians meeting somewhere near you where you'd fit in. It may be the denomination you were born in, or it may not. It may be a house group, but it's there somewhere. You won't find perfection. But the rewards of trying to find a church that fits will outweigh the problems.

Church is a place where you can have good teaching, where you can meet Christ working through his Spirit in other people. Think about it. Like a gym for an athlete, for a Christian, church is where the growth is.

Written by Tony Morphet in consultation with the AIC Committee.

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