

Is There GOVERNMENT in the Church of God?

Jesus Christ said, "I will build my Church" (Matt.16:18).

Was that Church foretold to always be UNITED, and of "one accord"? Did God establish GOVERNMENT and powerful AUTHORITY within His Church? Is God's church government from the Top Down or from the Bottom Up? How can Jesus Jesus Christ keep His Church UNITED if there is no structure of government? What are "apostles," "prophets," "evangelists," and so forth? Let's face it! Some of us are being "had" by a very clever Devil who hates God's government! There is more argument over CHURCH GOVERNMENT today than almost any other issue! What is God's pure and plain TRUTH?

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Jesus Christ told Peter and the apostles, "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt.16:18). That church was to never die, or disappear, or peter out and vanish from sight. It would always exist, and continue to be, in one form or another, till the end of the age, when Christ would return!

But would the Church always be united -- singular -- in perfect oneness? Jesus, in His final prayer for the church before His death, prayed that the Father would "keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be ONE, as we are" (John 17:11). He added, "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they ALL MAY BE ONE . . . that they may be one, even as we are one" (verses 20-22).

But how would Christ preserve and protect His Church unless there was government and administrative AUTHORITY in His Church?

Did Jesus mean for His Church to become a “democracy,” where the people rule, through voting in ministers and deacons? Or did GOD choose His ministers, and then verify His choice by their “fruits”?

Why did Jesus say to His twelve apostles, “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen YOU, and *ordained* you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit” (John 15:16)?

Why did Paul the apostle write and say: “And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets; thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Have all the gifts of healing? . . . But covet earnestly the best gifts” (I Cor.12:28-31).

If ministers are not accountable for governing God’s Church, then why did Paul write the Ephesian Church: “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the *perfecting* of the saints, for the WORK of the ministry, and for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph.4:11-12)?

How can a Church endure, and exist, unless there is LEADERSHIP – *some who RULE – and some with MORE authority than others?*

Paul made it even more plain that in God’s true Church, the ministry is a DIVINE CALLING. We know how Jesus called His disciples, who were to become the leaders of the Church – the twelve apostles (Matt.4; John 1). Likewise, we know how the apostle Paul was divinely “called” and “chosen” to be a minister of Jesus Christ (Acts 9:1-18; I Cor.4:1-9; Gal.1:12-18). God Himself chooses and selects *His true ministers!*

What is important then, is that we PROVE who are the true ministers and servants of GOD!

Government and Organization

Many have pointed out in the past that the Bible is a book about “Government.” And that is true. It reveals God as the Almighty Creator who *governs and rules* the entire Universe!

God also gave mankind authority to rule and govern the world itself. God told Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and *subdue* it: and have DOMINION over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (Gen.1:28).

As the human race grew, by families, God appointed His government in the home, making the father to be the loving ruler and supreme authority. Parents were to rule their children, and final decisions in the home were the province of the father. As Paul explained: “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man; and the head of Christ is God” (I Cor.11:3).

As families grew, and became nations, God’s government was the patriarchal and elder system. In ancient Israel, the tribes were ruled over by leading men and elders among the people. Elders became such because of their abilities, leadership qualities, and the acceptance of the people. They were the “princes” among the tribes.

Moses later was led to appoint or “choose” men to help him lead the nation of Israel. He “chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people, rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens. And they judged the people at all seasons: the hard causes they brought unto Moses, but every small matter they judged themselves” (Exo.18:25-26). Moses did this because he was being worn out trying to do everything himself. He followed the wise advice of his father-in-law Jethro.

During the early occupation of the Promised Land, the “elder” system served the people of Israel, combined with the system of the priesthood, which was hereditary. At this time God raised up and appointed “judges” to rule the people, to decide cases of law between the people, and to “govern” the nation.

Even this system had its faults, however, because human beings are prone to be human beings, make mistakes, and sometimes veer off from the right path. The book of Judges shows Israel continually resisted God’s government, His laws, and forsook the right paths, plunging into the idolatry of neighboring nations. Says the last portion of the book of Judges: “In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25).

During this time, God raised up a servant to Him named Samuel – a prophet called from childhood. Samuel grew in his office, wisdom, and leadership, and taught the people the ways of God. But as he grew old, he lost control of his grown children, who began making mischief at the Sanctuary of God, seducing the young women who came, taking bribes, perverting judgment, and debauching themselves. The people of Israel grew frustrated. Rather than blame themselves for the sad state of affairs, they blamed Samuel for poor oversight of his office and complained to him. They requested that he appoint them a KING to rule over them, like the other nations, thinking this would solve their problems!

We read in I Samuel , chapter 8, “Then all the *elders of Israel* gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah, and said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but *they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them*” (I Samuel 8:4-7).

What can we learn from this short HISTORY lesson about government in the Bible? Simply this: God appointed government over people, and rulers, but *people don't like it! Human government sooner or later succumbs to the flesh, becomes perverted, and corrupt!*

An old saying goes: Authority corrupts; but absolute authority corrupts absolutely!

As long as human nature and the lusts of the flesh enter the picture, all human forms of government tend to degenerate and become abusive and corrupt! This problem is true *even in the Church of God!*

Church Government Today

Initially, when Herbert Armstrong began serving God, he did not found a Church but rather an evangelical work. As it grew, and members were baptized, he called it the "Radio Church of God." In those days he acknowledged that the Church of God, Seventh Day, and others, were also parts of the body of Christ.

But after the Church grew big, and powerful, individuals began referring to the "work" as "the Church." By the late '50s and early '60s Herbert Armstrong himself began denying the fact that others could also be part of the body of Christ, and began calling virtually all other groups "counterfeits." This trend continued and grew more flagrant, as the Church increased in power, income, and membership.

There is a mortal danger in any organizational structure, whether ecclesiastical or secular. As growth continues, management systems are brought in, and faith and inspiration become overlooked and neglected. Systems replace faith; numbers crunching replaces inspiration. Human logic and reason and planning take the place of looking to Christ and expecting miracles to do the Work! Specially designed "co-worker letters" are sent to people to maximize the monetary returns -- taking advantage of widows, older people, and those who are ignorant of the methods of modern evangelism!

"The Organizational Trap"

The organizational trap swallowed the Worldwide Church of God, and a hierarchical structure developed, with the ministerial elite on one level and the plebeian masses of Church members down at the bottom. Soon ministers were expected to always be called "Mr." and never addressed by their first name! The examples and instruction of Christ and the early Church were completely ignored and bypassed.

Jesus Christ said, "The kings of the Gentiles LORD IT OVER THEM; and those who exercise AUTHORITY over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For

who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:25-27).

In the world's system of government, such as kingships, monarchies, dictatorships, the people serve the leaders or rulers – not vice versa. But in God's system, the greatest servant is the one who rules – whether he be king, president, or simply "chief."

As human hierarchies develop, however, people have a tendency to begin looking to the ministers not only as their spiritual guides and rulers, but even as their masters, and virtual dictators -- and not to Christ! In warning against this tendency, Jesus Christ declared: "But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father [in a spiritual sense, such as "Pope"] upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters [the term "Mr." is short for the term 'master'; usage of this term for the "ministry" can lead to wrong attitudes of superiority and inferiority among God's people]: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted" (Matt.23:8-12).

When churches disobey this simple set of instructions by Christ, the ministry becomes an inflated, self-serving, ego trip! Humility is swallowed up in pride and pride leads to arrogance! And arrogance leads to abusive, intrusive, wrong-headed, dictatorial forms of "Church government"!

History of Government in the Church

Herbert Armstrong incorporated the Radio Church of God in 1948. One 19 year time cycle, later, Loma D. Armstrong died -- in 1967. One 19 time cycle later, Herbert W. Armstrong died -- in January, 1986! These numbers illustrate the fact that God was working with the Church of God, during this time, even though mistakes were made by the human leaders. As the Church grew, he felt the need to establish lines of authority, and began ordaining various "levels" of ministers thinking he was following God's way, not realizing that ministerial "gifts" are NOT appointed "ranks," but divinely distributed GIFTS of the Spirit of God (I Cor.12:1-11). GOD is the one who appoints spiritual offices -- not men! (I Cor.12:27-31; Eph.4:9-13). These offices are REAL enough, and they have AUTHORITY – but they are not based on *human appointments!*

In other words, in the book of Acts we read that the apostles ordained Philip and Steven as "deacons." This was a special ministerial office of serving the widows and taking care of physical needs in the Church (Acts 6:1-6). But because these men were close to God, and leaders, HE chose them to become *evangelists* – a much higher office in the Church (Acts 6:8; 8:5; 21:8). These men were not "raised in rank" by additional "ordination," as practiced in the Worldwide Church of God and others. These additional "offices" were given by God and were revealed by the men's WORKS!

Thus God's true Church was never like the army, navy, or military, where men are increased in rank by their superior officers or the "brass." Rather, these higher offices are given by GOD and are revealed in the persons life by his spiritual works and gifts!

By establishing a *human-appointed* ministerial hierarchy, Herbert Armstrong was falling into the trap of Satan the devil, and setting up a GENTILE form of Church Government, the very thing Jesus Christ warned against and condemned (Matt.20:24-28; 23:8-12). He thereby created and injected the seeds of the Church's eventual destruction and take-over by Satan the devil! What seemed to work for him to keep the Church united and under one management and control, preserving church doctrines from apostate tendencies, worked for his successor to CHANGE doctrines subtly, and cleverly – to use the same form of Church "government" to lead the church off into apostasy and heresy!

The plain truth is, after the death of Herbert Armstrong in 1986, the Worldwide Church of God which he founded, forsook its moorings, his teachings, and veered off the tracks -- and the rest is history. Church government, taught so strongly by Herbert Armstrong, turned out to be the DOWNFALL of his Church. When he died his appointed successor seized control of the Church, using the same arguments of "Church authority" to assist him in his takeover!

Throughout history, beginning in the first century of the Church, Satan influenced evil men to infiltrate God's Church, and rise up to positions of leadership. The early apostles had to wrestle with them constantly and wrote of their nefarious workings (Acts 20:28-31; II Pet.2:1-3; Jude 3-4). Such men, no doubt, looked "good" on the outside, and dressed snappily, and acted like loyal, obedient servants -- yet sooner or later, began to teach error, and began to go astray and apostatize.

Even so, Paul, Peter and Jude foretold the same sort of apostasy would occur in the last generation, before the coming of Christ! (II Tim.3:1-11, 4:1-5; II Peter, and Jude). Paul wrote, "Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day [the return of Christ] shall not come, except there come a FALLING AWAY FIRST, and that man of sin be revealed . . ." (II Thess.2:3). The "mystery of iniquity" was already at work in Paul's day, he said (v.7), but it would rise to a consummation of deceitfulness and pinnacle of powerful delusion, in the last days (v.8-12), so that those who do not have a "love of the truth" will be deceived, led astray, and ultimately destroyed -- judged and punished with the wicked.

A Church Divided Up into Remnants?

Jesus Christ foretold that His Church would always exist – the gates of hell would never conquer it (Matt.16:18).

Does this mean, however, that the church would never be "divided"? That it would never be "split" into various branches, or divisions, or various groups independent of each other, each answering solely to Christ?

Some have thought so -- and have therefore made the boastful claim that they are the ONE AND ONLY "*TRUE CHURCH OF GOD*"! Herbert Armstrong used to make this seemingly proud boast continually -- and as "proof," he would point out that nobody taught the same thing as he did, and that all one had to do to prove that he was God's true messenger was just to compare the messages of everyone else, including himself, with the Scriptures. If he was right, then all the rest had to be wrong!

But is it really as simple as that? What if he himself was wrong on certain points? Would that "prove" that his church wasn't the true church, either?

Of course it would! The truth is, there is NO PERFECT CHURCH group on the face of the earth, today! How then can we recognize God's TRUE church, and His TRUE form of Church government? Where can we look? How can we identify the TRUTH?

"Wolves in Sheep's Clothing"

In the last few years, I have seen and experienced "wolves in sheep's clothing," trying to "join" with me in this Work of God, who since proved to be virulent predators who led a few people off into the netherworld of religious apostasy. Unfortunately, those few who followed such were ripe for the picking or plucking -- their own attitudes were wrong, in some crucial way, and so God allowed them to be led off into the religious "boondocks" and "wilderness."

God allows such things to happen. We know that these things must happen -- why? "For there must be also heresies among you, *that they which are approved* may be made manifest among you" (I Cor.11:19). These "tests" which come upon God's people separate the "sheep from the goats," as it were. They prove to be a sort of "litmus test" of the reality of the faith and obedience of those who profess to follow Christ!

When we look at church history, it becomes very apparent that fractures, divisions, and schisms, often occurred to the Church of God. Most of the resultant groups went into varying forms of religious apostasy, and departed from the truth, and could no longer be called correctly, "the church of God." They had been infiltrated, conned, and taken over by Satan the seductive devil and his devious minions.

However, history and Biblical prophecy also prove that there have been and can be "divisions" of various degrees WITHIN the spiritual "body of Christ," as well! As I see it, there is no doubt that "divisions" and "differences" have occurred in the true church of God, throughout its history, due to human nature, human imperfection, and weakness -- as well as human sins, and "goats" among the sheep! Jesus Himself said that the "wheat and tares" would dwell IN the church, side by side, TILL THE HARVEST (second coming), which itself leads to a certain amount of division and contention within the visible "church" (see Matt.13:36-43). Jesus warned FIRST for us to beware of false prophets

and teachers because they would be the church's MAJOR DANGER -- further evidence of strife, division, and "splits" occurring within the true church (Matt.24:11).

"Divisions" in Paul's Day

Paul warned expressly of this danger, saying to the Ephesus church leaders, "TAKE HEED therefore unto YOURSELVES, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God . . . For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. ALSO, of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:28-30).

Paul beseeched the Corinthians not to allow "divisions" to crop up among them (I Cor.1:10). It was reported to Paul that there were "contentions among you," as he wrote to them, admonishing them to watch out for such things (v.11). These were serious contentions, so Paul asked them, "Is Christ divided?" (v.13). No -- of course not! Christ is ONE. But apostasy set in within the first century church, and communication was not easy from church to church, so local congregations began to become more and more independent. DIVISION set in! Those with the Spirit of God guiding them, remained loyal to the truth, but more and more "differences of opinion" crept in, after the departure of the original apostles. Paul called the Corinthians "CARNAL" (I Cor.3:1-3). He warned them, "For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and STRIFE, and DIVISIONS, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?" (v.3).

Some of these churches were still God's Church, even though various "differences" had crept in. They had not yet made a major change in doctrine which militated against their being considered "Christian" in God's sight! They had various "problems" -- but they were not yet sick "unto death" -- spiritual death!

This was the CHURCH OF GOD, with all of its "spots and wrinkles." Clearly, it had carnal-minded ministers and leaders, in some cases, and there were arguments, debates, and strife. One of the major issues of that day was whether a Gentile needed to be "circumcised" and become a Jew in order to be saved. This controversy led to a major doctrinal meeting in Jerusalem over the issue (Acts 15).

So even the New Testament Church, as we see, was NOT "united." There were "DIVISIONS" in the church. Yet Christ is NOT divided. But experience proves that human beings, even those who STRIVE to follow Him, can be divided, and have differences of opinions about many things -- policies, judgments, prophecies, even some doctrines. Of course, the BASIC truths they should all adhere to. Paul and Barnabas had a major disagreement at one point, which caused them to go their separate ways, and to conduct separate ministries, in effect -- although they still regarded each other as "brothers" (Acts 15:36-39).

The Seven Churches of Revelation

In describing the Church of God during the last days, the time of the end, in the book of Revelation, Jesus Christ describes it in letters to SEVEN churches -- not just ONE. Each church is independent, locally governed, with its own administration, having originally been planted by true servants of God. But each one has DIFFERENT PROBLEMS, differences in many ways, and each is given particularly pointed correction (Rev.2-3).

Notice that to the first church, Ephesus, Christ says, "Remember therefore from whence thou art FALLEN, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou REPENT" (Rev.2:5). Here is a church, in the end time, just before the "Day of the Lord" (Rev.1:10), which needs to REPENT!

The third church, in Pergamos, also is told, "REPENT; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (Rev.2:16). This also seems to be a clear indication of the existence of this church just before the second coming of Christ -- it will be in existence "when he comes" and He will fight against it, when He returns, if it doesn't REPENT of its sins! Yet it also has faithful saints, typified by the martyr Antipas, whom Christ refers to as "my faithful martyr" (v.13).

The fourth church, Thyatira, is told, "But that which ye have already *hold fast TILL I COME*" (Rev.2:25). It also is obviously in existence when Christ returns, as it is commanded to "hold fast" TILL He returns!

The fifth church, Sardis, is also warned: "Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, *I will come on thee as a thief*, and thou shalt not know what hour *I will come* upon thee" (Rev.3:3).

Similarly, the sixth church, Philadelphia is told: "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown" (Rev.3:11).

Finally, the seventh church, the church of Laodicea, is told: "I counsel thee to buy of me gold tried in the fire, that thou mayest be rich: and white raiment, that thou mayest be clothed, and that the shame of thy nakedness do not appear" (Rev.3:18). Here is reference to the end-time Great Tribulation just ahead of us, which this "division" or "segment" or "remnant" of the Church of God must go through, in order to be made white and worthy!

These seven "churches" of Revelation stand for and represent SEVEN MAJOR DIVISIONS OR INDEPENDENT GROUPS which worship God and "keep His commandments," and believe in Christ as the Messiah, to the extent that God still considers them HIS Church! But they obviously have many, many major problems, which earn most of them the wrath and anger of God, if they don't "repent"!

This indicates that during these last days, the "true church of God" has over the centuries divided up into SEVEN major or minor "branches" -- each different, yet each enough alike to be part of the SAME TREE. Each has the SAME Spirit, but each has unique differences. Pergamos has a problem with paganism creeping in (Rev.2:14). Smyrna doesn't have much knowledge, apparently, but is rich in love -- and gives its life in persecution and martyrdom (Rev.2:9-10). Thyatira has a problem with the teachings of "Jezebel" -- a type of the great false church (Rev.2:18-21).

The most degenerate of all the churches, of course, is the LAODICEAN church (Rev.3:13-22). Its seems to describe not the Worldwide Church of God, which is very rapidly becoming "Protestant," but now its major offshoot Churches!

Why is God's Church so divided up, today? Why seven different major divisions?

The answer involves the problem of church government! Division occurs where leadership that would be truly obedient to God is lacking! It occurs when people cease to look to the Word of God and begin to look to human leaders instead!

To preserve and protect the Church is why God placed GOVERNMENTAL OFFICES in His Church!

WHY Church Government?

Paul wrote to the Ephesians 4:11-13, "And he gave some, apostles, and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers [WHY?]: For the perfecting of the saints [i.e., they are not yet perfect!], for the work of the ministry, for the edifying [BUILDING, strengthening] of the body of Christ [the church]: TILL WE ALL COME IN THE UNITY OF THE FAITH" -- ah hah! Did you catch that? "TILL we all come in [or, INTO] the UNITY of the faith." In other words, WE DO NOT YET HAVE TRUE OR PERFECT UNITY in faith, beliefs, doctrines, etc.!

The Greek word translated "church," *ekklesia*, merely means "called out ones." In the Old Testament, the "church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38) was generally called the "congregation of Israel." The proper name of God's Church, therefore, could be interpreted in English as "Assembly of God," "Congregation of God," "Church of God," or the "Group of God," or anything similar. There is nothing particularly "holy" about the word "church" itself. It is, properly speaking, merely a term used to describe a religious "group."

Just what is the "church of God," or "God's Church," which Jesus Christ founded? Is it a human organization of men, with a corporate charter approved by a state or government of this world? Many people seem to think so. However, that is NOT what the Scriptures teach us!

Rather, the church of God is the "body of Christ" -- that is, all those who truly belong to Christ Jesus, who have His Holy Spirit -- whether or not they belong to any other "organization" or "group." As Paul wrote, "For by one Spirit are we all baptized into ONE BODY, whether we are Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. For the body is not one member but many" (I Cor.12:13-14). This is a SPIRITUAL BODY! It consists of all TRUE believers -- those whom God has called and chosen! It is defined as all those people who have the Holy Spirit of God within them. As Paul also explained, "Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" (Rom.8:9).

Paul also wrote the Ephesians, "There is ONE BODY, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling" (Eph.4:4).

These true believers could even be scattered throughout many different Christ-professing groups, each with varying degrees of error in their teaching. Some of these true members of the spiritual "body of Christ" may not have contact with any organization or group. They could be all alone, serving God in their area! They may not even know of another true Christian, who believes like they do, for hundreds of miles!

This may seem incredible to some, but even Elijah at one point in his life thought that he was the only remaining true believer in God in all Israel! He said to God, when the wicked queen Jezebel was seeking to slay him, "I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty. The Israelites have rejected your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. *I am the only one left*, and now they are trying to kill me too" (I Kings 19:10). When God once again asked him what he was doing in the desert, Elijah gave the same answer again (verse 14). He thought he was ALL ALONE serving God! He was depressed, discouraged, and fearful of his life!

But Elijah was not alone. God told him, "Yet I reserve seven thousand in Israel -- all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him" (verse 18).

The point I am making, here, is that you do not need to have a "local congregation," or a "church of God" in your area, in order to be a true servant of God -- even a powerful servant, as Elijah was! Not at all! Let's grasp once and for all the plain TRUTH about just what GOD'S "church" or "ekklesia" really IS!

The Ekklesia of God

The apostle Paul wrote, ". . . Christ is the head of *the Church, his body*, of which he is the Saviour" (Eph.5:23). As Christians, "we are members of his body" (verse 30). Jesus is "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation . . . And he is the head of *the body, the church*" (Col.1:15-18). God appoints "some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ

may be built up UNTIL we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ" (Eph.4:11-13).

This Scripture shows, among other things, that God has put spiritual "offices" in His Church, or the body of Christ, according to the various talents and gifts that He gives to men. Not all have the same abilities. As Paul wrote to the Romans, "Just as each of us has one body with many members [hands, feet, toes, fingers, ears, eyes, nose, mouth, lips, tongue, heart, legs, arms, etc., etc.], and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully" (Rom.12:4-8).

The apostle Peter explains, along the same lines, "Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ" (I Pet.4:10-11).

All of us then, who serve God honestly and humbly, sincerely and to the best of our knowledge according to the truth of His Word, who have received the Spirit of Christ and of God as a begettal, BELONG TO CHRIST! We are members of His spiritual BODY! That body is not in any way a "human" church or "human" corporation, although there are many who may claim that they are the "only true Church of God." Such claims border on blasphemy against the Spirit of God!

The Purpose of the Ministry

According to God's Word, the purpose of the ministry is to ENCOURAGE growth, not to stop it in its tracks. It is to encourage spiritual development, study, research, questioning, investigation of knowledge. God wants us to grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (II Pet.3:18).

The original, intended purpose of the ministry, in the eyes of God, is revealed in the book of Ephesians. God inspired Paul to write, "And he gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the PERFECTING of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the EDIFYING of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, UNTO A PERFECT (MATURE) MAN, unto the measure of the stature of the FULNESS OF CHRIST: That we henceforth be NO MORE CHILDREN (mere babes, infants), tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love, may GROW UP INTO HIM IN ALL THINGS, which is the head, even Christ" (Eph.4:11-15).

The purpose of the ministers is to be helpers, to help us grow in faith and knowledge of Christ -- not barbarian overlords. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand" (II Cor.1:24).

Faith is between you and God -- not you and the local minister. There is only one Intermediary between you and God -- Jesus Christ (I Tim.2:5). You have only one Saviour -- Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12).

There are probably a good many sincere ministers in the Church of God, men who are doing a good work of helping the brethren to grow, as best they can. We should love them and highly respect them for their work and sacrifice. As Paul wrote, "And we beseech you, brethren, to KNOW them which labour among you, and are OVER you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to ESTEEM them very highly IN LOVE for their work's sake" (I Thessalonians 5:12-13).

"Binding and Loosing"

Many have read the Scripture in Matthew 16:19 where Jesus Christ said to Peter, "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' Some have thought that this Scripture gives Church ministers virtually carte blanche authority to make decisions on earth, and whatever they decide will be automatically bound in heaven!

For example, if a minister made a wrong decision, totally contrary to the law of God, do you believe that God would bind it anyway?

If a minister decided a couple were living in adultery, when the law of God said they were not, would God back the minister's decision and force the couple to break up in order to enter the Kingdom of God?

Is God such a cruel, unjust, harsh monster? Nonsense!

If a minister or apostle or evangelist told a person who was already married in the sight of God that it would be all right for him or her to marry another, while their mate still lived, would God Almighty back that decision, contrary to His own law?

God cannot contradict Himself, or bind any decision that is made contrary to His own inexorable, eternal, immutable, spiritual LAW! THE LAW OF GOD IS ALWAYS BINDING and cannot be nullified by the whim or error of any minister on the earth! The Law of God reveals the very picture of the eternal CHARACTER of God! It shows what He IS! Jesus Himself said, "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Matt.5:18).

The apostle Paul pointed out, "Wherefore the law is HOLY, and the commandment HOLY, and just, and good" (Rom.7:12). He added: "For we know that the LAW IS SPIRITUAL" (verse 14) -- and that which is spiritual is of necessity ETERNAL! As Paul also wrote, "but the things which are NOT SEEN are eternal" (II Cor.4:18). David wrote in the Psalms, "All his commandments are sure. They stand fast FOR EVER AND EVER, and are done in truth and uprightness" (Psalm 111:7-8).

Isn't that clear? Then no decision by any minister at any time can nullify or do away with or abrogate or rescind or erase the eternal, spiritual law of GOD! If a minister makes a decision contrary to the law of God, his DECISION itself in God's sight is null and void, cancelled out by the Law of God, and is nullified and abrogated and rescinded by the higher law of GOD!

In Matthew 16:19 Jesus Christ was not giving His ministry, or His apostles, any authority to bind or loose or make decisions contrary to the eternal, immutable law of God. This verse was never intended to be used as *carte blanche* authority to support the abuse or misuse of authority in the Church of God. Rather, when those in authority read this verse, they should FEAR AND TREMBLE -- for they will be held accountable before God for how they use their ministerial authority!

Rulership in God's Church!

We read in Hebrews 13:17 a very important Bible principle. Paul wrote, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, *as they that must give ACCOUNT.*"

We also read in verse 7, "Remember them that have the RULE over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation [conduct]."

The word for "rule" in these verses in the Greek language is *hegeomai* and means "TO LEAD" or "GUIDE." It derives from the word *hegemon* which means "a leader, a governor of a province, ruler." Our English word "hegemony" comes from this word.

Thus those in God's Church who are in the ministry are indeed "leaders," "GUIDES," rulers, and must GOVERN the Church – they are spiritual "governors"!

Those in the ministry will have to give ACCOUNT -- they will have to answer to Jesus Christ -- for how they have conducted their ministry! They will be held RESPONSIBLE! Any who foolishly abuse their authority, or use it like a club, or pervert it to contradict the laws of God, will be held supremely accountable, and will suffer CONDEMNATION!

God never intended His ministry to rule the flock or the Church with cruelty, harshness, or totalitarian despotism. His ministers were never intended to become despots or tyrants over the flock. God never intended His ministers to be suspicious "overlords," who would shoot first, and ask questions of the body.

He never intended for His people to live their lives in fear of the authorities, fearful of questioning, fearful of harassment. He never intended His Church to become an authoritarian-driven cult, with ministers prying into every nook and corner of people's private lives. He never intended the ministry to be a kind of Secret Police, KGB, or Nazi Gestapo, encouraging members to spy on one another and to become "informers."

According to the way of God, if any brother in the Church sees another commit a sin, he is NOT to go straight to the ministry, as a tattle-tale. Rather, he is to go direct to his brother who sinned, and confront him IN LOVE with what he saw.

As Paul wrote, "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one IN THE SPIRIT OF MEEKNESS, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Gal.6:1).

The apostle Peter said of God's true ministry, "The ELDERS which are among you, I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: FEED the flock of God which is among you, taking the OVERSIGHT thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock" (I Peter 5:1-3).

Thus God's true ministers will not be harsh, overbearing "over-lords." They will be like loving shepherds, who feed the flock willingly, out of love. They indeed have "oversight" and responsibility for the flock entrusted by God to their care. They therefore have RULERSHIP over them, spiritually. But as true ministers, they will not abuse this authority, knowing that they must one day give a complete account of their actions and activities and rulership!

Authority and Disfellowshipping

God's people must realize and recognize that Almighty God and Jesus Christ DID place "government" in His true Church body! Let's be sure we really understand this matter! Don't allow ANY BODY – no matter how seemingly sincere – deceive you on this vital point of Biblical truth!

God DOES give His *true, Spirit-begotten and Spirit-led* MINISTERS *authority to govern and RULE in the Church of God!*

The apostle Paul explains that sometimes God's ministers DO have to "DISFELLOWSHIP" certain brethren, or even ministers, for the sake of protecting the flock, God's people! It is God's principle and His way, ordained in Scripture, that at times true ministers of God must disfellowship certain people. When brethren go astray, and begin attacking God's servants, we *must* take action to defend the flock. Paul says, in inspired Scripture:

"For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present

I have already pronounced judgment in the name of the Lord Jesus on the man who has done such a thing. When you are assembled, and my spirit is present with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to *hand this man over to Satan* for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord" (I Cor.5:3-5, NRSV).

Paul continues:

"But now I am writing you not to associate with ANYONE *who bears the name of a brother or sister who is . . . an IDOLATER, REVILER, drunkard, or robber. DO NOT EVEN EAT WITH SUCH A ONE.*

For what have I to do with judging those outside? Is it not those who are INSIDE that you are to judge? God will judge those outside. *DRIVE OUT the wicked person from among you"* (verses 11-13).

The *Amplified Bible* explains this in greater detail, saying:

"But now I write to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of [Christian] brother, if he is known to be guilty of immorality or greed, or is an idolater -- that is, whose soul is devoted to an object that usurps the place of God -- or [is] a person with a foul tongue (railing, abusing, reviling, slandering), or is a drunkard, or a swindler or a robber. [No], you must not so much as eat with such a person Drive out that wicked one from among you -- *expel him from your church"* (vs.11-13).

I write these things because I want to save God's people from the jaws of the devil, and his bloody, dripping fangs. He has devoured many who have strayed, or wandered away from the straight and narrow path. He has gorged himself on their blood and flesh. He is a frightful monster, a fiend, a howling banshee of the night.

God commands His ministers to clean up His Church, so the bride can be spotless and pristine for the coming of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, our Messiah and Saviour (Eph.5:22-27).

Paul also wrote, telling when and why some people simply *must* be disfellowshipped! He declared:

"Now I beseech you, brethren, MARK THEM which cause DIVISIONS AND OFFENSES *contrary to the doctrine which you have learned; AND AVOID THEM*. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches *DECEIVE the hearts of the simple*" (Rom.16:17-18).

"But avoid foolish questions, and genealogies, and contentions, and strivings about the law; for they are unprofitable and vain. A man that is an heretick after the first and second admonition *reject; knowing that he that is such is SUBVERTED, and sinneth, being condemned of himself*" (Titus 3:9-11).

Why do some people think disfellowshippment is wrong and beyond ministerial authority? Is it because they themselves have an attitude of REBELLION against God, and refuse to take disciplinary action when it is administered to *them*?

Paul said the duty of God's true ministers is to --

"Herald and preach the Word! Keep your sense of urgency (stand by, be at hand and ready, whether the opportunity seems to be favorable or unfavorable, whether it is convenient or inconvenient, whether it be welcome or unwelcome, **you as preacher of the Word are to show people in what way their lives are wrong**) and **convince them, rebuking and correcting, warning and urging and encouraging them**, being unflagging and inexhaustible in patience and teaching.

"For the time is coming [and has NOW come!] when [people] will not tolerate [endure] sound and wholesome instruction, *but having*

ears itching [for something pleasing and gratifying], they will gather to themselves one teacher after another to a considerable number, chosen to satisfy their own liking and to foster the errors they hold, *and will TURN ASIDE FROM HEARING THE TRUTH AND WANDER OFF INTO MYTHS AND MAN-MADE FICTIONS"* (II Tim.4:2-4).

To protect and preserve the flock of God, His true ministers **MUST** at times use **AUTHORITY!** At times they must "rebuke, exhort, correct, warn," and discipline unruly or rebellious members, who have gotten into a wrong frame of mind!

It is the duty of God's true ministers to **PROTECT** and **GUARD** the flock -- God's sheep -- from all the prowling wolves, scavengers, hyenas, coyotes, mountain lions, and other enemies who seek to **DEVOUR** them! To do this, sometimes we have to use very blunt and incisive language, name names, and "denounce" the evil and dangers we see! It may not make us very popular. But serving God is no popularity contest -- it is a titanic contest of wills, a fierce struggle against those who promote error and heresy. It is a matter of truth versus error, God versus Satan and his wiles, a struggle for supremacy in the battle of light versus darkness. No quarter may be given in such a fight, unless we are willing to lose out on our salvation!

Sometimes the attacks of Satan come through *false brethren*, those who pretend to be our friends while it suits their purpose -- or even *false ministers* -- but when the time comes, they strike at us like a snake, waiting in ambush -- they strike like a pit viper, to destroy God's people with their venom!

God warns us in His Word to beware of all those who would put His Work or His people in peril and danger, who would strike at His servants, and try to sabotage the Work by their criticisms, attacks, slander, reproach, and caustic, belittling remarks. It is the solemn duty of true ministers to **EXPOSE** such people, and to "MARK" them carefully!

There are those among us, who were formerly with us, but who turned aside to error -- both laymen and ministers alike -- and they **MUST** be "MARKED," and cast out of the fellowship of God's Church! As Paul says:

"Some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling desiring to be teachers of the law; understanding neither what they say, nor whereof they affirm" (I Tim.1:6-7).

"Whereas the object and purpose of our instruction and charge

is love which springs from a pure heart and a good (clear) conscience and sincere (unfeigned) faith. But certain individuals have MISSED THE MARK on this very matter [and] have *wandered away into vain arguments and discussions and purposeless talk*" (verses 5-6, *Amplified Bible*).

When a root of bitterness begins to grow in a person, it is a poisonous weed, and like most weeds, it grows rapidly, taking over the whole mind and thoughts. It changes the heart, and corrupts the soul. The apostle Paul warned us to be very wary of allowing even a small "root of bitterness" to dwell in our hearts and minds. He said:

"Strive to live at peace with everybody, and pursue that consecration and holiness without which no one will [ever] see the Lord.

"Exercise foresight and be on the watch to look [after one another], to see that no one falls back from and fails to secure God's grace (His unmerited favor and spiritual blessing), in order that NO ROOT OF RESENTMENT (RANCOR, BITTERNESS OR HATRED) shoot forth and CAUSE TROUBLE and bitter torment, and the MANY become contaminated and defiled by it" (Heb.12:14-15, *Amplified Bible*).

Remember, certain men like Korah and his followers even slandered Moses, others tried to kill Enoch. Simon Magus led many astray in New Testament times (Acts 8). Jeremiah was thrown in prison; Isaiah was sawn asunder; Daniel was thrown into a den of lions! Why? Because men did not respect their message from God, and refused to submit to DIVINE, GODLY AUTHORITY! They did not want to submit themselves to GOD's authority, God's government, as it was expressed through these men.

When Israel refused God's government, when Samuel was the "judge" of Israel, and wanted a "king" instead, God said to Samuel, "They have not rejected you, they have rejected ME, that I should not reign over them" (I Sam.8:7).

Samuel was the "minister" of God in his days. But the people wanted *other* authority over them – they foolishly thought that a "king" would be much better! O how hard it is for people to learn!

What many seemingly have a difficult time learning is that GOD WORKS THROUGH MEN! It is GOD who placed authority and government IN His true Church! It is the DUTY of ministers to shepherd the flock, to teach the truths of God, and to protect the flock from wolves, predators, and false shepherds! What could be clearer than that?

What we all must DO, therefore, is prove carefully, using the BIBLE as our yardstick, WHO REALLY ARE the TRUE ministers and servants of God!

That is, *WHO ARE THE ONES REALLY TEACHING GOD'S TRUTH!*

How Final UNITY Will Be Achieved

How is true "unity" really created? With human nature being what it is, and human beings being prone to independence, and a universal dislike of "human authority," how can the various "churches of God" ever become truly "ONE"? How can they be truly "UNITED"?

Is it not through the fires of trials and tests and tribulation? Some are more hard-headed than others, and need stronger testing and trials in order to mature spiritually.

Notice! Many, in this final age, will have to go through, and then come out of, "great tribulation," in which they "have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the lamb" (Rev.7:14). Their robes are obviously dirty -- but the waters and bloodshed of Great Tribulation will give them the means to "wash" their robes, that they may become white -- righteous, in God's sight.

Daniel speaks of this same purification process, which will BRING US TOGETHER, and get rid of the dross, flimflam, dishonesty, and foolishness, which we see in the church and many members, today. Daniel was told, "And some of them of understanding shall FALL, to TRY them, and to PURGE, and to MAKE THEM WHITE, even to the *time of the end*" (Dan.11:35).

Although the church is "divided" into segments, and has many problems, today, these problems will in most cases be eliminated by the FIRES OF TRIBULATION and final testing. Christ is going to present the church to himself "a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph.5:27). In the coming months and years, Christ is going to CLEAN THE CHURCH UP! He is going to purge and purify every "element," every group, every true segment, rub-a-dub dub, and get rid of all the dirt, grime, grease and filth -- scrub, scrub, scrub -- until it is squeaky clean and spotless and shining!

Therefore, WHEN Christ returns, we read, "The marriage of the Lamb is come, and his WIFE hath made herself ready" (Rev.19:7). She is not ready, today. She is not yet purified, purged, and made

white. But she will be in time for the wedding! "And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints" (Rev.19:8).

What Is the BODY of Christ?

The body of Christ, His Church, is composed of EVERY TRUE BELIEVER around the world, whether or not they belong to a humanly incorporated "church." The body of Christ, His true Church, is not man-made -- it is SPIRITUAL!

Paul explains further: "The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into ONE [spiritual] BODY -- whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free -- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

"Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact GOD HAS ARRANGED the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!' And the head cannot say to the feet, 'I don't need you!' On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are INDISPENSABLE, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But GOD has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

"NOW YOU ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues [foreign languages]? Do all interpret? But eagerly desire the greater gifts" (I Cor.12:12-31).

If we truly belong to the body of Christ, then we are among those "parts" mentioned in the preceding verses. God has given each of us various abilities to use in His Work, His service, His "body," to encourage, uplift, strengthen and edify the other parts. What is the purpose of this?

Paul goes on, in his letter to the Ephesians, "Then we will *no longer be infants*, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things GROW UP into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph.4:14-16).

I know of NO human "church organization" which fulfills this description of the "body of Christ." All have failings, faults, hypocrites and liars in their midst -- even in their ministry and hierarchies. All fall far short of the mark to be considered "THE body of Christ." However, every true Christian, who has been baptized, received God's Spirit, REGARDLESS of which "church" they may belong to -- whether Seventh Day Baptist, Seventh Day Adventist, Seventh Day Church of God, Worldwide Church of God, Church of God International, or some other Church or group -- is a living MEMBER of the SPIRITUAL "body of Christ" described here!

The true members of the body of Christ may not be united in perfect doctrine or understanding of every vague Scripture or prophetic interpretation. But they are united by the bond of love for each other, regardless of their outward differences. Jesus explained to His disciples, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. . . . This is my command: Love each other" (John 15:12-17).

Jesus declared, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. BY THIS all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34-35).

How many churches I know which profess to be the "only true church" of God, and yet are dismally and abysmally LACKING in true love for others in their church, as well as lacking in true love for those outside their "group." How many I have known which have been filled with in-fighting, jealousy, bickering, bitterness, anger, rivalry, competition, strife, sins, hatreds, envies, deceits, and every wicked aspect of Satan's character!

To be perfectly honest with you, churches I have known seem to be best described by the apostle Paul when he wrote, "The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery, idolatry and witchcraft [astrology, plumb bobbing, water witching, etc., in the church itself!], hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you as I did before, that those who live like this will NOT inherit the kingdom of God" (Gal.5:19-21).

“By Their FRUITS”

But what are the TRUE characteristics of God's TRUE people? Jesus said we would recognize them "by their fruits." He declared, "Likewise *every good tree bears good fruit*, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. *A good tree cannot bear bad fruit*, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does

not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them" (Matt.7:17-20).

What does this tell us? We will know God's true Church – if we know how to recognize GOOD FRUITS!

What are the "fruits" of the true people of God? They may not be perfect in doctrinal understanding; they may not grasp all prophetic mysteries; they may not be very successful in the eyes of the world, or have many of this world's goods and treasures. They may be poor, and lacking in "manners." They may seem like "low class" people in the eyes of the "suits." They may not look like much in appearance. But they are described very accurately by these "fruits" mentioned by the apostle Paul.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal.5:22-23).

Jesus said that the "wheat" of God's true people would dwell side by side with "tares" -- weeds which impersonate wheat. The "tares" are planted by Satan the devil (Matt.13:36-43). The weeds may look like wheat, but they are evil; their goodness is only superficial; their inner heart is evil and rotten, selfish and destructive. Over a period of time, however, a tare can be spotted, just as a wheat can be verified -- by the "fruits."

James discussed the difference between the two when he wrote: "Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such 'wisdom' does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

"But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness" (James 3:13-18). The body of Christ is composed of THIS kind of people -- and every "church" I know of actually has BOTH kinds! No human "church," therefore, can possibly be the "one and only TRUE church of God!"

“When the Son of Man Comes, Will He

Find Faith on the Earth?”

A true Christian today is a rare commodity, indeed! Did not Jesus the Messiah Himself say, "However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

It would be nice if, during this final generation before the return of Christ, that the entire "body of Christ" were perfectly united in truth, belief, and practice, all experiencing the true "government of God" in our Church.. But today we see thousands of different churches, sects, denominations, and cults, each professing to be "Christian." The vast majority of them are nothing but hollow shells; they have departed from the faith and truth of God long ago, and are nothing but imposters, led by wolves in sheep's clothing, false prophets and wicked teachers who deny the Word of God in their life and practice (see II Cor.11:13-15). Others are more recent creations, but still far from the truth of God in many respects.

Where are the true people of God today? What kind of government exists in God's TRUE Churches?

The apostle Paul prophesied that the Church of God of this end-time would be in deplorable spiritual condition! He wrote that in our time there would be a whole-sale departure from the faith and truth of God (II Thess.2:3) -- a great spiritual REBELLION!

He warned, "But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasures rather than lovers of God -- having a FORM OF GODLINESS, but denying its power. Have nothing to do with them" (II Tim.3:1-5).

This warning involves those having an outward form or show of spirituality; they "seem" good on the outside, just like the Pharisees of old, during the time of Christ. But it is mere pretense. They are spiritual hypocrites!

Paul went on, warning us, that in the end time, "evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived" (II Tim.3:13). He wrote that in the last days many churches and men "will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the TRUTH and turn aside to myths" (II Tim.4:3-4).

Therefore, just because you and your church "seem" to observe holy days and Sabbaths does not prove that YOU know Christ or God, or truly belong to Him -- any more than the unconverted Pharisees! The real question is, do you *personally* really know Jesus Christ? Do you have a personal relationship with Him? Do you in deep humility and abject sincerity, address Him as your own personal Lord, Master and Saviour? Have you truly repented of your sins? Believe it or not, if you truly have this personal relationship, have repented, and are striving to follow Christ and keep God's commandments, then *you are a true Christian!*

Frankly -- let me be candid -- there is more hope of such a person entering the kingdom of God, than of many Sabbath keepers and holy day worshipers who don't study their Bibles daily, who only

pray five minutes a day or less on their knees! I personally know evangelical people who sincerely pray together, asking God's blessing on the food, when they eat out in restaurants, out of sincere love of Christ. On the other hand, I know many "Sabbath keepers" who would be ASHAMED of any such demonstration of the love of God, and who think of themselves as "superior," to any such outward display of love for Christ and God! If that attitude of smugness and cavalier self-superiority describes you, then shame on you!

On the other hand, I personally know of *evangelist* ministers who visited "NUDIE BARS," drank to the point of alcoholism, smoked cigarettes, who were high-ranking ministers in Sabbath-observing, holy-day keeping Churches of God!

Talk about hypocrisy! And they stressed the concept of "Church Authority" and "Church Government"! – that is, their OWN authority and government! Why? Was it because they lusted after the tithes and offerings of their members, to support and sustain their wild and wicked "lifestyle" behind closed doors?

Finding the True Church

The real key to being a Christian, and finding a TRUE Church of God, is to have God's Spirit as a begettal (Acts 2:38; 5:32), and to fellowship with others who also have His Spirit, as you are able to find them. If you do have the Spirit of God, and nurture it, and study God's Word daily so you can grow spiritually, then it will "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). In so doing, however, the time may come when it may require you to SEPARATE FROM any group which refuses the truth, and denies the truth, and which becomes or is guilty of apostasy!

Remember, Jesus said many would fall away from the truth during the last days (Matt.24:4-5). This warning includes WHOLE CHURCHES! Paul wrote, "That day will not come [the day of Christ's return] before there arises a DEFINITE REJECTION OF GOD and the appearance of the lawless man. He is the product of all that leads to death, and he sets himself up in opposition to every religion. He himself takes his seat in the temple of God, to show that he really claims to be God" (II Thess.2:3-4, Phillips Translation).

Because of human nature, politics, and desire for position and power among men, the Church of God has always had problems due to competition, strife, envy, false brethren, and false leaders, leading to splits, separations, divisions, and sects.

For example, during the split between the "Church of God, Seventh Day," and the "Seventh-Day Adventists," toward the end of the 19th century, the Church of God, Seventh Day people believed that the Adventists erred by leaving the name of God out of the Church name. In other words, the name of the Adventists no longer identified them as belonging to God. This was an error, no doubt, and the Adventists went from bad to worse as they followed the errors of the false prophetess Ellen G. White.

However, this error by itself did not mean they were no longer part of the "Church of God." It was merely an error, which someday might be repented of. God is very patient. This one error itself would not disqualify them as a remnant of God's true Church!

The True "Philadelphia Church of God"

I believe and hope that those who are with me in this Work of God are, for the most part, members of the "Philadelphia" Church mentioned in Revelation -- that is, we are the "remnants" of the Philadelphia Church. Of course, God will decide who really has the spirit of "brotherly love" which characterizes the true Biblical "Philadelphia" remnant of His Church.

It is perhaps *possible* that the Worldwide Church of God at one time was doing the work of the Philadelphia Church of God (Rev.3:8), because it seemingly was doing a great witness with very little membership. It seemed to have more truth than any other Church during the 1950s and '60s. However, as it grew larger, sheer apostasy and error set in, and leaders began going astray, as early as 1967 and 1972. The Church began compromising with the world, and errors began multiplying. It was torn with division in 1974, and again in 1978, and was temporarily taken over by the state of California in 1979. After the death of its founder, Herbert W. Armstrong, in January, 1986, it plunged – nose-dived – into rank apostasy under Joseph W. Tkach and its candle was put out, as it returned to mainstream Christianity.

Whether it was really ever a true representative of the Philadelphia Church, however, is, therefore, open to question and serious doubt, since the Church leadership was guilty of many flagrant and incredible sins and spiritual transgressions. Even Herbert Armstrong himself made many mistakes, and taught egregious doctrinal errors which did great harm to many married couples who had to split up because of terrible errors in divorce and remarriage doctrine. The Church also taught for many years that doctors and medicines were evil, Satanic, and thereby condemned many innocent and guiltless people – even young children and elderly men and women – to blindness, permanent injury, and unnecessary death!

As the Worldwide Church plunged into error, it began casting out the more zealous and diligent members who would not go along with the charade, who refused to compromise. They, these "outcast ones," became in a sense the remnant, the "core" of the true "Philadelphia" Church of God. They as a whole do not belong to ANY "visible" church organization. They may be attending NO services each Sabbath, not knowing where they might go. But they obey God's commandments; they observe the Sabbath and holy days AT HOME, or with a few others in their area of like understanding.

God is bringing many of them into contact with Triumph Prophetic Ministries, and they recognize that we are truly serving God. Their spirit witnesses with our spirit that we are of God. We speak the truth, and they recognize it. They are still "proving all things." Therefore, although they are scattered, they are still "hanging tough," "hanging in there," and "holding fast." The Philadelphia Church of God, therefore, today is probably a widely scattered bunch; they are not organized under the title "Philadelphia" Church of God, but they fit that description because of their personal "fruits."

There is a Church in Edmond, Oklahoma, which calls itself the "Philadelphia Church of God," but they were only organized in early 1990. They came into existence AFTER the Laodicean Church arose, yet the Philadelphia Church of the Bible is in existence BEFORE the Laodicean Church! They, therefore, are not the true Philadelphia Church of God. Besides, their doctrinal errors and totalitarian government prove they are impostors! Apart from the fact that they came into existence *too late*, they also retain many of the errors of Herbert W. Armstrong, consider him to be "Elijah," despite his many prophetic errors. Write for our articles, "The Prophetic Errors of Herbert W. Armstrong," and "The Philadelphia Church of God – Exposed"

The Counterfeit Dollar Bill Analogy

God's true Church, today, is not a visible "corporation" or "sect." You cannot just pick out a church group, and say, "This is it!" It is not that simple. You cannot say the true Church is like a dollar bill, and all the other churches are *counterfeit* dollar bills. That is a very misleading analogy, and confuses people. The problem with this analogy, so often used by Herbert Armstrong in the past, is that *NO CHURCH ON EARTH IS PERFECT!* But any "dollar bill" which is not "perfect" would have to be considered *counterfeit!*

If perfection were the "key" to identifying the true Church of God, THEN ALL CHURCHES WOULD BE "COUNTERFEIT," because *none are perfect!* If that analogy were true, then the true Church SIMPLY WOULD NOT EXIST!

God did not call me to raise up a new Church, to follow the Laodicean Church, but rather to bear witness to the end-time Churches of God, and to bring together the scattered people of God, as He makes it possible. We, the scattered, the disenfranchised, the disinherited, the "cast out ones," the "rejects" -- we ARE the *spiritual* "Philadelphia Church of God"! We have our "lumps" to prove it (Rev.3:9-10). We are not "incorporated" by that name -- human incorporation means nothing to God. Yet we are the spiritual REMNANT of those who are truly DOING the Work of God, who are growing in grace and spiritual knowledge, who are repenting of sin and changing as they see error! Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits" (Matt.7:20). It is up to each individual to PROVE where and what the truth of God really is, and to stand by it, rooted and grounded in the truth and established in the faith (Col.2:7).

"But Isn't There only One Vine?"

In Herbert W. Armstrong's book *The Incredible Human Potential*, he wrote,

"What about a single member, 'a joint or part,' going off by itself – or following a MAN instead of the CHURCH OF GOD that is in direct continuous succession from the apostolic Church founded by

Christ in A.D. 31? He is like a joint or piece of wood or stone,
entirely outside of, and therefore NO PART OF the BODY OF
CHRIST that shall MARRY Christ."

Does this statement by Herbert Armstrong prove that there is only one physical remnant of the true Church of God on earth -- the Worldwide Church of God -- and that if anybody leaves that church, they are like the piece of wood or severed joint, and will be entirely outside the true Church and have no part of the body of Christ?

Those are very powerful claims! But where is the PROOF?

The quotation from Herbert Armstrong is wrong on several counts. First of all, the fact is, there is no proof in history that the Worldwide Church of God can trace its' direct continuous succession from the apostolic Church founded by Christ, any more than the Seventh-Day Adventists, the Church of God Seventh Day, the Seventh Day Baptists, or any number of groups! The truth is, you cannot look into history, and find ANY proof of ANY "apostolic succession." Even the Roman Catholic Church fails on this score, although it can trace its popes back much further than any other church can trace its history. There is no evidence that Peter, the apostle of Christ, ever served as the bishop of the Church of Rome! Rather, he was the apostle to the *Jews!* (Gal.2:8-9).

The nearest thing to "apostolic succession" would be the succession of POPES in Rome, but the Roman church departed from the faith very early in Church history. Although they may be able to trace their popes back to the second and third centuries, without problem, their teachings totally contradict the teachings of Christ and the apostles! Their "succession" is a false succession of wicked apostates and anti-Christis -- not a succession of true followers of the Word of God! The true origins of the papacy go back to ancient Babylon, and the gaudy and colorful Babylonian priests of Baal and his consort Semiramis!

The history of the Church of God cannot be documented from person to person, generation to generation, in any formal "succession." There is very little data for entire centuries

Secondly, Herbert Armstrong, in his old age, sometimes twisted and distorted the Scriptures to suit himself. Ted Armstrong who was disfellowshipped and left the Church the very year that *The Incredible Human Potential* was written and published. The idea Herbert Armstrong was writing about is actually found in John, chapter 15. Read it for yourself. The apostle John wrote, quoting Jesus as saying, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not REMAIN IN ME [that is, in Christ's spiritual body, the spiritual Church, not an organization of MEN with the title "Church of God"], he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15:5-6).

We "abide in Christ" by abiding in His Word, and by keeping His commandments. This has nothing to do with "abiding" in a particular "Church" organization of men! Otherwise, what would you do if the entire Church went astray because of its new leaders? If a "church" goes astray, errs and begins breaking the commandments of God, then it ceases to function as a part of the body of Christ; it ceases to be used by God as His instrument; its ministers cease to be His ministers; the church plunges into apostasy, and the ministers become servants of Satan the devil instead of the true God – that is, unless they repent of their sins and apostasy, and return to God's truth!

Make no mistake! Whole churches of God have gone astray!

Today's Church Ministers Prophesied

Isaiah the prophet thunders, "Now therefore, what have I here, saith the LORD, that my people is taken away for nought? *they that rule over them [their shepherds or "ministers"]* MAKE THEM TO HOWL, saith the Lord; and my name continually every day is *blasphemed*" (Isaiah 52:5).

Ministers of various end-time churches blaspheme God's name by their practices, their filthy deeds, their disfellowshipment procedures, their false doctrines, their calling God's TRUE servants and prophets "false prophets," "Satan-inspired," and other epithets. They blaspheme God by their every action and word, every day, as they abuse, beat, and browbeat the sheep under their control.

The prophet Ezekiel wrote, "The word of the LORD came to me: 'Son of man, prophesy against the SHEPHERDS of Israel; prophesy and say to them: "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: WOE to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have RULED THEM HARSHLY AND BRUTALLY. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them" (Ezek.34:1-6).

God thunders, "I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will REMOVE them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves; I will RESCUE my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them" (verse 10).

God Himself says, "As for you, my flock, this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will judge between one sheep and another, and between rams and goats. . . . See, I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. Because you shove with flank and shoulder, butting all the weak sheep with your horns until you have driven them away, I will save my flock, and they will no longer be PLUNDERED" (Ezek.34:17-22).

Almighty God, and Jesus Christ, both have a severe "bone to pick" with the End Time Church of God generation -- the people of God today. God says to His flock, His people, who have strayed into the paths of sin and Laodicean compromise and error: "Surely the arm of the LORD is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your INIQUITIES have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear. For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. Your lips have spoken LIES, and your tongue uttered wicked things. No one calls for justice; no one pleads his case with integrity." (Isaiah 59:1-4 NIV).

Jeremiah also thundered against many end-time ministers of the remnant churches of God. He wrote, "WOE be unto the PASTORS that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the LORD. Therefore thus saith the LORD God of Israel *against the pastors that feed my people; Ye have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them:* behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings" (Jer.23:1-2). Plain words! These pastors ABUSE the flock under their care by their harsh manner and means of "church government"! They "lord it over" God's people, and the end result is destruction and devastation of the flock!

God declares: "They rely on empty arguments and speak lies; they conceive trouble and give birth to evil. They hatch the eggs of vipers and spin a spider's web Whoever eats their eggs will die, and when one is broken, an adder is hatched. Their COBWEBS are useless for clothing [rendering people "naked" spiritually!]; they cannot cover themselves with what they make. Their deeds are evil deeds, and acts of violence are in their hands. Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood [to disfellowship so-called "dissidents"!]. Their thoughts are evil thoughts; ruin and destruction mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths [they "cover up" the sins of the ministry, and refuse to judge individual cases with righteousness, but always support the "minister," right or wrong!]. They have turned them into CROOKED ROADS; no one who walks in them will know peace" (Isa.59:1-8 NIV).

The Spirit of Apostasy

In the days of the apostle Paul the apostasy was already so strong that Paul wrote to Timothy, saying, "You know that everyone in the province of Asia has deserted me, including Phygelus and Hermogenes" (II Tim.1:15). The conspiracy was so strong in the days of the apostle John that he wrote, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because MANY false prophets have gone out into the world" (I John 4:1).

There were so many false teachers going from door to door, in John's day, that he admonished the brethren, "Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, DO NOT TAKE HIM INTO YOUR HOUSE or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (II John 8-11).

Things were so out of control by 90 A.D., that John was compelled to remind his dear friend Gaius, saying, "I wrote to the church, but Diotrefes who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with

us. So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and PUTS THEM OUT OF THE CHURCH" (III John 9-10).

When entire Churches go astray, a true Christian should cling to the true Vine, which is not the Church -- the church is merely a branch itself! The true Vine is Christ! As He so plainly said, "I AM THE TRUE VINE . . . I am the vine; YOU are the branches. If a man remains in ME [not in some "Church" or other!] and I in him, he will bear much fruit . . . If anyone [or ANY CHURCH "BRANCH"!] does not remain in me [in the TRUTH of God!], he [or the church] is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches [including entire Churches] are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned" (John 15:1-6).

Let's get this straight -- once and for all!

A true Christian must follow *Christ*, not "men" who at one time may have been His ministers, but who reject truth and fall away. The Pharisees were such a class. They were ministers of God's Church of that time, with a "direct succession" from Moses. BUT THEY WENT ASTRAY, rejected Christ and His "new truth," and became ENEMIES of the truth! Those who followed Christ had to come OUT of the churches or synagogues of the Pharisees, and establish their own assemblies (see Acts 5:29, 2:38-47).

Jesus was teaching that we must ABIDE IN HIM -- not in some physical organization of men which claims to represent Him! We must abide, or remain, in HIS WORD! As He said in the first part of John 15, "You are already clean because of the WORD I have spoken to you. Remain in ME, and I will remain in YOU [through the Holy Spirit]. No branch can bear fruit by itself [cut off from Christ]; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me" (verses 3-4).

The sooner we understand that God's Church is not a single organization on this earth, the better off we will be, spiritually. God's "Church" is a spiritual organism, a spiritual body, comprised of all those people who have God's Holy Spirit (Rom.8:9-10) abiding within them, regardless of whether they are members of any of a number of Sabbath-keeping churches.

As the apostle Paul said, spiritual circumcision is of the heart, and not the flesh. True Christianity is an inward matter of the Spirit, and not an outward, physical matter of which "organization" you belong to! Herbert Armstrong went astray when he began CLAIMING that the "Worldwide Church of God" was God's one and only Church. He knew about the Church of God, Seventh Day, from which his church organization sprang. He even referred to it as "God's Church" for years -- and labeled it as the "Sardis branch" of God's Church (see Rev.3:1-2). Perhaps he was ignorant of many other small churches which also keep the Sabbath and the holy days of God.

Sadly, the Church he left behind, the Worldwide Church of God, fell into the sinister hands of a wicked spiritual leader who began destroying many of the remaining vestiges of truth still in the

Church, perverting what remained, and began leading thousands of naive and foolish sheep to spiritual destruction and doom.

The True Circumcision of God

The apostle Paul wrote, "If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, shall they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? . . . A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one *inwardly*; and circumcision is *circumcision of the heart*, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God" (Rom.2:25-29).

Paul also wrote to the Corinthians, "Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commandments is what counts" (I Cor.7:18-19). Paul had a fierce dispute with certain false brethren who wanted to bring all people under the ritualistic law of Moses, and the law of circumcision (Acts 15, Galatians 1-2). They wanted everybody to belong to the Church of the Pharisees! They were seeking outward "unity," according to the flesh.

But Paul declared, "Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. . . . Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation" (Gal.6:12-15).

Paul was so angry at those who were preaching circumcision was necessary for salvation -- that is, that everybody had to belong to "their Church" organization, which compelled physical circumcision of all males -- that he exclaimed, "As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!" (Gal.5:12). The Moffatt translation is even plainer. Paul actually said, "O that those who are upsetting you would get themselves castrated!"

That is the way I feel about some groups today who try to impose their legalistic baggage on true believers, forcing them into spiritual slavery and bondage to their particular Church! Let them go and "castrate themselves"!

Those who bind heavy burdens on the backs of men and women, and rob them of their livelihood by imposing onerous tithing burdens of one, two and three tithes, deserve no better!

Many End-Time Remnants

Many people and groups have left the Worldwide Church of God, or the Church of God International, and other groups, over the years, and no doubt many more small groups will be formed among them, as they depart the errors of Worldwide. Which of these numerous, and no doubt sincere, groups is doing the "work" of God, or are all of them?

The answer to that question is basically this: No one person has any "monopoly" on the truth. Any man or group which insists it has a "monopoly" on the truth, and that no other can be serving God, but must be false, has to be in error on this point. Such a group would constitute a serious danger to any Christian who comes into contact with them, because they will tend to exercise and claim "rulership" and "authority" over the believer, bringing him or her into bondage to their system of teaching and beliefs, threatening them with excommunication and disfellowshipment, and "the lake of fire," if they ever leave or are put out of their group.

Did Paul not write, "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (Rom.14:1)? Did he not say, "Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his [or her] own master he [or she] stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Rom.14:4). Paul admonishes, "Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put ANY stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's [or sister's] way" (v.13).

Any church which claims that it constitutes the one-and-only, sole, end-time Church of God is vain, egotistical, arrogant, and self-righteous. They may have some truth. They may see the errors of Worldwide, in many areas. But they themselves *may* be "following a man" to destruction!

Are We Still "Babes" in Christ?

It is time we get rid of "personalities," and stop following men. We need to get our priorities straight. The really important question we need to answer, first and foremost, is WHAT IS THE TRUTH of God, and then WHERE is it being preached?

The apostle Paul commands us all, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (I Thess.5:21). He said it is our own individual responsibility -- not something we can pass off on somebody else. Therefore, we should compare and study, and pray, and ask God to lead us into His truth.

You CAN prove the truth of God! It is within your grasp and ability. But you must approach it prayerfully, cautiously, carefully, in faith and with diligence.

Which group or church should you join, today? The United Church of God? The Living Church of God? Church of God International? Church of God Intercontinental? Biblical Church of God?

You name it, it's probably out there somewhere!

If you decide to support a group teaching fundamental error, then your support could be in vain, in the sight of God. If you support a new hierarchical church tyranny, they will enslave you and bring you into bondage.

Paul wrote of a similar situation in his day. He had to confront false ministers rising up within the ranks of God's Church. Paul wrote of them, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what their actions deserve" (II Cor.11:13-15).

These "false apostles," as he called some of them, wanted to get hold of people's money! Paul said, "Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone . . . I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so" (II Cor.11:7-9).

Paul said to the Corinthians, "Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! In fact, you even put up with anyone who *enslaves you or exploits you* or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face. To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!" (II Cor.11:18-21).

The apostle Paul was very concerned about the church in Corinth. To his dismay, he saw that the people of God were very immature, naive, and still "carnal." The church of God was dividing into factions, divisions, warring groups and segments, even in his day! He wrote to the Corinthians spiritual instruction which we should all take to heart.

Paul declared, "Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly -- *mere infants* in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere men?" (I Cor.3:1-4).

Too many people, today, look to personalities, outward appearance, and then to superficial truths, and make a quick judgment as to whom they should follow. Superficially, the Pharisees had the truth of God -- the Law -- and many were confused by them, and followed them. Others entered the Church with a smooth gift of gab, and a silky personality, and charming mannerisms, and many followed them -- right out of the Church, away from the truth.

The bottom line is, WHERE is and WHAT is the TRUTH? Where is the TRUTH of God really being preached? We should look to the TRUTH of God -- not mere human personalities. Jesus did not attract people to Him by His personality, but by His words of truth, the whole and entire message He preached, the good news of the Kingdom of God. Jesus said we are to live by "every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt.4:4). He also said, ". . . the Scripture cannot be broken" (John 10:35).

How are true Christians "sanctified," or set apart, from others, by God? Jesus Christ said, "Sanctify them by the TRUTH; your word is truth" (John 17:17). The prophet Isaiah boldly said, ". . . should not a people enquire of their God? . . . To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to THIS WORD, they have no light of dawn" (Isa.8:19-20).

Unless a minister or church or group speaks according to the WORD OF GOD, they are false ministers, leading people astray, or they are erring ministers, and will be punished for their serious errors!

How Can You Recognize God's Government and God's True Church?

With so many groups around, professing to serve God and to be doing the "Work" of God, it behooves us to do exactly what the apostle John said: "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but TEST THE SPIRITS to see whether they are from God, because MANY false prophets have gone out into the world" (I John 4:1).

Seeing many groups proclaiming the "gospel," and doing a "work," it is a perplexing predicament to determine just where the TRUTH is being preached and inspired by the Spirit of Almighty God! No doubt many are confused, perplexed, baffled.

However, God will not forsake His people who worship Him. His Spirit will "guide" them into all truth (John 16:13).

There are many prophecies showing that many of God's people or "sheep" will be scattered, without a shepherd, in the Great Tribulation (Ezek.34; Jer.23). That time has not come yet, but it may be very near!

Many are "scattered" today, but there is still true teaching of God available for those who seek it. The "famine of the word" of God has not yet come (Amos 8:11-12). The prophecy of Acts 2:17-21, where God promises that in the "last days" He will pour out His Spirit upon all flesh, sons and daughters, young and old men, and upon His servants and handmaidens, so that they will "prophesy," has not yet come to pass -- but it is surely not far off. This final "witness" will occur at the time of the heavenly signs (Acts 2:19), which introduce the "Day of the Lord," the final "year" or "time" before the actual return of the Messiah.

A prophetic witness will go out during the "Day of the Lord" such as this world has never seen (compare Rev.7:1-10). Over 144,000 of Israel, and a great multitude of Gentiles, will be included in this group.

Be very careful of those who would bring you into "church hierarchies," and under their "church government." Many false prophets seek to find a following. Many seek to increase their personal wealth, as Balaam did, preaching for the "wages of unrighteousness." As Peter wrote, "With eyes of adultery, they never stop sinning; they seduce the unstable; they are EXPERTS IN GREED [watch how they manipulate an audience during the "holy day" offering sermonettes!] -- an accursed brood! They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness. But he was rebuked for his wrongdoing by a donkey -- a beast without speech -- who spoke with a man's voice and restrained the prophet's madness" (II Pet.2:14-16).

WHY the Church Is DIVIDED, Today!

Thus, the Church of God, today, is "divided" -- as a result of Satan's wiles, human nature, human greed and slackness and lethargy, and human error. The fault is not Christ's or God's. The blame rests with erring and sinning human leaders, who in far too many cases are simply not close enough to God and His Word, and don't tremble before His Word (Isaiah 66:2).

The Church today is divided -- SIN has wormed its way in. Much purging and purifying must be done. ERROR has contaminated the Church, and even grown and spread. That is why certain ones MUST go into the Great Tribulation to be purged and cleansed, as their final "testing." They will pay the ultimate price -- their lives. They will suffer martyrdom, imprisonment, even torture in some cases, and death. It will not be pretty. But thank God He gives us a chance to repent now, and to respond to His Truth, and to come out of sin and error. The hard-headed ones and "blinded" ones who refuse to admit the truth now will simply have to suffer the consequences, but they are not "lost." They can still redeem their lives by repenting and turning to God, in heart and spirit, during the time of great tribulation.

When we look at the "Christian" world today, we see many false, counterfeit churches which masquerade as churches of God (II Cor.11:13-15). But we also see some few very sincere evangelical churches (at least some of the ministers, and members are sincere and devout), Messianic Jewish churches, Seventh Day Churches of God, Seventh Day Baptists, and similar groups which seem to have enough understanding to be considered "God's church," even though they are weak and ignorant in many respects. Many of them have evidence of true love and devotion in their lives, which in God's sight is far more important than much "head knowledge" and factual understanding.

As Paul said, "And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and *all knowledge*; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity [*love*], I am nothing" (I Cor.13:2).

Today, the professing "Christian world" is a shambles of confusion and chaos. Most of the sects, cults, denominations are now merely "store-front religion" -- empty spiritual facades created and controlled by Satan the devil. But there are a *few* -- perhaps literally "seven" main divisions -- who do represent the true Church of God, in all its faults, foibles, and blemishes, as they exist, today! Some of these remnant groups of the true Church of God could include segments of the Seventh Day Adventist Church; others could include various evangelical groups. Others would be churches that came out of Worldwide, each with much truth, but each with serious error.

Many of these people are SINCERE. I would not hesitate to call them "Christian." But they are in serious jeopardy -- error -- and some will pay a very high price for their mistakes. Some of the shepherds may be "wolves" -- but the flock is still the flock! Some we can with God's help reach out to and save NOW, but others will not respond until God deals directly with them in great tribulation. Ultimately, however, all those who become part of the BRIDE of Christ will have to "pass the test" -- God's test. Or they simply won't be there.

Of course, God knows and sees all, and He knows the hearts and minds of men, and He is testing each one of us. He knows those who are His. As Paul wrote, ""Nevertheless, the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity. But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour, and some to dishonour. If a man therefore PURGE HIMSELF from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work" (II Tim.2:19-21).

"Underground Christians"

There are "underground" Christians today, suffering persecution in North Korea, Vietnam, China -- many have been imprisoned, others have been tortured, and some have been martyred. They are our brethren, even if they don't see all the truth we have been privileged to know and understand! Jesus will judge them on a different standard, as we read so plainly in the Scriptures:

"And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that *knew not*, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required: and to whom men have committed much, of them they will ask the more" (Luke 12:47-48).

Each will be judged fairly, according to what they have done with what God gave to them, including the amount of knowledge and understanding they received (see Matt.25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27).

Jesus plainly told His disciples, "And *other sheep* I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there SHALL [ultimately] be one fold, and one shepherd" (John 10:16).

Therefore, it really is not our need or concern to try to sort out who belongs to Christ, and who doesn't. Many will be there, and you might be surprised to see them. On the other hand, some of the self-righteous, who think they will be there, may well not make it at all. Jesus said the poor publican, who would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but smote his breast, saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13) will be justified -- that is, be in God's kingdom -- rather than the smug, self-righteous Pharisee who had confidence in his own righteousness (Luke 18:11-14).

Jesus put it plainly on another occasion. He declared: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint, and anise and cumin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (Matt.23:23).

The "bottom line" is that God knows who belongs to Him. He will judge each individual. That includes those men of old who died in flames for having translated the Bible into the common tongue, such as Wycliff, and Tyndale. That includes such men of faith and humility as George Mueller, of the Plymouth Brethren, of the nineteenth century, who served God in an amazing way, building up many orphanages merely by faith and trust in God, through fervent, intercessory prayer. It was his great work of faith that Herbert W. Armstrong originally patterned the Worldwide Church of God after, when it was known as the "Radio Church of God."

Personally, I believe no one can read George Mueller's Autobiography, or biographical accounts about this man's dealings with the Lord, and his life of faith and obedience, and come away without being mightily impressed with the depth of his conversion, love of God, and faithfulness under extreme trial and duress! He was, in my opinion, a very faithful and humble man of God of his century -- a man who looked upon himself as a "poor, unworthy servant of the Lord."

Persecution Growing Around World

In our day, in Bulgaria a fear campaign has been launched against all "new and unconventional religious movements," including evangelical Christians, some with a history longer than 100 years. The Bulgarian press accuses evangelicals of giving drugs to teenagers, bribing people to attend church and encouraging young people to commit suicide. The media promotes hatred of Christians, and publishes inflammatory accusations, such as one woman's fear that evangelicals will kill her, and who accuses pastors of practicing cannibalism.

In February 1994, the Bulgarian state announced that religious organizations must "re-register" within three months or the government would seize all their assets and possessions. May 10, 1994, a

new law was passed in Bulgaria's second largest city forbidding religious organizations from inviting people under 18 years of age to religious activities. June, 1994, it was announced that 24 groups had been denied permission to seek government registration, including Gideons International, well known distributor of free Bibles. In August, opposition from the Orthodox Church and Communist Party forced the cancellation of an evangelistic mission to the port city of Varna, accusing the mission of disseminating religious propaganda.

In Cuba, a Christian from the Dominican Republic was caught by police, who burned his legs with cigarettes and put electrical shocks to his teeth. A group of forty Christians who brought Bibles to Cuba from Jamaica were all arrested at their hotel, many were robbed by the police, and escorted back to the plane. A Vietnamese pastor, previously imprisoned for ten years in North Vietnam, is now in prison in South Vietnam for evangelizing the Stieng tribe. In the Philippines, a man who gave up a good job to preach the gospel of Christ, was warned three times by the New People's Army, a militant wing of the Communists, to desist. Two men who belonged to his church were killed by the Communists only two weeks after becoming Christians.

A Pakistani believer in Christ was shot and killed by his Muslim accusers, after having been released from prison in Lahore, Pakistan. This man read his Bible every day.

In China a Christian was sentenced to five years for preaching the gospel, when he would not abandon his faith, which authorities called "the poison of imperialism." He was beaten, but while they beat him a supernatural joy filled him. He felt the Holy Spirit surround him, and the Reds could obtain no retraction. While in prison, he was given another ten years for preaching in the slave labor camp! One winter a severe disease epidemic broke out, and of 1300 prisoners, 1035 died. He himself was considered dead, and taken to the morgue. When he prayed, he saw an angel dressed in white whose face shone with God's glory and who blew upon him. Immediately he felt better and the sickness left him, he knelt, gave thanks to God, and *left the morgue!* The prison doctor, seeing him, thought he was a ghost! He told the physician, "Don't be afraid. . . God restored me to health. He sent me to show you the way of God." The doctor knelt, and said, "Your God is a reality."

After he left the prison, after serving 15 years, he told the authorities, "Suffering did not diminish my faith but only intensified my relationship with Jesus." This man, Mizhong Miao, worked another 18 years in the underground church, secretly, until he finished his course.

Are such men truly men of God? I shout from the top of my lungs, YES! YES, INDEED! *They are my brothers in Christ! GOD BLESS THEM, and their Witness for the Truth they have been given to understand!*

"Judge Not, That You Be Not Judged"

Too many of God's people tend to be judgmental, and look down their noses at others who do not belong to the same "group" as they do. Too many are proud, lifted up, and act like the Pharisee who

thanked God that he was "not like other men." Too many are prone to "judge their brother" because of doctrinal errors on minor points (or what might be considered "major points"), when they themselves have major problems with attitude, hidden sins, and a wrong spirit.

Jesus Christ said, in this regard, to those who are prone to sit in judgment of others: "Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged: and with what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again. And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the BEAM that is in thine own eye? Or how wilt thou say to thy brother, Let me pull out the mote out of thine eye; and, behold, a beam is in thine own eye? *Thou hypocrite!* First cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye" (Matt.7:1-5).

Paul also warned us about the SIN of judging one another, over issues that shouldn't really matter. He wrote: Him that is weak [i.e., such as weak in knowledge, lacking in understanding] in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations. For one believeth that he may eat all things [i.e., animal flesh of "clean" animals]: another, who is weak, eateth herbs [is a "vegetarian" and won't eat meat -- he believes it is wrong]. . . . Let not him that eateth despise him that eateth not; and let not him which eateth not judge him that eateth: for God hath received him. *Who art thou that judgest another man's servant?* to his own master he standeth or falleth. Yea, he shall be holpen up: for God is able to make him stand" (Rom.14:1-4).

Does this mean that I would knowingly endorse, or accept error? Of course not! But I will accept as a "brother" in Christ one who does not have the same understanding as I do, even on points of God's Law, or understanding the nature of the "Godhead," although I will not compromise with him in either obedience to God, myself, or in understanding! I will simply accept such as they are -- weaker brothers in Christ who have not been gifted with the knowledge and understanding God has given us. Of course, any "brother" who is dishonest, immoral, breaks the commandments, steals sheep, lies and bears false witness, and falsely accuses others, I would not consider a true "brother" at all, but an imposter -- a Satan implant, a "tare" amongst the wheat! Jesus said of such, plainly, "You shall know them *by their fruits*" (Matt.7:16, 20).

I will, however, continue to preach and publish the TRUTH of God without compromise -- I will not "accept" error, or false doctrine, knowingly, or quietly allow it to exist without attempting to expose it and eradicate it, wherever found.

Paul summarized this principle, saying, "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself. For whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord: whether we live therefore, or die, we are the Lord's. . . But why dost thou judge thy brother? or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? for we shall ALL stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God. So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God. Let us not therefore judge one another any more: but judge this rather, that no man put a stumblingblock or an occasion to fall in his brother's way" (Rom.14:7-13).

The Real "Bottom Line"

In the months and years ahead, severe persecution such as we have never seen, is going to break out against all minority groups and tiny religious churches, which will be termed "cults" and "bizarre sects" by the mass media, under the control of government propagandists. True Christians will be persecuted with a vengeance -- *before* the "Great Tribulation" even arrives!

Notice in Matthew's Gospel! Jesus gave a sequence of prophetic events which must occur before He returns. In chapter 24 verse 21, He mentions the coming of Great Tribulation. However, long before this event occurs, Jesus mentioned in verse, "For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in various places. All these are the beginning of sorrows" (vs.7-8).

Here He is talking about the BEGINNING of the End Time -- years before the final "Great Tribulation"! And notice! Right after this "beginning," He declares: *"THEN shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall KILL you; and ye shall be hated of ALL NATIONS for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall HATE one another. And many false prophets shall arise, and shall DECEIVE MANY [those who are sleeping through the Apocalyptic Times, not close to God, not busily overcoming, praying, and "watching"]. And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure to the end, the same shall be saved"* (Matt.24:9-13).

This persecution occurs *BEFORE* the Great Tribulation. *It is the very NEXT thing prophesied - on the prophetic calendar!*

Knowing this, isn't it high time we draw close to one another, begin to LOVE one another, and show by our attitudes and actions that we really are the children of God and servants of Christ?

Isn't it high time we quit "judging" one another, or others who are proving their loyalty and devotion to Christ by their intense suffering, by accusing them of being "blinded," or not really "Christian" because they don't understand certain things we do? Isn't it high time we concentrate on getting "back to the faith once delivered to the saints"? (Jude 3).

Isn't it high time we work seriously as we study God's Word, to obey Paul's admonition: "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Tim.2:15)?

Shame on many of us!

Jesus plainly said to His disciples -- and I hope that includes you: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, *if ye have love* one to another" (John 13:35). He also said: "Ye shall know the *truth*" – DO YOU? – "*and the truth shall make you FREE*" (John 8:32).

In the coming years, those who truly belong to Jesus Christ/Yeshuah the Messiah, are going to be "tried" and "tested" to prepare them for entrance into God's Kingdom (Matt.5:48). One of those supreme "tests" may be whether they will submit themselves to God's TRUE CHURCH GOVERNMENT – true Church AUTHORITY!

Those who are wicked, who are tares, and goats, and who do not really belong to Him, will be discovered and found out – their "fruits" will eventually betray them.

David wrote in the Psalms: "The Lord is in his holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven: his eyes behold, his eyelids try, the children of men. The Lord TRIETH *the righteous*: but the wicked and him that loveth violence his soul hateth. Upon the wicked he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, and an horrible tempest: this shall be the portion of their cup. For the righteous LORD *loveth* righteousness; his countenance doth behold [with favor] the upright" (Psalm 11:4-7).