

Dear beloved,

I'm writing this to see if I can help you put some things into a clearer perspective regarding recent events and trends in the Church.

First, what is the Church? The Bible defines the “general assembly and church of the firstborn” as those “who are registered in heaven” (Hebrews 12:23). It consists of those whose names are written in the book of life (Philippians 4:3), having repented and believed the gospel, and been sealed with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:14; Acts 2:38; Ephesians 1:13).

While there may be a rough parallel between the true Church of God, registered in heaven, and a legal corporate body or bodies, or associations of individuals, the two are not strictly synonymous. Within the group of physical persons associated with the Church, there will be some who are strong in the faith and some who are weak (Romans 14:1). Some may not be converted at all (Matthew 13:24-30). “But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor” (2 Timothy 2:20). “Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are His'” (2 Timothy 2:19).

While it's God's ideal that the body of the Church be perfectly united in faith in and obedience to his word, that has seldom been reality down through the history of the Church. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 1:10, “Now I plead with you, brethren... that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” These latter phrases are in the subjunctive mood in the original, which implies potentiality and possibility, action that may or may not occur.

Throughout most of the history of the Church, it has existed in scattered individuals or groups that were often lumped in with or confused with heretical groups by outsiders (cf. *God's Church Through the Ages*, John Ogwyn, pp. 23, 25, 31, 35, 40, et al.). Division has existed and does exist because of carnality within and among members and leaders of the Church (1 Corinthians 3:3).

Yet the Church has always been strongest and most effective in fulfilling its mission in those situations where it has operated as a unified group of God's elect under leadership faithful to God's Word. Consider the example of the apostolic Church in the New Testament, and other examples scattered through the pages of Mr. Ogwyn's book.

We are admonished to “walk... with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3). Above all, however, we are to abide in the truth, the word of God (John 8:31; 14:23-24; 15:7). True Christians are identified as those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ, and have the testimony (the witness, or message) of Jesus Christ, and who have love for one another (John 13:35; Revelation 12:17; 14:12).

So we must walk in truth, but within that parameter strive to be at peace with one another and preserve unity. That means we must make allowance for the weaknesses and mistakes of others, even leaders, and be longsuffering and forgiving. Some ministers are more effective than others, and the quality of the work of each will be revealed in the appropriate time (1 Corinthians 3:12-13).

The ugly incidents that occur among us from time to time – apostasy, heresy, licentious conduct, political infighting, or similar tumults – are not a credit to the Church, and such disruption is not only harmful to individual members, but weakens – or may even completely destroy – our effectiveness in the work of taking the gospel to the world. The best thing we as individuals can do is above all remain committed to the truth, and be peacemakers where that's possible and appropriate within the realm of

our own influence. Certainly we should not add to the problems by acting rashly or vindictively.

Those who attack the Living Church of God because our leaders have not always stated everything exactly the way Mr. Armstrong might have done at some point, are wrong. While Mr. Armstrong was used to do a great work, his writings are not Scripture. As he himself taught, our primary guide for faith and doctrine is Scripture as correctly understood and considered in its entirety.

An example is the contention of some that we teach a false gospel because we include in the definition of the gospel the message of the forgiveness of sin through Christ's sacrifice. Mr. Armstrong supposedly taught that the gospel is exclusively about the Kingdom of God. To say the gospel includes anything else, according to some critics, is teaching a "false gospel."

Mr. Armstrong did emphasize that the gospel Christ brought is the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14). Because the world has rejected the true, full gospel of God, and has substituted a "gospel of MEN about the PERSON of Jesus Christ – confining the message solely to the things ABOUT Jesus" (*What is the TRUE GOSPEL?*, Hebert W. Armstrong, 1972 edition). As Mr. Armstrong understood and believed, however, the message of grace and salvation are also a part of the true gospel, which he explains in the same booklet.

More important than what Mr. Armstrong wrote, what does the Bible tell us about the gospel?

Jesus certainly preached the gospel of the Kingdom, as we've seen. In a sense, the Kingdom of God could be viewed as an overriding theme of God's Word. But the gospel has many facets that all relate in one way or another to the Kingdom of God.

Consider the Holy Days. The annual cycle of Holy Days reveal the plan of God, which is what the gospel is about. The first step in that plan, portrayed by Passover, is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to pay for our sins. Then comes the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which pictures repentance, coming out of sin. Then Pentecost pictures the giving of the Holy Spirit and the reaping of the firstfruits of the Spirit. Then the Feast of Trumpets pictures the coming of Christ in judgment and the first resurrection. Then Atonement pictures the reconciliation of the world to God through repentance, Christ's sacrifice and the putting away of Satan. Then Tabernacles pictures the establishing of God's Kingdom on earth, which all the preceding leads into. Then the Last Great Day pictures the second resurrection and final judgment of mankind. All of these elements are part of the message of the gospel.

The gospel is, in its fullest sense, the entirety of God's word. And it certainly includes the message of salvation and grace. Jesus, in quoting from the book of Isaiah, said that he'd been sent to "preach deliverance to the captives," among other things (Luke 4:18).

Did Paul preach a false gospel? He said that he'd been sent to "testify to the gospel of the grace of God," which was a part of the message of the Kingdom of God (Acts 20:24-25). He also referred to the gospel as the "gospel of your salvation" (Ephesians 1:13). He said to the Corinthians that he'd been sent to preach the gospel, which includes the "message of the cross," that is, Christ's crucifixion (1 Corinthians 1:17-18, 23). That's not *all* that the gospel is by any means, as some pretend, but it is certainly a part of the gospel. He also wrote, "Remember that Jesus Christ, of the seed of David, was raised from the dead according to my gospel," implying the truth of Christ's resurrection is part of the gospel, and that it points to Christ's identity as the promised Messiah (2 Timothy 2:8).

No government is any better than those who administer it. How can we believe in God's Kingdom without knowing the character of the King? The gospel includes information about the King – Jesus Christ, the Messiah. He is mentioned many places in the Old Testament. The Messiah's coming was equated in the minds of the Jews with the establishing of God's Kingdom. Four books of the Bible were written to record the story of his birth, life and death as a human being, his teachings, and his resurrection to former glory.

To believe in the gospel of the Kingdom we must believe in the King, and the true gospel leads us to such faith (Romans 10:10-17; note that in this context the gospel is referred to as the “gospel of peace”).

To properly understand any doctrine of the Bible, one must look not at just one or two Scriptures but all the Scriptures pertaining to the subject, and put them all together in the proper relationship. We must be careful about reading our own ideas into Scripture, as well as failing to understand all Scripture has to teach us.

We must be vigilant, but we must not falsely read into isolated statements or events evidence of hidden agendas where none exist. Many errors have been committed, and many more are likely to be committed in the future. Let's not add our own errors to the mix.

Over and over in the past, faithful members committed to the truth have had to leave or been forced out of organized religious bodies. But it would be foolhardy to leave an imperfect Church organization to follow error.

Scripture also provides for the enforced separation of those who cause division through false teaching or to pursue their own aggrandizement (Romans 16:17; Acts 20:31). It takes spiritual discernment to know when a separation is necessary. Ask God for such discernment, seek it diligently, and God will grant it (Proverbs 2:1-17).

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