

A Distant Reflection

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Since the early 1970s, the modern church of God has been in turmoil. This turmoil has not been constant, and the reasons for it are many—personal, doctrinal, governmental, cultural, political, etc. Attendance at church services and feasts have surged and retreated like the tide. Over the past more than two decades, the number of churches claiming to be a part of the church of God has swelled from one to a handful and then to literally hundreds of large and small organizations scattered all over the world. Unfortunately, there is no sign that the process of disintegration is slowing.

These many splinter groups separated from the Worldwide Church of God (WCG)—and each other—for sundry reasons, most of them ostensibly doctrinal, but not all. Among later splits, some have resulted from clashes of personality between church leaders. Others have formed new groups to "correct" a fault in church government—lurching from hierarchy to congregationalism or presbyterianism and back to hierarchy. Yet others have driving prophetic beliefs that cause them to break away from a larger group, sequestering themselves in preparation for the end or following some new prophet, witness, or anointed leader. Churches have broken up over the use of funds, over the approach to "The Work," over paying the ministry, over church property—people will divide a church over just about anything!

The fact is, while most church members believe this to be an aberration, it is actually the norm. The unity under one large, worldwide church, which many experienced in WCG, is the rarity. Church history shows that the various congregations of the true church down the centuries were separated by great distances and probably did not know any others existed. Nor did they have the same beliefs or structures beyond the basics of Sabbath- and Passover-keeping, full-immersion water baptism, and separateness from the religious views of the world around them. These groups—whose existence we know about mainly through their enemies' writings—were so small, scattered, and often remote that it is often difficult to determine just what they believed, and therefore, whether they were actually part of the true church or merely a heretical Catholic or Protestant sect.

It is a truism that history tends to repeat itself—or, perhaps more accurately, as the French philosopher Voltaire wrote, "History never repeats itself. Man always does." People, following the perverse guidance of human nature, make mistakes similar to those their forefathers made. This is what has happened in the church of God down the centuries since the time of the original apostles. Today's church, sadly, is walking the same path.

A Little Church History

Because we regularly study the Bible and hear sermons about Jesus and the apostles' works, we are generally familiar with the history of the first-century church from the New Testament's point of view. In case some are unsure, here is a summary:

On Pentecost of the year that Christ was crucified, God's Holy Spirit descended on the apostles and the small group of disciples that had remained faithful, and the church of God was founded. Thousands were baptized in short order.

Over the next decade or so, though some newly converted church members returned to their homes in far-flung parts of the Roman Empire and beyond (see Acts 2:9-11), the bulk of the church remained in the land of Israel. The Bible and history provide either sketchy or no information about the travels of the apostles during this time, except for the few chapters in Acts on Peter and John traveling to nearby places like Samaria and Joppa. It seems that the apostles did not venture too far until God revealed that salvation was open to the Gentiles in Acts 10-11. In fact, Jesus seems to have set His plan for them before His final ascension: "You shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Once Saul/Paul was converted on the Damascus Road and given instruction in the gospel (Acts 9), large-scale evangelism began in earnest. Acts chronicles the "missionary journeys" of Paul and Barnabas, along with others, to Antioch in Syria and then on to Cyprus, Asia Minor, Macedonia, Greece, and finally to Rome itself. Church tradition and legend tell of the journeys of various apostles to Egypt, Libya, Ethiopia, Babylon, Armenia, Persia, and even to India! Other tales tell of Joseph of Arimathea, Paul, and Peter relocating to or visiting Spain, Gaul, and Britain. The work of the first-century apostles truly covered the known world.

Yet the Bible also informs us that not all was well in the congregations of the church. Fractures in church unity are apparent in the epistles of Paul, James, Peter, John, and Jude. As early as about AD 53, Paul warns the Corinthian church about divisions among them over their ministerial preferences: "Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ'" (I Corinthians 1:12). In I Corinthians 3:3, he castigates them, "For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?" Other epistles reveal similar cracks in church unity.

His later epistles—those written in prison before his death—show that division and heresy had not abated. He warns Timothy against false doctrines, which he groups with "fables and endless genealogies," saying that some have strayed from the faith, "desiring to be teachers of the law, understanding neither what they say or the things which they affirm" (I Timothy 1:3-7; see also II Timothy 4:3-4).

James admonishes the recipients of his letter, "Where do wars and fights come from among you?" (James 4:1). Peter (II Peter 2) and Jude warn about destructive doctrines and false teachers. For example, Jude writes, "For certain men have crept in unawares, . . . ungodly men, who turn the grace of our God into lewdness and deny the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 4).

Finally, John, the last of the original apostles, does his best to warn the shrinking flock of faithful Christians about the deceivers in the church: "Little children, . . . as you have heard that the Antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. . . . They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us" (I John 2:18-19). He makes a similar warning in II John 7, 10, and another in III John 9-10.

As biblical history closes, we see a dwindling church under attack, many following false teachers against the apostles, and Christ's original teachings being perverted. Thus, just as the modern church cracked and splintered upon the death of Herbert Armstrong, so did the first-century church apostatize and shatter as the original apostles aged and died.

Clues to the Church's Future

Mr. Armstrong often quoted Christian historian Jesse Lyman Hurlbut regarding the stark difference between the first-century church and the one history remembers from the second century:

For fifty years after St. Paul's life a curtain hangs over the Church, through which we strive vainly to look; and when at last it rises, about 120 AD, with the writings of the earliest church-father, we find a church in many aspects very different from that in the days of St. Peter and St. Paul. (*The Story of the Christian*, 1954, p. 41.)

Historians have learned a great deal about Christian history in the intervening six decades since the publication of Hurlbut's book, but his conclusion remains accurate. The historic second-century church bears little resemblance to the apostolic church, and in fact, it is mostly an apostate church evolving into what would become the Roman Catholic Church in succeeding centuries. However, what historians have gleaned from that time is instructive, providing us dismaying clues regarding what could be the future of today's church organizations.

What is clear from second-century history is that the church that kept the Sabbath and the festivals, particularly Passover, and maintained the bulk of New Testament doctrine, diminished almost to obscurity except for a few prominent leaders such as Polycarp of Smyrna, one of the apostle John's protégés. We hear of these mostly from their enemies, other "church" leaders—many of whom are now styled as Catholic "early church fathers."

An example of this is the controversy over Passover, which raged until the late-100s, as Polycarp and his disciple, Polycrates of Ephesus, argued unsuccessfully to retain its celebration on Nisan 14 (thus, it is called the Quartodeciman—meaning "fourteenth"—Controversy). Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon, who died at the beginning of the third century, maintains that the Roman church had celebrated a Sunday Easter rather than the Passover since at least the time of Bishop Sixtus I (ad 115-125). Thus, within about two decades of John's death, the truth about the Passover had already been changed in Christianity's most powerful church.

The works of these "early church fathers" along with some apocryphal writings inform us that the change from keeping the Sabbath to observing "the Lord's Day," Sunday, was already underway as well. Before the end of the second century, Pseudo-Barnabas (ad 100), Ignatius of Antioch (107), Justin Martyr (145), Bardaisan (154), Irenaeus (178), Tertullian (180), and Cyprian (200) had all mentioned that their churches—or Christians in general—kept the first day of the week as a day of worship.

There are also the apocryphal gospels that historians and archeologists are continuing to unearth. While their apocryphal and heretical nature discounts them from being theologically useful, they do reflect the wildly divergent views of confessed Christians of the time. For instance, "The Infancy Gospel of James," written about AD 145, not only adds to what Matthew and Luke write about Jesus' birth, but also teaches the perpetual virginity of Mary, a doctrine that is still fundamental to Catholicism. "The Infancy Gospel of Thomas," dated to the middle of the century, imagines Jesus using His divine power to create birds from clay, wither and kill another child, and blind complaining neighbors. This Jesus is not at all sinless and perfect!

"The Gospel of the Ebionites," composed before AD 150, holds that Mary was not a virgin, that Jesus was not divine but chosen by God at His baptism, and that His task was merely to abolish the Jewish sacrifices. "The Gospel of the Hebrews," written about the same time, has Jesus say that the Holy Spirit is His mother, and it also holds that His half-brother, James, was present at the Last Supper.

Then there is "The Gospel of Thomas," most likely an early second-century composition, which is a compilation of Jesus' supposed sayings. While most critical scholars today believe it is not a Gnostic text *per se*, early Gnostics—many "Christians" among them—interpreted it in a Gnostic way. The text shows little or no interest in doctrine. Instead, it concentrates on a disciple having unique insight—secret knowledge—into Jesus' sayings as the way to eternal life. Jesus is reduced to a mere conveyor of enlightenment.

Finally, "The Gospel of Peter," from the late second century, is a Docetic work, depicting Jesus as a pure, incorporeal spirit, and thus His body and all that happened to it were illusions. It also claims that Herod gave the order to crucify Christ, not Pilate, and that the cross floated out of the tomb with Jesus and spoke in response to a heavenly voice!

". . . Doomed to Repeat It"?

With just these few examples at hand, it is not difficult to trace the course of "Christian" belief once the original apostles were no longer an authoritative bulwark against heresy. The scattered churches, disunited and not at all "speak[ing] the same thing" (I Corinthians 1:10), began to entertain ideas brought in by the kind of false teachers that the apostles warned against. Since many of these ideas paralleled concepts in the world—whether Gnostic-like philosophies, Jewish legalism, or Greek mythological norms applied to Jesus—they were welcomed over time by weak members who wished to fit in to the surrounding culture. Faithful members and ministers left or were forced out of these apostatizing churches (III John 9-10).

We should not miss the larger point: A similar process is taking place in today's church of God. Rather than unite, the churches are continuing to fragment. The situation is swiftly progressing to the point, as Daniel 12:7 puts it, "when the power of the holy people [will be] completely shattered."

The reasons given for leaving a group are becoming more picayune and less justifiable. Papers fly at light speed over the Internet, castigating Minister X and his group for some supposed heresy, while others are flung out with equal speed in defense, in unconscious imitation of the polemical and apologetic writings of the "early church fathers." In similar imitation, some leaders have declared other ministers and even whole churches excommunicated because they will not submit to their assumed authority. And new "gospels" (see Galatians 1:6-9) and teachings that we never entertained before are moving too many far from the "trunk of the tree."

While Scripture prophesies of the disintegration of the end-time church (see II Thessalonians 2:3; I Timothy 4:1-3), we as individuals are not doomed to be part of it. Jesus' first command in speaking about the last days is, "Take heed that no one deceives you." (Matthew 24:4). In verse 24, He warns, "For false christs and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (see also verse 11). We must be constantly on guard against deception, especially of the "Christian" variety, since it is an unmistakable hallmark of the end time.

More importantly, we need to be growing ever closer to the Father and Jesus Christ, for a maturing, intimate relationship with God is the key factor in enduring to the end (Matthew 10:22; 24:13). Jude writes, "But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life" (Jude 20-21).

As the times become ever more dangerous to true Christianity, our prayer needs to be like David's, a man who faced frequent peril:

I will love You, O Lord, my strength. The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I will call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised; so shall I be saved from my enemies. (Psalm 18:1-3)