



"Quit griping about your church; if it was perfect, you couldn't belong."
—Anonymous

12-Aug-11

Which Flock?

A recent [Forerunner](#) article pointed out that division has been the rule in true-church history almost from the beginning. The unity experienced during Herbert Armstrong's leadership of the [Worldwide Church of God](#) was an exception. Returning to the historical pattern, we have now literally hundreds of groups of various sizes from which to choose. How do we make that choice? What guidelines do we use? Do we even need to make a choice?

For that last question, Scripture indicates that an independent Christian is an oxymoron—a contradiction in terms. Throughout the Bible, [God](#) regularly refers to His people as a flock of sheep. By definition, a flock is a *group of sheep under the care of a shepherd*.

The independent Christian might argue that his Shepherd is [Jesus Christ](#). If that is what the Bible means by shepherd, then why are there such passages as [Jeremiah 3:15](#); [John 21:15-17](#); [Acts 20:28](#); and [I Peter 5:2](#)? Furthermore, the command in [Hebrews 13:17](#) says in part, "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls." How does an independent Christian obey this command if he does not acknowledge that there is a *human* shepherd with that kind of authority over him?

What is the root cause that motivates someone to go astray, to remove himself from both the flock and the shepherd? [Hosea 4:12](#) answers: "For the spirit of harlotry has caused them to stray, and they have played the harlot against their God." God says it is the spirit of prostitution. They violate their marriage agreement by giving to others that special and exclusive affection due only to their Betrothed. Rather than submit to their Betrothed and His desires, they submit to those of themselves and others. In his vanity, the "independent Christian" has made himself his own god. God bluntly provides His view of that choice in [Proverbs 28:26](#): "He who trusts in his own heart is a fool. . . ."

It is arrogance ([Deuteronomy 12:8](#); [Psalm 12:3-4](#))—not a quality that God blesses ([Proverbs 3:34](#); [James 4:6](#); [I Peter 5:5](#))—for a sheep to believe that it can go it alone, that it does not need a shepherd and the flock. Such a sheep puts itself in mortal danger ([Ezekiel 34:5, 8](#); [Jeremiah 50:6-7, 17](#); [John 10:12](#)). Whether we are talking about a physical sheep or a spiritual sheep, to separate from the flock is a foolish and dangerous act.

So the question is not "Do we affiliate with a group?" but rather "Which group, which flock?" What guidelines will we use to make that decision?

An excuse some use for their independence is that no one group has all the truth. They are correct; no one group has perfect knowledge. Expecting perfection in anything man has a hand in is a fool's errand. However, it is possible, with effort, to find the group that has the most truth and the least error, as God has opened each of our minds in our studies to understand what is truth and error. God does require us to do the necessary work to make progress *toward* perfection ([Hebrews 6:1](#)). After all, we are instructed to diligently study ([II Timothy 2:15](#)) and to work out our own salvation ([Philippians 2:12](#)).

There is an example of someone who had to decide which group to associate with and the biblical guidelines that he used to make that decision: Herbert Armstrong. Which church he would affiliate with was a decision he faced when beginning to learn the truth. Notice that the question was not *if* he would affiliate, but rather *with whom* he would affiliate.

Here is a quote from the chapter 20 of Herbert Armstrong's *Autobiography*:

Yes, and yet, small, powerless, resultless, impotent though it appeared to be, here was a church with the right name, "keeping the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ," and *closer*, in its doctrines and teachings, to what God had been opening my eyes to see plainly in His Word than any other church of which I knew! Small and impotent though it appeared, *it had more Bible TRUTH than any church I could find!*

Notice his effort, as well as the place truth—not size, power, or results ([Matthew 7:21-24](#))—had in his decision-making. He recounted his experience in a May 2, 1974, "Brethren Letter":

I had learned in my earliest study of the Bible that God's Church would be keeping the Commandments, including the [Sabbath](#), would be kept in the name of God, and have Biblical truth. Several religious organizations had the name Church of God. But this seemed to be the only one keeping the Sabbath. While they certainly did not have all Biblical truth, they did, beyond question, have more than any church I knew, and less error. So I did continue to fellowship with them.

Note that, while truth was a major guideline, he was not looking for *perfect* truth, just the most truth and least error.

We can use his example to list some criteria to use in deciding which flock we should choose for our association, and by that choice, which shepherd to submit to ([Hebrews 13:17](#)). First, they should have the right name: "Church of God." Second, they should be keeping God's commandments, including the Sabbath. Third, they should have the most truth and the least error based on our understanding.

The first two are easy to determine, but the third one is the difficult one. This one requires great effort and choices. God requires both from us ([Philippians 2:12](#); [Deuteronomy 30:19](#)).

How important is truth to God? [Psalm 145:18](#) reads, "The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth." Jesus tells us in [John 4:23-24](#): "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to

worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth." Finally, Paul writes in [II Thessalonians 2:10](#), " . . . they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved."

Clearly, truth is of the utmost importance to God. It determines if we have a relationship with Him. We "*must* worship in spirit and truth" and He expects us, not just to accept the truth, but to *love* the truth. Herbert Armstrong's third guideline has strong biblical backing. We are required to be careful with *every* truth that God has revealed to us ([Deuteronomy 8:1](#)) and not deviate from *any* of it ([Deuteronomy 28:14](#)). One sign that we are a child of God is that we stand where we find the truth ([John 8:44](#)).

A billionaire once advised that, when making a decision about which way to go, one should wait until he is able to run *to* something rather than *from* something. Many going astray are running from something. Truth, when it is a guideline for association, shows the way to something.

God equates going astray as iniquity that has to be laid on Jesus Christ ([Isaiah 53:6](#)). Therefore, one who claims to be a Christian that truly loves his Savior *has* to make a choice—which flock?

- Pat Higgins

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[It Takes a Church](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Richard Ritenbaugh, citing the African Proverb, 'It takes a village' asserts that this principle more aptly applies to the church, specifically designed to serve as a support for those in need. In this era of 'going it alone' or 'cocooning,' we as a people like to be self-sufficient without any support from others. Consequently we become self-centered, self-absorbed, showing little concern for others. As Christians, especially in our current scattered condition, we need to fight this pervasive trend, forming warm, productive, quality relationships with our brethren, actively ministering to the needs of one another. The ministry functions to equip members to become other centered (or family centered), serving one another and applying righteousness for the good of others. If we refuse to apply this practical knowledge, actively serving one another as interdependent joints, we miss the mark of coming to the unity of Christ.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[Who Is Doing the Work of God?](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

What is more important: preaching the gospel to the world or feeding the flock? John Ritenbaugh gives reasons why we should at this time be concentrating on reversing the church's serious spiritual decline before we presume to go to the world.

If you would like to subscribe to the C.G.G. Weekly newsletter, please visit our [Email Subscriptions page](#).
