

In The Grip Of Distrust

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Most of us are aware of a phenomenon that too often takes place within the church of God. It should not happen, but it does. This phenomenon is that if an attitude or trend begins to develop in the world, we can expect that it will soon enter the church. When it does, it shows that we are not as attuned to the Kingdom of God as we should be—that we are still too attached to the world.

A July 23, 1995, article in the *Washington Post*, by Liz Spayd, reports the findings of the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago:

Faith in both Congress and the White House is hovering at a 20-year low. Only 12 percent of the public say they have a great deal of confidence in the executive branch, and slightly less than 8 percent characterize their confidence in Congress as substantial.

Trust in other institutions is also on a gradually descending slope: Expressed support for science, medicine, organized religion, labor and education are all near their low point since researchers began their biennial surveys in the mid-1970s. Earlier Lou Harris polls patterned on similar questions suggest the decline may actually have begun in the 1960s.

"This is one of the most dramatic developments in public opinion in the post-World War II era," says Darrell West, a professor of political science at Brown University. "There is a deep-seated distrust, not just of government but of all kinds of institutions that people once had great confidence in."

The article suggests the Kennedy assassinations, the disillusionment over Vietnam, the Watergate break-in and subsequent cover-up, the Iran-contra affair of the Reagan administration, the Whitewater scandal, the accusations of extramarital affairs by President Clinton, the suicide of Vincent Foster, Waco, Ruby Ridge and the recent Oklahoma City bombing as prime motivations of this growing distrust. In each case the government is perceived as being the actual cause of the event or as hiding the evidence that would clearly reveal the culprits.

Coincidentally, the August 28, 1995, issue of *Time* published a long article in which a large body of psychologists say that Americans' very lifestyle is producing anxiety and depression in increasingly large numbers of people. Their lifestyle tends to isolate them from practices that were formerly communal affairs; individuals now bear family burdens that were once shared among many people. The frustration and perceived hopelessness of these situations creates depression. The psychologists accuse automobiles, suburban living, television, computers and abandoning the family farm among other things as causes of this problem. This problem, they say, has no solution because almost no one wants to give up his lifestyle.

As members of God's church, we do not live isolated from what is going on in the larger society. When the massive doctrinal changes took place in our former association, many within the church reacted in much the same way as those in the world react to disturbing events in areas that greatly concern them. From both within and without, we have been very masterfully set up to withdraw, accuse and very possibly rebel.

The Arch-Enemy at Work

Our dilemma is not nearly as complex or hopeless as the world's. We can unerringly pinpoint the real cause and agent of the distrust now abounding in the hearts of many in the church. After all, the Devil began this whole mess called "the world" in the Bible, when he induced distrust for God's Word in the minds of Adam and Eve.

Through distrust, Satan seduced Adam and Eve away from submitting to the most wonderful, lovable, giving, concerned, sensitive and helpful Personality in all creation—God. Can you imagine that? The Devil convinced them that God could not be trusted!

Distrust is a powerful incentive whose fruit is divorce. Our first parents sinned and division began. The world has not been united since. When there is distrust, faith evaporates. Fear, anxiety and depression escalate, and the motivation to be personally secure and free from the hassles of coping intensifies. The "fight or flight" mechanism kicks in.

In our recent history, the most devastating blow struck against the church has *not* been in the area of doctrine. Radical changes of doctrine have merely been the means by which more serious underlying problems have been exposed. Except for a few doctrines, all the spin-off churches of God that have formed within the last several years believe basically the same things. The major differences between us are in the areas of policy and attitude. Despite the doctrinal confusion introduced through the leadership of the parent organization, the doctrinal base established through Herbert Armstrong survived in the new groups.

In my opinion, the most damage was caused in the area of trust and loyalty. Members of the church have become suspicious, fearful and distrustful. Alarmed and confused by the doctrinal changes, we are fearful of being hurt and misled further. We are unsure whether *anybody*—especially the ministry—can be trusted, so we do not trust many lay members either. As a result, our loyalty to God, His truth and to each other has broken down even while we deny that it has happened (see Matthew 24:12).

Spiritual Free Agency

Professional sports has popularized the term "free agency." It is a contractual concept by which a professional athlete, after serving, playing or performing under contract for a certain number of years, becomes free to negotiate a new contract with any other team. When that time expires, he is a "free agent." He no longer "belongs" to the team with which he originally signed.

Though it is very financially rewarding to the players, this concept is playing a major role in destroying fan loyalty. Players, especially the very good ones, are becoming little more than "hired guns" who give their talents to the highest bidder. They move from team to team, wherever they feel it will be most lucrative for them to play. Free agency is exposing the public to the greed that lies at the foundation of each player's heart and is turning people off by the tens of thousands. Fan loyalty to a team is being overcome by disgust.

The same negative force is at work in the church in the wake of the doctrinal changes. Many in the ministry are considered to be little more than hirelings to whom a paycheck, severance pay or retirement income and benefits mean more than the truth of God and the spiritual health of the sheep. Many of the sheep feel abandoned and unprotected.

This distrust of the ministry is producing a fairly large number of "independent" Christians. These people will not join with any group. They are going to float and/or just go it alone because, they say, their Sabbaths are so much better now that they are free to pursue their own studies and teach their own families. They are relieved that they do not have to put up with all the hassles in the congregation or listen to another boring sermon. Besides all this, they distrust the church government and/or do not care for the policies. I have heard all of these expressions of independence uttered or written more than I care to hear or see.

This approach may very well destroy them ! In them, the principle that the church is a "spiritual organism" is stretched to its very limit! In this extreme approach, there can be no such thing as an "independent" Christian since a Christian is made part of Christ's body when he receives the Holy Spirit. The spiritual body is one though it has many members (I Corinthians 12:20).

The independents like to give the appearance of being wise and strong—strong enough to stand alone and be independent, to be real leaders. But, in reality, they are just as devastated as anybody. In fact, they might be among the most devastated; their attitude and corresponding reaction are exposing the underlying problem. They are those who, in battlefield triage, would be left to die because they are too far gone, and little or nothing can be done for them.

The Real Work of God

Genesis 1:26 expresses the specific purpose statement of the Bible. God, the Creator, the Master Potter, is reproducing Himself! This is **THE** work of God. He is in the process of making man in His image. That project is completed in two stages, the physical and the spiritual. When the physical aspect was completed at creation, the spiritual one began. This is the overall project He is supervising.

God is already a unit: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" (Deuteronomy 6:4). God is one, but consists of more than one Person. When Jesus came, He proclaimed the gospel of the Kingdom of God. In doing this, He publicly announced the expansion of this unit to include others besides the two Beings already revealed.

A kingdom is synonymous with a nation. It consists of large numbers of people, but it, too, is one. Indeed, the church is called "a holy nation" in I Peter 2:9, and though it has many members worldwide, it is one church. Thus, Jesus announced that the Kingdom of God will consist of many more personalities. He also told us how we can become a part of it and how it will be accomplished. Through these means the project stated in Genesis 1:26 will take a giant step toward fulfillment.

In John 17:11, 22, Jesus added another factor that further confirms our understanding of what is happening in God's work. He requested of the Father that "they [the disciples, including us] may be one, as [in the same way] We are." The Father and Son are obviously two different personalities, yet they are also a unit that Jesus is requesting that others be joined with.

How can a person, independent from consistent fellowship with the body of Christ, the church, still be a part of it? A person thinking this way is sliding away from God's intention, as His Word clearly shows. He fully intends we be an active member of a physical body as well as the spiritual organism. Is the church *only* a spiritual organism? If the spiritual organism is the only important aspect, why even have congregations? Is it possible that congregations play a major role in preparing us for God's Kingdom? Let us look at this from another angle.

God intends mankind to be an active and contributing part of a physical community. "And the Lord God said, 'It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.' . . . Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:18, 24).

Perhaps verse 18 could be rephrased as, "It is not good that man be independent." Our God establishes principles and patterns in His Word from which we can extract wisdom, the practical application of truth. Some of the most basic and fundamental patterns for His purpose are established very early in Genesis.

What is He showing here? That, in relation to God's purpose, the most and the best will *not* be produced in us if we are alone. If we are independent, we remove ourselves from the circumstances that will produce the most toward His purpose. In this specific context, God is not commanding everyone to marry, but He is clearly showing that marriage is better than remaining single.

Everyone understands from his own experiences that the more people who comprise a unit or community, the greater the number and intensity of problems. This occurs largely because our carnality drives us to compete rather than cooperate. Sometimes a person desires so strongly to be independent of this kind of community relationship that he separates himself in order to be completely free from the suspicions, distrust, offenses and other hardships that occur within a group. To put it another way, it is very similar to a soldier running away from the battlefield to protect himself.

In its rawest form, it is selfishness and self-interest. It can be a self-serving avoidance of being useful, of contributing steadfast strength and encouragement, of being a right example to others or of being found wrong and corrected. If nothing else, we are detaching ourselves from the unit to which God intends we show allegiance and give service.

A Lesson from History

Daniel 8:5-7 gives a historical insight that is helpful in this regard:

And as I was considering, suddenly a male goat came from the west, across the surface of the whole earth, without touching the ground; and the goat had a notable horn between his eyes. Then he came to the ram that had two horns, which I had seen standing beside the river, and ran at him with furious power. And I saw him confronting the ram; he was moved with rage against him, attacked the ram, and broke his two horns. There was no power in the ram to withstand him, but he cast him down to the ground and trampled him; and there was no one that could deliver the ram from his hand.

God's description of Greece, their army and the manner in which they fought is instructive. Greece's army was invincible in its time. Nobody ever fought with the lightning ferocity and cunning of Greece before this time or perhaps since. They created "blitzkrieg" warfare, which Adolph Hitler openly admitted that he copied from the ancient Greeks.

One historian speculated that the ferocity of the Greek army was produced by their approach to life and especially politics. Even though the Greek system had people filling governing offices such as mayor or burgess, they did not have a representative system like ours. Their society was close to a pure democracy. Each Greek male was taught that *he* was responsible to participate and contribute to

the governing of the community. One result of this was that individual citizens felt responsible to the community, and leadership qualities were produced in them that made each Greek male feel as though he was the leader of his community even though he really was not.

These qualities carried through into their warfare. The individual soldier not only took orders from his captain, he also thought independently to act for the benefit of the regiment. This frequently became necessary in the heat of battle when the leader was incapacitated by wounds or other distractions. Another quickly assumed his role, and there was no loss of leadership.

Thus, a factor that made the Greek fighting machine so invincible was that when their "shepherd" was smitten, the "sheep" did not scatter. The individual Greek soldier would not run off to protect himself from the confusion and danger of the battle when his commander fell. Instead, he helped his unit regroup because he was responsibly committed to its well-being and the accomplishment of its goals rather than his personal well-being.

There are times when it is necessary to flee or withdraw for a while. Jesus said to flee persecution (Matthew 10:23). It is obvious that, on occasion, discretion is the better part of valor. But such times should be only a brief interval during the time of God's working with a person or with His church.

On the other hand, I do not want people to "jump" just anywhere in order to be with a group. There are equally dangerous ramifications of being with the wrong group. We should very thoroughly consider where we will fellowship.

The Church Shattered

The church is under attack. A powerful persecution is under way, and many sheep have been scattered. But what I am hearing from "independents" are cries such as, "I'll never follow another man!" or "No man is going to tell me what to do!" or "Beware of any group that has a hierarchical governmental structure."

While a limited amount of wisdom may be in such thinking, these independents may be failing to see a very real problem because they are looking in only one direction. While they critically examine others, problems of equal or greater magnitude in the areas of ignorance of God's Word, of respect for government or gross intolerance for another's weaknesses may be in them.

They have reacted by divorcing themselves from any group and "floating" among many groups. Their attitude is such that, even when they do attend, they are in reality just passing through. It is very much like the modern practice of a man and woman living together without commitment. Each "takes" what they can get from the relationship, but one is always free to leave if things do not go quite as planned.

Daniel writes:

Then I heard the man clothed in linen, who was above the waters of the river, when he held up his right hand and his left hand to heaven, and swore by Him who lives forever, that it shall be for a time, times, and half a time; and when the power of the holy people has been completely shattered [*scattered*, KJV], all these things shall be finished.

(Daniel 12:7)

Surely the enemy has attacked, and the sheep are scattered! Jesus says,

And when he [the true shepherd] brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers. (John 10:4-5)

We had good reason to flee our former association: The voice of a stranger was heard within it, and we could not follow him. But is it possible that the "independents" still do not hear the True Shepherd's voice? Could they have fled for different reasons? This is why these people may be in very real danger. They cannot come to any shepherd because their confusion and governmental problems are preventing it.

Shepherds of God's Flock

The apostle Peter called Jesus "the Chief Shepherd" (I Peter 5:4). But this same Peter also admonished earth-bound men, elders of the church, to be shepherds to the church of God:

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: **Shepherd the flock of God** which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. (I Peter 5:1-3)

Many of the independents maintain the notion that they are going to follow only Christ. The unspoken (and sometimes spoken) charge is that there is no need for the ministry. If that is so, why then does God consider scattered sheep as *not* being in a fold? Notice Jeremiah 23:1-4:

"Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of My pasture!" says the Lord. Therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel against the shepherds who feed My people: "You have scattered My flock, driven them away, and not attended to them. Behold, I will attend to you for the evil of your doings," says the Lord. "But I will gather the remnant of My flock out of all countries where I have driven them, and bring them *back to their folds*; and they shall be fruitful and increase. I will set up shepherds over them who will feed them; and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, nor shall they be lacking," says the Lord.

This same principle is expressed in Ezekiel 34.

The independents are scattered, but they think they are in the fold. If their premise is correct, then why all the instruction in the Bible about gathering those who are scattered? The Bible gives the impression that a person is not in the fold unless he is with the group. Why else did Jesus give the parable of leaving the ninety-nine sheep to rescue the one not with the flock? It is interesting that Jesus depicted the separated sheep in His parable in Matthew 18:12-14 as having gone astray, and in Luke 15:4-7 as being lost.

Jesus has set certain men in His church as shepherds to tend His flock under Him. They are described in Ephesians 4 as His gift to the church. In giving this gift to the church, He in turn gave gifts to them to enable them to perform their job. Like all others, some perform their appointed tasks faithfully (Matthew 25:21, 23), while others are unjust stewards of their responsibilities (Acts 20:30).

To whom much is given, much is required, and so the minister will have to answer for his use of those gifts. James makes it very clear that the teacher will receive the stricter judgment (James 3:1). But the independent has a strong proclivity to paint all with one brush, perhaps forgetting that he also will have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ to answer for his use of his gifts and for his possibly too critical judgments.

The Need for Human Leadership

What is the independent looking for? Is he looking for a pastor completely unstained by any hint of defect in character or expression of personality? Where will he find him? Is he looking for a leader with absolutely perfect doctrine? What is it? Is he looking for a teacher who has exquisite ability to express the teaching with clarity and beauty? Is he looking for the fruits of that person's ministry? I think a person should look for these things. It would be wonderful to find such a person, but at the same time we must realize that finding all of them in perfection in one man will be very difficult. Especially in this difficult time, one should not make his search with the attitude that he will settle down and take root only when he finds a pastor who deserves to have him in the congregation!

God makes it very clear that other shepherds besides Christ are necessary for leading and caring for His people. Zechariah 10:2 says, "For the idols speak delusion; the diviners envision lies, and tell false dreams; they comfort in vain. Therefore the people wend their way like sheep; they are in trouble because there is no shepherd." The context makes very clear that God is speaking of human leaders.

Moses understood the need for human leadership even though Israel had the cloud to follow in the wilderness. The context shows God's clear assent to Moses' proposal.

Then Moses spoke to the Lord, saying: "Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them and go in before them, who may lead them out and bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord may not be like sheep which have no shepherd." And the Lord said to Moses, "Take Joshua the son of Nun with you, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; set him before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation, and inaugurate him in their sight. And you shall give some of your authority to him, that all the congregation of the children of Israel may be obedient" (Numbers 27:15-20).

Making a diligent and honest search for a true shepherd of the church of God is everyone's responsibility. It is imperative that we find a fold where we can be properly fed and where we can serve. The enemy has scattered the flock through the extensive doctrinal changes, and God has permitted it for our good.

God does nothing that is not for our good. Undoubtedly, a sorting of His people is taking place through the choices we make about which group we choose to fellowship with. In the broadest sense, this situation is enabling Him to evaluate who really loves truth (II Thessalonians 2:10). Perhaps the sorting will permit Him to work with us to an even greater extent.

At any rate, it is a daunting challenge for all of us to make clear sense of what is going on and where all this is headed in the immediate future. One thing is certain: Romans 8:28 is still in the Bible, and only good can develop from this for those who truly love God. He is still on His throne. But remember, it is not God's will that we be separate from a group. Lone sheep are the ones most easily

"picked off" by the predators prowling along the perimeter of the flock. Safety, service, love and strength is within the fold.

Jesus says in Matthew 16:18, "I will build My church, and the gates of Hades [*hell*, KJV; the grave] shall not prevail against it." These very words of Christ clearly show He had a corporate body of human beings in mind, not just a spiritual organism. He used *ekklesia*, meaning an assembly of people, a group, and He confirmed this by using *Hades*, a pit into which dead bodies are cast. He thus shows His church to exist continuously as flesh-and-blood human beings.

It is clearly His will that all those having the Spirit of God be fellowshiping and serving together on a regular basis (Hebrews 10:25). A person may delude himself into thinking he can better serve Christ and prepare for the Kingdom of God free from all the pressures of a congregation, but the Word of God shows otherwise. He could even be condemning himself to the flames of the Lake of Fire by showing God that he is not pleased to associate with God's own sons and daughters, His holy people. The "independent" must repent of his independence if he wants to glorify God, truly serve His people and become spiritually mature.