

Preparing The Bride

by John W. Ritenbaugh
Forerunner, May 1997

A Statement of Purpose

Part One

As humans we possess a powerful tendency to separate people into clear categories. We label others to define them as belonging in a specific niche in relation to us. This is not intrinsically wrong. In this violent world, categorizing a person as a friend or foe may mean the difference between living and dying!

We naturally categorize people according to sex, race and language. A person is not prejudiced simply because he does such a thing, since a label may be used merely as an identifier. We may know two people of the same name, but we categorize them according to race or ethnic group. We categorize people according to trade, profession, height, weight, personality, social status, fashion, athletic ability, morality, and of course, religion. Our list of categories can be virtually endless.

Subconsciously, we categorize others constantly. Through this process, we manage to keep a part of life fairly well-organized. However, it also has a damaging downside because we have a strong tendency to generalize when we judge. We categorize people as good or bad, friend or foe, converted or unconverted simply because they "fit" into a certain broad category. Though it may seem incongruous, an area of life where this tendency is seemingly strongest is religion.

Schisms in the Church

Religious groups divide endlessly. The overwhelming majority of schisms seem to occur because an issue arises in which people take sides, dividing into the "good" and "bad" guys. Again, it is not intrinsically wrong that such things should occur. Jesus was certainly not wrong in founding the church of God as a separate organization!

But God's church has itself also split time and again. Initially, there was one church, one organization. How many are there today? Only God knows how many organizations claiming to be the church of God there actually are. Divisions have occurred largely because we have lost the purity of faith, love and doctrine that existed at its founding. These will never be *entirely* recaptured until Jesus Christ returns and sets the church aright.

A major development since Herbert W. Armstrong's death has been to examine every doctrine, policy—indeed, his every act—in minute detail. This has not been done to discover what is right (like the Bereans, Acts 17:11), but to find flaws or supposed flaws. The result has been that the major body of God's church has rapidly headed into worldliness, and many of its members have left it to form new churches.

Even within the new groups, people are pushing for doctrinal changes, and if the majority resists the changes, further defections occur. Forgotten is that God through Mr. Armstrong delivered to us the "trunk of the tree," "able to make you wise for salvation" (II Timothy 3:15). God warns through the

apostle Paul, "Let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God" (Hebrews 6:1). Instead of looking backward, we should be looking forward to continued growth in character.

What Should We Do?

Since this condition exists, what course of action should we take? Our first step needs to be an honest and humble acceptance of our own lack of purity. This helps us to have a more tolerant approach to others because we can judge without as much perverted comparison.

Commonly, religious people try to ascertain as quickly as possible what a person believes or what kind of work he is doing, putting him into a convenient niche. But that, however, is the wrong approach. A better approach would be, "*Whom* do you believe?"

Peter boldly tells the religious leaders of his day, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). He does not say we are saved because we are part of a certain organization, or because we consider that we are "preaching the gospel," but in different words he says, "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). This must be fundamental to the direction and attitude in which God's work is done.

The church of God continues to divide as its largest branch declines spiritually. Some, including ministers, are looking for a new spiritual home, no longer content to remain in an organization they feel is taking them back into the world. This has resulted in a variety of new church organizations being established. These groups all teach the same basic doctrines, those given by God through Herbert Armstrong.

So, what is the best course for us to pursue at this time? Three elements need to be considered:

- 1) What would be the best policy to follow without overtly contributing to the breakup of another branch of the church of God by proselytizing its membership?
- 2) What would be the best policy to pursue that will not bring us into competition for members with our brothers who believe essentially the same things?
- 3) What approach best fits the times and fulfills the major responsibility of the church?

Only one function of the church fits all three categories at this time: concentration on "feeding the flock." Feeding the flock was always the first function of the priesthood of the Old Covenant church, and continues as the first function of the ministry of the New Covenant church.

To understand better why this is the best course of action, we need to see the current state of affairs in the church in the larger context of how God has operated in the past. He has been working out the same purpose from the beginning, recording in His Word clear evidence of His patterns of operation to provide us hope and direction. We can be confident because God does not change from these basic patterns, through which He reveals much about Himself to His people.

In the Beginning

God states His purpose in the first chapter of the Bible: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness . . .'" (Genesis 1:26). Of course, mortal men, as represented by Adam and Eve, are only clay models. God's ultimate purpose—creating man in His image—must be worked out over thousands of years in the individual lives of all their descendants.

II Corinthians 3:18 adds, "But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord." This is accomplished through the conversion process, requiring time, experience in living by faith and the fervent cooperation of the converted.

Israel in the Wilderness

When God led Israel by a cloud in the wilderness, He established a clear pattern, instructing His people for all time. Numbers 9:15-23 records:

And on the day that the tabernacle was raised up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the Testimony; from evening until morning it was above the tabernacle like the appearance of fire. So it was always: the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, after that the children of Israel would journey; and in the place where the cloud settled, there the children of Israel would pitch their tents.

At the command of the Lord the children of Israel would journey, and at the command of the Lord they would camp; as long as the cloud stayed above the tabernacle they remained encamped. Even when the cloud continued long, many days above the tabernacle, the children of Israel kept the charge of the Lord and did not journey. So it was, when the cloud was above the tabernacle a few days: according to the command of the Lord they would remain encamped, and according to the command of the Lord they would journey.

So it was, when the cloud remained only from evening until morning: when the cloud was taken up in the morning, then they would journey; whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud was taken up, they would journey. Whether it was two days, a month, or a year that the cloud remained above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would remain encamped and not journey; but when it was taken up, they would journey. At the command of the Lord they remained encamped, and at the command of the Lord they journeyed; they kept the charge of the Lord, at the command of the Lord by the hand of Moses.

To this we must add what Exodus 13:17-18 records:

Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt." So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea.

These two passages establish two factors very clearly: 1) God leads His work; it moves or stops at His command. 2) He rarely moves it in a straight line, directly toward the goal. In fact, numerous passages show He moved His work in directions seemingly away from the goal! Why? Because He is working out **HIS** purpose.

God knows how to rear children so they will grow into His image. If His purpose had been merely to save Israel and place them in the land, He would have led them straight to Canaan. But His purpose also included leaving later generations a witness that He is building holy, righteous, spiritual character through faith. This requires time and experience in living by faith.

God's pattern with Israel is a model for the New Testament church to follow. Christian life is a pilgrimage, a process, having a beginning and an end. An individual's or church's life does not always flow in the same direction. God is still Creator, leading His church through a variety of experiences through which He will accomplish His purpose, creating righteous character.

The Rest of the Old Testament Period

Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament shows long spans in Israel's history when God seemed not to be working, when people seemed free to do as they pleased. However, this would be a dangerous assumption. Jesus completely refutes this in John 5:17: "But Jesus answered them, 'My Father has been working until now, and I have been working [I am always at work].'"

What sort of work has He been doing? "For God is my King from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth" (Psalm 74:12). God is always working out His purpose, and that purpose has always been the same! He just chose not to record what happened during those gaps.

Nevertheless, God occasionally altered the way He approached Israel. He made governmental changes: from judges to kings under Saul and later from Saul's line to David's. God established the Levitical priesthood, raising up prophets in times of need. At other times the priesthood continued without prophets. In other words, *God's relationship with Israel was not always conducted in the same manner, yet it was always consistent with His overall purpose.*

In the New Testament

In Acts 1:6, the apostles asked Christ when He would establish the Kingdom:

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And He said to them, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:7-8)

Despite spending three-and-a-half years of intense training with Jesus, the apostles retained the common Jewish concept of the establishment of God's Kingdom. Paraphrased, Jesus said, "God is working it out. You need to focus your attention on another area at this time."

The work of God was about to make a dramatic turn, occasioned by something that had never occurred before in the history of the earth. God would give His Spirit, visibly manifesting His power

in many, and simultaneously launching His church and the preaching of the gospel! His Family was about to make its greatest numerical advancement to that time. It was a unique time in history. It has not happened in that manner since.

A Shift in Focus

As shown in the first five chapters of Acts, the church immediately engaged in intense evangelism, and great growth in numbers followed quickly. With the ordination of the first deacons in chapter 6, the church began to organize itself to handle its needs. Persecution intensified with the martyrdom of Stephen in chapter 7. In chapter 9, Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, was converted, and the conversion of the Gentile Cornelius and his family occurred in chapter 10. This momentous turn in the work of God shifted its focus from Israel to the Gentile world.

Regarding God's work changing its emphasis according to need and God's will, Acts 20:28-32 is especially interesting:

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears. And now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

Predicting that conditions would not always remain the same, Paul warns that significant events would trouble the church after his death. He felt it was critical that they pay special attention to feeding the flock through the Word of God, and in doing so the people would build spiritual strength. Clearly, God's focus, the church's focus, shifts occasionally to meet the spiritual needs of the church and His will.

Summary

- Both church and secular history show that division is the natural order. Though this is not good, it is a reality we must face.
- God frowns on competition among His people. We should be working in cooperation toward leading His people to a deeper understanding of godly principles and responsibilities.
- God has been working out the same purpose from the very beginning: He is creating man in His image. He, in His own work, has never deviated from that plan.
- God's work moves at His command in a direction according to His purpose. The clear biblical pattern is that God leads and His servants follow, no matter what form the work takes.
- His work often shifts its focus within the overall purpose according to need. God prepares and calls men to accomplish the work He needs done at a particular time and place.
- Acts and the Epistles show clearly that the focus of the early New Testament church changed dramatically to meet needs that arose, but its main focus was predominantly to feed the sheep.

Part Two

Daniel 5 provides the historical background of the cliché, "The handwriting is on the wall." It has come to mean that events are clearly pointing toward only one conclusion. It usually suggests that a disaster has already occurred, and in looking back, we should have known better, or that one is underway and its full effect is unavoidable.

Events over the past few decades in the church of God should have warned us about what was happening to our spiritual condition. A spiritual disaster is in progress in the church, and as it continues to fragment, the destruction is worsening by the day. When will it stop?

One of Jesus' titles is "Chief Cornerstone," and I Peter 2:5 refers to church members as "living stones . . . built into a spiritual house." In Matthew 24:2, Jesus describes the destruction of the physical Temple in Jerusalem: "Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down." Because the distrust, discouragement, drifting, confusion and splitting are continuing among us, this could be describing His end-time church!

We Should Have Known

For several reasons, we should have understood more clearly what was happening. But our weakened spiritual condition and perhaps an imperfect knowledge of what to do—not to mention a fear of doing something "radical"—prevented us. We all share the burden of this irresponsibility, but it is undoubtedly greater for some than others.

We should have known what was taking place because of the history of the first-century church, the era of the apostles. Paul, John, Peter and Jude filled their epistles with references to heresies and false ministers. Paul warns in Acts 20:29-31:

For I know this, that after my departing savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

Paul warned them repeatedly beforehand, as did Herbert Armstrong. Paul predicted that voracious spiritual heretics entering the church from the outside and others rising from within would deceive the brethren. Jesus also warned in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares that both would grow together (Matthew 13:24-30). We should have expected something like this to occur. We should have at least been ready for it personally. How many times does the Scripture warn us to watch, be alert, be vigilant?

The "blessings and cursings" chapters and the history of ancient Israel should have warned us. Maybe our greatest fault was our failure to remember that God judges without respect of persons. Both Leviticus 26:33 and Deuteronomy 28:64 show that if God's people do not keep the commandments, He will scatter them as a punishment until they repent.

Did not ancient Israel go into captivity and become scattered? How can we think that this could not happen to us? Because we are "in the church" (Jeremiah 7:3-15)? Failure to consider seriously the spiritual ramifications of what Paul forcefully teaches in Galatians 6:16, 4:26-28, and Romans 9:1-8—that the church is "the Israel of God"—has led to heavy disillusionment.

Romans 15:4 gives us instruction at this point: "For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope." He helps us to identify a cause for what we are now suffering through. God, after giving them plenty of warning, scattered Israel and sent them into captivity because they disobeyed His commandments. The warning is for us too. We should have known better because, as Paul writes, God recorded these things with the church, the Israel of God, foremost in mind.

Jesus says in Luke 12:48, "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required." God punishes the disobedient by scattering them. We should take notice. Has anyone ever been given more than we have? Of all people, we are without excuse. We should not have allowed ourselves to get into the condition that brought this scattering to pass.

Given this background and the emotional stress we have endured, it is very easy to point the finger of accusation at any number of personalities, cliques, doctrines, or policy changes we feel should be exposed as the cause. Satan and the human leadership are the most natural targets. Though there may be some truth in the accusations, they are also very dangerous spiritually. God's Word shows we must be careful in assigning blame. Those we accuse may just have been tools, albeit willing ones, used to carry out *God's* designs in reaction to our sins.

God Did It!

Dismissing God's involvement in the church's scattering as simply a matter of His passively "letting it happen" falls far short of the truth. God is *actively* involved in governing His creation, especially in bringing His spiritual creation to its fullest potential. In Daniel 4:17, He clearly states that He raises up and deposes kings. Jesus says God's awareness and involvement is so acute and extensive that not a sparrow falls without Him noting it! How much closer scrutiny will He give to His regenerated children?

What God did to the church was an act of faithfulness to what He is, as well as a vivid expression of His desire for us to be in His Kingdom. David writes, "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do? The Lord is in His holy temple, the Lord's throne is in heaven: His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men" (Psalm 11:3-4). Paul says in Hebrews 12:6, "For whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives."

God gives examples of this throughout the Bible. He challenged Satan to test Job (Job 1:6-12). He sought a volunteer to be a lying spirit in the mouth of a false prophet to punish Ahab and Israel (II Chronicles 18:21-22). He Himself "removed Israel out of His sight" after they exhausted His patience (II Kings 17:18-23). God also took an active role in sending Judah into captivity. In Lamentations 2:1-8, God proclaims *at least 26 times* that He did this or that against the daughter of Zion (a type of the church) to devastate it.

In Romans 9:17, Paul refers to Pharaoh, Israel's enemy and a type of Satan, "Even for this same purpose I have raised you up, that I might show My power in you, and that My name might be declared in all the earth." Could those in positions of leadership in the church, who had the power to impose doctrinal changes, rise to their positions without God knowing? Could they do anything against His wishes? The very people God wanted there were there.

On the one hand, to believe that God played only a passive role in scattering the church subtly accuses Him of not caring. On the other, thinking that "God just let it happen" is like a mental shrug

of the shoulders, allowing us to shift the blame to others as though it was all their fault. We thus escape the responsibility of contributing to the cause of this major spiritual disaster.

God is not a passive Creator; He actively rules His creation. What is at stake here is our awareness of and response to God's sovereignty over our individual lives in particular and the church and the world in general.

Herbert Armstrong's Warnings

Was God without just cause for what He did to Belshazzar (Daniel 5)? The original handwriting on the wall proved God knew of Belshazzar's irreverent and blasphemous handling of the holy things. Just as God warned Belshazzar through His servant before the rod of His punishment fell, so did He warn us.

On June 24, 1978, Herbert Armstrong delivered a sermon to the Pasadena PM congregation, and it was later sent out to be played in all congregations worldwide. In it, he warned that we were getting lukewarm and pleaded with us to turn back to Christ. Fifteen times he shouted, "**Wake up!**" He wanted us to understand that the whole church was spiritually deteriorating. The disaster was already well under way.

From that time until he stopped preaching a few months before he died, virtually every sermon Herbert Armstrong gave was in some way related to that theme. Some thought that he sounded like an old crank. On June 24, 1985, exactly seven years to the day after exhorting us to "wake up," he published a special edition of the *Worldwide News*. Entitled "The Recent History of the Philadelphia Era of the Church of God," this paper rehearsed what had happened in the recent past lest it happen again. As he feared, it happened again—even worse! We were clearly warned.

Mr. Armstrong blamed what he called "intellectualism" as a major part of the problem affecting the church. Similarly, Paul contrasts what he calls the "wisdom of men" and revelation (I Corinthians 2:4-16). They are referring to the same concepts. The issue for both men was that Christianity is founded upon, depends upon, and flourishes under the revelation of God, not human intellect.

This does not discount human intellect's importance to physical life, but regarding spiritual life, *the true things of God must be revealed*. Paul's example is instructive, as he was undoubtedly a man of no mean intellect. Did God convert him through his intellect, or did God reveal Himself to him in a blinding flash of light on the Damascus Road? Until God worked that miracle on his mind, Paul was an enemy of the truth. To some degree, Paul's experience has happened to us all. He continued to use his intellect but lived and judged according to revelation.

Jesus and the original twelve apostles were all considered unlearned men. By contrast, consider where the church's recent leadership received the education that fueled the massive doctrinal changes. Did they not attend this world's universities in search of "higher" degrees in theology and "related" subjects? The "wisdom" they learned there sounds good to human nature and carnality. They passed it on to the ministry and lay members, and it gradually infiltrated our minds like a cancer, sapping the vitality of true, simple, revealed spiritual faith, obedience, and love. A famine of the Word was beginning. (For a more complete exploration of this subject, request our booklet, *The World, the Church and Laodiceanism*.)

Warnings to Israel and Judah

The attitude of Laodiceanism and the leaven of intellectualism have constituted the engine that has destroyed the Worldwide Church of God. An interesting parallel to this appears in Amos 4. The prophet initially addresses the wealthy women of Israel, but he certainly includes their husbands and, by extension, the whole nation.

God begins by swearing on His holiness that, because of their attitudes and conduct, He will surely scatter and drive them into captivity. He mentions how they loved to go to the feasts, though they were heavily laden with sins they overlooked. Before scattering them, He warned them by means of agricultural plagues, diseases, and droughts that produced famine, yet violence increased in the land. Through all these disasters, the people weakened and wandered from place to place in search of peace and strength.

But they never took His warnings to the point of repentance and changing their ways. They never made the connection that they were personally responsible for what was happening in the nation. They always blamed somebody else. The section concludes with a stern warning: "Prepare to meet your God"! (For a more complete exploration of this subject, request our booklet, *Prepare to Meet Your God!*)

Jeremiah 3:12-15 shows conclusively that Israel did not repent at the preaching of Amos:

Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say: "Return, backsliding Israel," says the Lord, "and I will not cause My anger to fall on you; for I am merciful," says the Lord, "and I will not remain angry forever. Only acknowledge your iniquity, that you have transgressed against the Lord your God, and have scattered your charms to alien deities under every green tree, and you have not obeyed My voice," says the Lord. "Return, O backsliding children," says the Lord; "for I am married to you. I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion. And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding."

Jeremiah 7:8-15 explains that 120 years later Judah suffered the same devastating fate for the same reasons:

"Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know, and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name and say, 'We are delivered to do all these abominations?' Has this house, which is called by My name become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it," says the Lord. "But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I set My name at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel. And now, because you have done all these works," says the Lord, "and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you, but you did not answer, therefore I will do to this house which is called by My name, in which you trust, and to this place which I gave to you and your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh. And I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brethren—the whole posterity of Ephraim."

Like Israel and Judah, we did not heed the warnings. God was faithful, but too many trusted in lying words far too long. What happened to them has happened to us. Have we repented? Or have we all

pointed the finger of accusation at the Pastor General and his staff as though they were totally at fault? Have we ever thought that we got what we deserved? Could those men have merely been a reflection of us? They were just in a better position to exercise influence on the entire body.

For a long time I did not consider the warnings to be aimed at me, or the whole church for that matter. It was always somebody else, I thought. I should have known, but I was blinded because of my spiritual condition. When I look back on it now, the warnings seem like trumpets sounding, but I did not think the problems were my fault.

The handwriting is on the wall, and it remains there because this problem is far from over. People are scattered all over the world, distrusting the ministry and each other. This is just the way Satan, the roaring lion (I Peter 5:8), wants it—God's people are much easier to pick off when they are scattered and solitary.

The first-century apostles warned us in their epistles. Herbert Armstrong raised an alarm long and often. Events within the church should have alerted us to our deteriorating spiritual condition. Red flags should have waved frantically when doctrinal changes led us from the faith once delivered. When some ministers refused to teach the changes, they even warned us silently! The worsening spiritual famine and our present scattered condition are warning us right now.

What will you do? That remains to be seen. God's instruction, however, is clear. *When apostasy occurs, each person must heed the warning and repent of his own sins, not look for scapegoats.*

The Hour of Decision

Christ did not form a corporate body, His church, as an act of vanity. The church is to provide common teaching in God's truth to perfect the saints, fellowship with those of a common Spirit, and a base for preaching to the world. Its focus is the family relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ in preparation for the next step in His purpose.

Considering the church's scattered state, and the undeniable fact that God scattered it because of our sins, now is the time for deep and heartfelt soul-searching and repentance. Christ admonishes five of the seven churches of Revelation 2—3 to repent. Each message ends with an exhortation for the reader to listen to "what the Spirit says to the church *es* ." If the shoe fits, wear it, regardless of which church Christ is addressing.

Jesus Christ is terribly serious; He even threatens Ephesus with removal of its lampstand if they do not repent (Revelation 2:5)! God's church has always had to contend with sin, but this time we have received a stinging rebuke. We have been spit out (3:16)!

But there remains hope for returning to God:

When I shut up heaven and there is no rain, or command the locusts to devour the land, or send pestilence among My people, if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. (II Chronicles 7:13-14)

In that June 24, 1978, sermon, Mr. Armstrong stated near the end:

[God] knows our weaknesses. He is a forgiving God. And if we'll only turn back to Him, He will still put out His arms and receive us and love us, and you can't imagine how much the love of God can come into your minds and your hearts and how much He can love you. God loves His church! . . . Now the time has come for us to have a revival within our own hearts. It ought to strike home to us and condemn us. It's our fault. And I'm not just talking to you that I see here today, I'm also talking to the other churches that will hear this on tape all over the world. Unitedly, brethren, let's get on our knees, and let's get back to Christ.

Daniel's Prayer

Daniel 9 is an excellent model for us to follow in returning to God. Daniel prayed this prayer during the Jews' captivity in Babylon. They were nearing the time when God would release them and return them to the land of their inheritance. The prophet asked God how He would restore the Jews.

Today, we find ourselves scattered, hoping to be reunited as a single body. We need to ask God how He will restore and reunify the spiritual Jews in the end time. We, too, look forward to being released by Christ's return and placed in the land of our inheritance.

This prayer and the circumstances that motivated it teach us a vital lesson: The purposes and promises of God revealed in His Word instruct us on what to pray, as well as encourage and motivate us to pray. Daniel prayed about what he learned from the Bible, specifically the book of Jeremiah (Daniel 9:2-3).

What did he do? He confessed the sins of the nation, sins that scattered them in captivity, sins that divided the corporate body of Judah. He obviously felt that many of the sins that caused the captivity still remained in the character of the people.

Reading between the lines of Daniel's prayer, we can understand his anxiety over the readiness of the Jews to return. He expresses his own feelings and probably the feelings of others among the Jews. He had a right to be concerned because, when they did return some years later, only a few actually emigrated back to Judea. The vast majority remained in the land of their captivity, in the world, in Babylon. Having grown comfortable in their captivity, they feared the sacrifice of returning—repenting—was too great.

But God is faithful for good or bad; this makes Him absolutely trustworthy. When He warns He will scatter His people for their sins, He follows through, whether He is warning Israel or us. Daniel shows in verses 8 and 11 that sin permeated the whole society, and he recognizes God's faithfulness by referring to the blessings and curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28.

Daniel continues in verses 13-14:

As it is written in the Law of Moses, all this disaster has come upon us; yet we have not made our prayer before the Lord our God, that we might turn from our iniquities and understand Your truth. Therefore the Lord has kept the disaster in mind, and brought it upon us; for the Lord our God is righteous in all the works which He does, though we have not obeyed His voice.

Daniel explicitly reveals why we find ourselves in this condition. Though we saw the problems beginning, we did not ask Him to stop them at their source, our own *personal* iniquities. God had no choice but to send this disaster upon us.

Verse 15 is a bald-faced admission of guilt. "We have sinned, we have done wickedly!" In verse 17, the prophet beseeches God to turn in mercy and rescue them: "Now therefore, our God, hear the prayer of Your servant, and his supplications, and for the Lord's sake cause Your face to shine on Your sanctuary, which is desolate." Daniel concludes his prayer with this heartrending appeal:

O my God, incline Your ear and hear; open Your eyes and see our desolations, and the city which is called by Your name; for we do not present our supplications before You because of our righteous deeds, but because of Your great mercies. O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and act! Do not delay for Your own sake, my God, for Your city and Your people are called by Your name. (verses 18-19)

Daniel bases his plea on behalf of the people on his knowledge of God's character and directs it toward His mercy. He does not appeal to God from their own righteousness, nor on their present suffering. He just asks God, knowing the compassion He has for His people, Jerusalem and the Temple, to forgive them and release them. Such a deliverance would be solely by God's grace, and He alone would be glorified.

Biblically, there is no proof that God will unite us again in this age. God scattered Israel and Judah. He regathered Judah in its own land for a while, only to scatter them again to the four winds. The other tribes of Israel remain scattered, but in the future they will be reunited with Him and Judah.

Thus, the Bible gives us only a partial pattern. He will unite us, but when? Perhaps uniting will occur in the Place of Safety. Maybe before the rise of the Two Witnesses, God will mercifully raise someone up around whom His church can unite.

When it occurs is less important than each of us making sure we have a right relationship with God. As individuals, we must strive to heal the breach by repenting of *our* sins so that nothing that caused this separation remains to hinder a reunion with our brethren. **Now** is the time for us to launch a strong personal revival of our former devotion and enthusiasm to Him and His great purpose.

Summary

- We were more than adequately warned by Scripture, Herbert Armstrong and events of what was occurring in the church.
- God is actively involved in His creation, especially in His church. He Himself did the scattering just as surely as He scattered Israel and Judah.
- God scatters as a punishment for sin. Regardless of whether we are ever reunited, we need to concentrate on heartfelt soul-searching and repentance.

Part Three

An arresting contrast exists between the evangelizing done in the early years of the first-century church and what gradually developed as the church aged. The early chapters of Acts give the impression that virtually every church member was evangelizing.

Evangelist means "one who declares good news." To whom the good news is given is unimportant. In its broadest sense, anybody can evangelize, whether apostle, deacon or lay member. One commentator remarked that an apostle was also a prophet and an evangelist: an apostle because he was sent, a prophet because he forth-told and an evangelist because he brought good news. In the earliest years of the church, this is how "evangelist" is used.

Over time, however, the church's usage of the term changed, as seen in Paul's writings, from a publicly performed *function* to a high-ranking *office* with or without the public function. Paul uses the term in II Timothy 4:5 to define Timothy's functions as an evangelist being focused on church brethren. In one sense, he was still evangelizing but to the church. Its use had shifted to an administrative rank.

The advice Paul gives to Timothy and Titus focuses on how to pastor a congregation, not how to preach the gospel. Little in these books indicates that Timothy or Titus did any preaching to the public at large, bearing witness to the gospel. This responsibility seems to have been a function primarily of the apostles.

Herbert W. Armstrong

Anyone familiar with the history of the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) knows that Herbert Armstrong used the term "evangelist" in the same way as the later New Testament writings. To him, "evangelist" was an administrative rank. In actual practice, Mr. Armstrong, an apostle, did the evangelizing, but evangelists administered offices as department heads. Their evangelizing was mostly confined to preaching to the church. They supervised others. Occasionally, they would travel to local church areas to represent Mr. Armstrong, and would be traveling speakers during the Feast of Tabernacles. Local church pastors had more evangelistic contact with the public through *Plain Truth* lectures and visiting prospective members than the evangelists did!

In *Mystery of the Ages*, p. 275, Mr. Armstrong gives an encapsulated account of the church's zigzag history. The church, like Israel in the wilderness, has not moved in a straight line toward salvation over the nearly two thousand years since its founding. During long periods, God allowed the church to continue without any public preaching of the gospel—in fact, it was often in hiding, protected by God in the "wilderness" (Revelation 12:6). He did not seem too concerned, for if He had, He would have moved the church to act for His name's sake. Herbert Armstrong repeatedly claimed that the gospel was not preached for 1,900 years! He did not mean it was not preached at all, but it was not preached with the understanding, power, extent or duration until God raised him up to do it in the twentieth century.

Proselytizing

Although the Jews were engaged in it in Jesus' day (Matthew 23:15), proselytizing makes its first appearance as a biblical command in Jesus' ministry. Under the Old Covenant, God never established a function for proselytizing, partly because He limited His work to those who made the covenant with Him in Israel. But even so, Israel was to be God's witness before the nations: "'You are My witnesses,' says the Lord, 'that I am God'" (Isaiah 43:12).

Expecting others to be attracted to His people, God made provision in the law requiring Gentile males to be circumcised if they desired to join Israel (Exodus 12:48-49). Deuteronomy 28:10 adds, "Then all peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you."

God chose Israel to exemplify to the nations of the world a way of life that really works, but other than their personal witness, He made no provision to "preach the gospel" to the world. His experience with Israel ought to send us an obvious signal as to the importance of feeding the flock as compared to preaching to the outsider. As stated before, feeding the flock was always the first function of the priesthood of the Old Covenant church.

Israel failed because they did not live God's way of life and therefore could not be good witnesses. "Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward" (Jeremiah 7:24).

The next verse clearly establishes the prophets' major function: "Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt until this day, I have even sent to you all My servants the prophets, daily rising up early and sending them" (verse 25). The prophet's function, like the priest's, was to feed the flock, to strive to get Israel turned around—to put them "back on track"—so they could be proper witnesses.

In the New Testament, virtually every admonishment, exhortation and command is given to encourage obedience and growth in character. Jesus states the Christian's responsibility as, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

The Key to Effective Witnessing

The key to effective witnessing is not preaching the gospel publicly merely because God commands the church to do it, *but being properly prepared to do so when it fits God's purpose*. God spent thirty years preparing His Son for His public ministry. Jesus spent three and a half years preparing the apostles to preach the gospel. After Paul's conversion, he spent three years in the desert with Christ to prepare for his work. ***Preparation, along with God's will, is the key to preaching the gospel.***

Preparation precedes going to the world. Otherwise, the witness will be no better than that given by ancient Israel under the Old Covenant. Israel failed! Their failure resulted from the miserable quality of their witness. It was insufficient, misleading and sometimes an outright lie because they were not living as they were taught by God. Their failure is understandable, however. They were not equipped spiritually to do what was required of them. "Yet the Lord has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day" (Deuteronomy 29:4).

Neither are we fully equipped to do what is required of us. How can we preach when we can barely practice what we preach? The loving, serving, sharing example of the Christians in the first chapters of Acts is partially given to show their spiritual state in relation to the power with which the preaching was done. We are nowhere near that level of spirituality.

The most effective witnessing by the church of God was done before the world knew of radios, televisions, satellites, computers and fax machines. In the first century God worked powerfully

through a people thoroughly prepared spiritually, and their witness was so effective that Luke records that they "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6)!

We, on the other hand, have all come out of a spiritual organization in decline for many years, much longer than the time since Herbert Armstrong's death. Division in the church, doctrinal confusion and the lethargic attitude—allowing people to be virtually driven back to the world with hardly a murmur—are proof of this. Mr. Armstrong strove mightily in his last seven years to get the church "back on the track." Doctrinally, he succeeded to some extent, but he never came close to succeeding in turning peoples' attitudes to what is right.

It is now the ministry's responsibility to strive to get church members to live God's way of life *fervently* again, growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ and holding fast what they have been given. When a pastor concentrates his attention on preaching the gospel publicly, he cannot effectively feed the flock, whose attention will be focused where the pastor's attention is focused. A man cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

A Subtle Danger

A subtle danger lurks when preaching the gospel to the world is the main focus. Though the individual member may feel good that he is doing something as part of a visible work, he may in reality be lured into neglecting his most important responsibilities: overcoming and presenting a godly personal witness to the world. The busyness of doing an external work subtly becomes equated with righteousness. Improving statistics become the measure of growth. As the body "grows," the need to eradicate sin seems to disappear. It seems as though "saving" other people is easier than working on ourselves. But we need to work hard at casting the beams out of our own eyes before we start telling others of their problems (Matthew 7:1-5).

Formerly, the commonly held concept was that the lay member was to "pray and pay." Though I know of no minister who actually preached that, the members definitely *felt* it was true. Mostly, they *were* "out of the loop," a problem that can be blamed on governmental beliefs and policies.

However, each member is equally important to the body, as Paul shows in Romans 12 and I Corinthians 12. Each is given gifts by God to perform his function, with the primary function being to preach the gospel through one's *personal* example. The development of these gifts is a vital function of the church. We develop them as we overcome and grow, participate in feeding the flock, and make a personal witness in our lives.

When these gifts are not developed, the overall function of the church becomes hollow, to say the least, and the church's approach becomes carnal. Thus, the individual's relationship with God must be promoted at all costs, or the quality of everything else suffers immeasurably.

The End of Herbert Armstrong's Ministry

Most of us have our spiritual heritage firmly anchored in the ministry of Herbert W. Armstrong. We owe much of what we know and what we have become to God's working through him. However, he claimed that no man taught him.

In a long letter to brethren and co-workers he states, "No man taught me these truths. As the original apostles were taught by Jesus in person, so was I taught by Jesus Christ in writing. It is the same

word—the same teaching" (March 19, 1981, p. 5). He did not mean that he did not read or research into other men's writings on biblical topics, but that spiritual truth and understanding always came out of God's Word.

A little later in the letter he adds, "He used me in building the Philadelphia era of His church—and in proclaiming His gospel in all the world! . . . God has never removed a man called to a specific leadership or assignment or commission until his mission is completed." Mark well his last statement. Mr. Armstrong's mission is completed—it cannot be revived. The church's mission has taken a turn.

The Bible contains multiple examples of the works of men like Noah, Abraham, Moses, Samuel, Elijah, the prophets, and the first-century apostles. Did not God allow them to live until they completed their work? Did those who followed these specially commissioned men do the same job as they did? Did Joshua do the same job as Moses? Did David do the same work as Samuel? Did Elisha do the same work as Elijah? Did Nehemiah do the same work as Jeremiah, Ezekiel, or Daniel? Did those who followed the first-century apostles do the same work? Is it logical to assume that those of us following Mr. Armstrong will do the same work He did? Of course not! The Bible's patterns show otherwise.

An era unique to God's church has ended. If God had wanted to continue His work as done under Herbert Armstrong, why did He not either allow him to live or appoint someone exactly like him? Obviously, God wanted a change of emphasis to occur in His work.

Why Change Now?

Why has God chosen to emphasize something else? We do not know exactly why, but we know a change has occurred. God did not tell Israel in the wilderness why He was changing directions. Now is a time to exercise faith and patience.

God may have made this change because He is working out prophecy. God says in Daniel 12:7, "When the power of the holy people has been completely shattered, all these things shall be finished." Again, in Amos 8:11, "'Behold, the days are coming,' says the Lord God, 'that I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.'"

Taken together, these passages indicate that at some point a steady decline of hearing God's Word will begin (implying at least a decline in public preaching). If, as a reaction to Israel's hardness of heart, God is ordaining this to occur now, would it not be in vain for us to contradict His will? Would He support someone striving against His will? Would He want us to preach the gospel—in a desire to witness to as many as we can—in spite of what He says He is bringing about? Would it not be better for us to focus our attention on something we *can* accomplish by preaching strongly to the flock?

Herbert Armstrong's letter of March 19, 1981, adds:

I have gone to considerable length in this letter to show you how God does His work among humans through one man at a time. He specially prepared me for the work He has called me to do. I know of no one else who has been so prepared.

God is not the author of confusion. He does not raise up men to compete with each other. When He raised up leaders of the same rank at the same time, as He did with the twelve apostles and Paul, He positioned them on earth so their ministries did not overlap (II Corinthians 10:12-16).

Hold Fast What You Have

God instructs the Philadelphia brethren: "Hold fast what you have, that no one may take your crown" (Revelation 3:11). He says, not hold fast to an organization, but *hold fast to God's truth*. How does one lose his crown? By failing to hold fast to His truth! This begins to clarify the main focus of the faithful as the return of Jesus Christ draws near.

Christ prophesied that as we approach the end that "because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold" (Matthew 24:12). Paul confirms that the last days will be "perilous times of great stress and trouble [hard to deal with and hard to bear]" (II Timothy 3:1, *Amplified Bible*). Distractions will grab the Christian's attention and choke his spiritual life, if allowed (Matthew 13:22). We will need all the focused attention a shepherd can give to keep us headed toward the Kingdom of God.

God records in Jeremiah 23:28-29:

"The prophet who has a dream, let him tell a dream; and he who has My word, let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat?" says the Lord. "Is not My word like a fire?" says the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?"

The difference between God's Word and a prophet's dreams is as great as the difference between wheat and chaff. God's Word is like fire, penetrating, purifying and consuming evil. His people need to hear that Word powerfully expounded to help them through the end time.

Paul adds in his prayer for the church in I Thessalonians 3:12-13:

And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all, just as we do to you, so that He may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ with all His saints.

He writes in other places, "Now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed" (Romans 13:11), and "the night is coming when no one can work" (John 9:4).

More in the Book of Revelation

In Christ's letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2-3, only one message indicates strong public preaching (Philadelphia), while another alludes to what may indicate public evangelism (Thyatira). Some commentators argue that applying "open door" to public evangelism is not certain. Regardless, each message contains powerful admonitions to **repent** or exhortations to **overcome**. Again, *the emphasis is on getting ready*.

In Christ's Olivet Prophecy to His disciples about the years just before His return (Matthew 24-25), He emphasizes personal things: watching, praying, being faithful, being ready for the Bridegroom, developing one's talents and serving the brethren. In fact, nowhere in Revelation, the book revealing

end-time events, does Christ commend any evangelistic activity. He prophesies of the Two Witnesses, but the context shows their work is not an organized church activity. If the seven thunders symbolize the witness of the seven churches, the Two Witnesses do not appear until after the final church witnesses.

John 21:15-19 recounts an interesting episode at the very end of Jesus' ministry, in which He asks Peter three times, "Do you love Me?" After each of Peter's replies, He admonishes His disciple either to feed or tend His sheep. The strong implication is that a proper feeding of the sheep cannot be done without a deep love for Christ. Feeding those Christ died for may not be glorious, but it is necessary, not only for the well-being of the individual sheep, but also for the effectiveness of the work of the entire body.

Verse 19 ends with Christ's cryptic command, "Follow Me." In the context, this command can refer to only two things: following Christ in a martyr's death, or more broadly, following Him in laying down His life for the well-being of His sheep, possibly also including martyrdom. Earlier, He said, "The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). Either understanding gives an awesome and meaningful responsibility.

Obviously, preaching the gospel is included in the work of the church. But, from Christ's and the apostle's instruction to the church at the end, it is not at the forefront of their minds. God's work has taken a turn for now.

A backward glance at the fruits of those who have left the WCG and formed their own groups is instructive. Have any of them "set the world on fire"? No matter how charismatic their personalities, how many radio or television stations they manage to get on, how big their organizations, how many other prominent names go with them, or how many years they have been at it, their impact has been insignificant. Though they have tried with varying degrees of intensity to preach the gospel, God has not appeared to have blessed their efforts to any great extent. This is not to imply that what they have done is evil. Most of them have continued to exist, but growth in reaching the world is minimal at best.

This begs a question: "Who are we that God should treat us any different than He has treated these others?" Are we *it*, that God should bless us above others in this area of His work? Our circumstance could easily become similar to Israel's in their second year in the wilderness when they tried to go into the land after God decided they needed more wilderness experience. Presumptuousness does not impress God. We must always remember that it is His work, and we are merely His to use. The tool should not dictate to the craftsman how it is to be used.

Sometime in the future, the work will take another turn, and preaching the gospel will again be at the forefront of His mind as He raises up the Two Witnesses. Today, however, the church is in a circumstance similar to a campsite on a long journey. It is not intended to be a period of passive waiting. We must be eagerly awaiting God's orders, peaceful, alert, girded, making intensive preparations and repairs, revitalizing ourselves, loving our brethren, and ready to move at a moment's notice.

A Unique and Effective Work

I have repeatedly said that I am *not* against preaching the gospel to the world. However, apart from brief historical spurts, it has always been secondary to feeding the flock. It must be. Consider this

analogy. It takes only a brief moment to conceive a child, but it takes nine months of development before it can live apart from its mother's body. How many years are needed before full physical, emotional and spiritual maturity is achieved—thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, or seventy years? Spiritually, the church's function of feeding the individual is involved from conception to maturity because it is the major part of its responsibility. Thus, the Bible devotes much of its instruction to personal overcoming and growing.

When my wife and I were considering if we should leave the fellowship of the WCG, a major issue we needed to resolve was whether that constituted leaving the church. Like virtually everyone else, we had it drilled into us that leaving the WCG was tantamount to leaving the church. Gradually, we came to see that the church is a spiritual organism, not bound by human corporate boundaries, and felt confident we could then leave the WCG without leaving the spiritual church. (Request our free booklet, "Guard the Truth," for further information.)

When we left, nothing changed in relation to what I had been most of my converted life since being baptized in 1959. In 1966 I was ordained as an elder, and in 1969 I became a church pastor. That is where God placed me in service to His church. I am still in the spiritual organism, and I am still a church pastor. God has not suddenly made me an apostle just because the fellowship changed!

Consequently, it is essential to look at some of our resources and examine what has been produced by this work in its brief existence. Very few of us have had any prior professional experience in what we are now doing. We have had to learn everything from the ground up.

Yet it seems as though we should continue this way. We need time for the development of others to carry part of the load, which is being accomplished. People are contributing generously of their experiences and knowledge. They are growing and producing increasingly better material. For now, the wisest choice is to keep this work narrow in its focus, so that our energies and talents are not wasted doing too many things and in the end produce nothing worthwhile.

We are doing a work none of the major groups who have left the WCG in recent years is doing. In producing sermons, articles and booklets to feed converted people, we are teaching Christian living principles in a more detailed, specific and deeper way than others have attempted. Far from being self-centered, we are sharing what we have with others—and not with just church members. The booklets and tapes are finding worldwide distribution. ***We are preaching the gospel!***

The gospel of the Kingdom of God is about its King, laws, territory and subjects, which covers just about everything in the Bible. Adding to that the wide variety of terms the apostles used to describe it, the gospel is the whole of God's Word, the truth. Paul calls it "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). When it is preached to the world, they hear only a narrow sliver of that truth. The overwhelming bulk of the message is intended to be preached to converted Christians to refine and mature them.

We are doing an effective and important work, aimed at this time primarily toward converted people. It is a necessary and vital work. In this manner, we are serving people as they need to be served to prepare themselves for Christ's return. The Bride ***must*** make herself ready (Revelation 19:7). We are striving to ensure that every member of Christ's body has a sufficient supply of "oil" available for his or her preparation (Matthew 25:1-13).

Christ says in John 6:63, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life." If we continue to preach Christ's words to His people, we will be giving them the resources to overcome and grow toward spiritual perfection.

Summary

- The term "evangelist" gradually changed from a function directed toward the world to a high office within the church. In this modern era, Herbert Armstrong, an apostle, did the public preaching, and evangelists administered internal church functions.
- God waited four thousand years before He commanded a proselytizing function in the church during the ministry of Jesus Christ.
- Israel failed in its witness. The key to effective witnessing is thorough preparation, and when we neglect our individual relationship with God, the work we do for Him suffers immeasurably.
- A subtle danger inherent in focusing on preaching the gospel is for the member to equate his support of it as righteousness.
- When God prepares a man to do a work, He allows him to live long enough to finish it.
- The admonitions to the end-time church, especially in Revelation and Christ's Olivet Prophecy, are unanimous: Hold fast and make sure you are spiritually ready for Christ's return.
- God does not seem to be profusely blessing the at