

Franchising The Faith

Businessman's Approach Without Truth

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Well, this commentary is a spin off from the one that I gave last week regarding Americans' meager knowledge of biblical truth. It's combined, though, with my remembrance of an article that appeared in the *Charlotte Observer* newspaper. Actually, it was a couple of years ago. The article was titled "Franchising the Faith."

One day in late 1994 or '95, it was suggested to me by a former longtime member of the Worldwide Church of God that the leader of the group that he was in with nothing more than, as he said, a businessman, a businessman whose business was religion—and he was going to leave that organization. Well, the subject of this article was an increasing number of preachers using American business strategies to build their congregation's membership. These two thoughts came together in this commentary.

The centerpiece of the article featured a young preacher who actually copied Starbucks' business procedures, even to the point of giving away coupons valued at \$10 for a free Starbucks coffee to those who showed up for services. Do any of you remember Jesus ever doing anything like that? Or Paul or Peter?

What struck me about the article, though, actually to the point of sheer disgust (and I think that that's why I remembered it) was the incredible, seemingly total absence in the memberships' minds of any link whatever with what the Bible says about how God produces church membership. You would think that God would produce the same pattern all through time so that we could have faith in what was going on because He did not deviate.

This article reminded me of what Jesus said to a large group that was following Him at one point. He said to them, "You're only here in order to get something to eat." In other words, there was no good spiritual reason in them for coming to hear Him. I know that I want to understand things of this sort, so I will know whether God is involved and approves of what these preachers are doing, or with what I'm doing.

Interestingly, the article contained not one reference to God or to His sovereignty over the church, in order to justify these promotions that were going on. There was not one mention of the Bible, though they are was a brief mention of sermons. The format of their services was typical of the purpose-driven church movement that was so popular a few years ago, with heavy emphasis on bands, singing and slide shows. At least it seemed to me that their services were little more than a pep rally.

These business entrepreneurs whose business is religion can get away with this because the American people, though they believe the Bible is a holy book, have almost no knowledge of what it says. What little knowledge people do have is not believed strongly enough to actually trust. So what did they do? They feel like they need to go to services, and so they go and just go along with what is going on, and probably enjoy it for the most part. Thus, people feel justified to voluntarily give themselves to a religion that they sincerely believe is Christian, but is in reality false all the way to its core. In reality, what is happening through their participation is that they are turning the tables and forcing themselves as though they were God.

Right from the beginning, they—the people participating in this kind of thing—become the Sovereign through dictating the foundational terms of their supposed relationship with God. This, brethren, does not bode well for a good relationship with Him.

It reminds me of Israel's refusal to enter the promised land on God's terms. Then, shortly thereafter, they volunteered to go in, and were sorely defeated by the Canaanites. They were going to go in on *their* terms. They turned the tables.

Well, nobody does that to God and gets away with it. In fact, the people in this article have no relationship whatever with the God of the Bible. Do they ever stop to think whether God wants a relationship with them? They would know, if they knew and believed what the Bible says. Do they know that the Bible shows that it is God who initiates the relationship with those who become His children? That's how you know, if God initiated it—that He wants a relationship.

Do they know that it is God who also sustains the relationship as it continues? We're saved by grace, not by sincerity. Sincerity is good, but the chance that we humans are sincerely wrong in some of our beliefs about spiritual things is tremendously high. Recall that people, in their deep sincerity, cast their lovable flesh-and-blood babies into fires as a sacrifice.

Assuming God's tolerance about our beliefs and conduct is what American religion has become to its core, and the fatal flaw is that they believe God is so tolerant that any concept of worship of him as acceptable as long as one is "sincere."

Some measure of this sort of thinking is right in the church of God. And this is no wonder, because the concept of universal acceptance by God surrounds us in our environment, and this concept is easily absorbed. It's so comforting.

I've been at the center of the Pentecost counting controversy, so I've had some things expressed to me about it. One of the things I have heard is this: "What does it matter? It only comes around once in a while anyway." That's almost unbelievable for a church of God member.

Well, brethren that is a very dangerous position. It *assumes* God's tolerance. "It doesn't matter; it only comes around once every 11 years." (That's the average of this thing that we are talking about.) You see, it assumes God's tolerance. But, brethren, we are sanctified. We are made holy by *truth obeyed*, not *sincerity*.

What is this statement saying about God? Taken to its ultimate end, if God doesn't mean we have to count in a certain manner, then why does He command anything? Why does He say, "Keep Passover on the 14th [of Nisan], and the First Day of Unleavened Bread on the 15th of Nisan," unless He really means it? Which He does!

What I have heard from people right in the church of God is the same casual attitude toward God as in the world, and thus, like in the world, sovereignty is reversed and mere men are telling God what He must accept of us.

Recently, a man gave a sermon in which he said he thought that it was better not to teach a truth if it was going to cause a disturbance and be upsetting to the congregation. Well, brethren, *hearing a spiritual truth one has never heard before is almost always upsetting*.

This is one of the major things that made people so angry about what they heard from Jesus—angry enough to eventually kill Him. Should He have kept His mouth shut? The same Jesus said in John 8 that it is truth that sets us free. Would we rather remain comfortable in our slavery to a lie than be confronted by a truth and be made upset for a while? This is a reality we may face often as we continue along the way.