

The Source Of Church Characteristics (Part One)

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My overall subject here fits into a series of sermons that I actually gave beginning the last Feast of Tabernacles. I called it at the time, "In Search of a Clear World View." The series of sermons was mostly about the characteristics of the church. What is it that sets the church off as being different from the Christian churches of this world? I gave material there but I am now zeroing in on what it is that really makes the church of God different from all of those who claim to be but are not necessarily that way at all. This is going to be on the source of characteristics of the church.

We will begin in the end time, with a brief explanation of the term eschatology. It is the study of end time events, thus it involves a study into prophecy, did Jesus mean this or that? Did Isaiah write about our time or something that is already fulfilled? Who is the beast, and will that person and his nation arise to power? Will the church ever come together from its scattered condition? What is the evidence of such-and-such a scripture applies only to an ancient event we might term as a forerunner, or will it also occur a second time in our day in a more major way? Are the two witnesses alive? If they are, are they already preaching but not in an open public way? Who is the great whore of Revelation 17? Who is the false prophet and what religion does he represent? Has the great tribulation begun and against whom are the powers of this world primarily aimed?

The study of eschatology delves into questions such as these. This sermon is going to look at one particular issue important to us at this time in history. We are entering—or are we already into—a very confusing period of time. We know from eschatology that the false prophet and the beast with him are going to force a false religion on all of the people of the world. Only those who see through the deception are going to be able to escape it and it may cost them dearly.

We have to know characteristics that we need to identify as those being right and true. (When I began this subject I spoke on it twice at the Feast of Tabernacles, then there was a break until I spoke on it again on the last day of Unleavened Bread, then again on Pentecost.) This series is intended to help us to clarify what our world view should be to better serve the church, and to clarify things as to the path that we need to be walking in this very critical time.

In the past thirty years, the church that so many of us came to believe has been the true church, was figuratively blown apart by internal dissension following the death of

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longtime leader Herbert W. Armstrong. What was once a fairly large unified organization has become dozens of much smaller fellowship groups. Most of these groups still have the same basic package of doctrines, they are each doing a work of preaching the gospel to the best of their ability, but there is no doubt that personality differences from group to group are somewhat different, maybe, even from what they were in the Worldwide Church of God, and we are not united in a common work.

Some members scattered throughout the globe really seem to fret about this seeming lack of unity, because it seems to destroy our end time vision of the church solidly doing a very compact work right up to and through the work of the two witnesses and the return of Jesus Christ. So we need to question that.

Was our vision really correct? I think that I proved to you from Scripture that it was God who blew the WCG apart, even as He blew Israel apart, even as He blew Judah apart. He blew them apart because He was displeased at the way things were going in those nations. I think we have to figure that the book of Lamentations is giving us a very clear picture that He blew the church apart. He was the only one who had the power to do it in the way He did, and He did gather all of those scattered people together into smaller groups, not all of the people, but the church is still going on.

Maybe we do need to change our vision of the end time church of God. Perhaps our end time expectation was wrong, from the time that we were in the Worldwide Church of God, and the circumstances that produced the scattered condition of the church was part of the purposeful work of Jesus Christ to put the church in the circumstance He wants it now. He definitely wanted Judah scattered, He definitely wanted Israel scattered, but He never lost sight of them. He has made the promise He is going to bring them back together in His good time.

I think we need to consider that God said, I never change and you can rely upon Me. So the church is scattered but it is still under His authority and it is operating in a way that is effective to what He wants at this time.

Please turn to Revelation 1. We have to get a right idea of where we are right now. This verse is critical to a right understanding of the time flow of the entire content of the book of Revelation

Revelation 1:1 The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants—things which must shortly take place. And He sent and signified it by His angel to His servant John.

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The key word in that verse is the word, shortly. It really begins to set the time element for the entire book. I believe that a proper understanding of the English meaning of that word is, imminent. Did Jesus Christ mean imminent in the sense of as soon as I am done giving these prophecies everything is going to blow apart? Or did He mean that they would be imminent when they began to be triggered by God to occur? You can begin to understand that if the second one is correct, a thousand years can go by, two thousand years could go by, before He finally reached that place—now we begin.

Then they not only begin but they begin to occur on an accelerated pace, and once they get started they are going to come faster and faster. I used to wonder why Herbert Armstrong would say, brethren whenever these things begin to occur they are going to occur so fast it will make your head spin. I do not know if he fully understood it, but he was right. I think that you can see from your own observations of what is taking place in the world, things are speeding up.

We do not want them to go too fast, we want them be under God's control, and we want to be able to catch our breath and understand where we are at any time. I am passing on to you that I understand and I believe that the true interpretation is, they will be imminent once they start, and that occurrence of fulfillment will take place then one right after the other, even the way they are given in the book.

I think you know that by the time we get to chapters 16, 17, and 18, horrible things take place in one twenty-four hour period. The scriptures are jammed with things that are going to occur, and the Day of the Lord becomes shrunk down to one day.

We have something to support what I just gave you, what I feel is the correct application of that word shortly. History proves that the overwhelming number of events prophesied in Revelation have not occurred, they are sitting there as prophecies, they are going to take place but they have not occurred yet. This is emphasized in our present day by there being so much attention even to the blood moons thing. David gave that series of articles on the blood moons, but you cannot really pin anything to them. They are the visions of men, but they could be very wrong.

I think it indicates imminence, because so many blood moons did happen very rapidly within a two year period, and it indicates that we are moving toward a period of time when prophetic events are going to be fulfilled in that sort of manner.

The only section of Revelation that concerns the issue of the church—and the timing of events so that we can isolate the true church and identify it as clearly as we possibly can—are in chapters 2 and 3, where descriptions of seven congregations are given. It is

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not necessary to go through those chapters in verse-by-verse detail, but I do want to pick some things out so that you will see the drift of what I am thinking.

The seven congregations are just that, seven congregations of individual groups of people—true Christians meeting in fellowship. They all existed at the same time—in the first century—probably no later than about 95 A.D., which is when the researchers feel that the apostle John received the book of Revelation. So, they were all there, the seven churches, seven congregations, but they were one spiritual body. It was one church.

These seven churches had characteristics that Christ was going to make use of for the end time church. It does not mean that those seven congregations were going to continue right on. They are no longer in existence, they are gone, they served their purpose. The people that were in them were saved by God, but they served their purpose as descriptors for you and me, for when the book of Revelation begins to be fulfilled.

The seven churches are one spiritual body, they are all part of the same church, the church of God. Collectively they are one church and they are used as examples for those living when the prophecies begin to be fulfilled in the end time.

In order for those then living who will be able to evaluate themselves against those characteristics given by Christ. For you and me the important information there is the characteristics that existed in the members of those seven congregations and we are supposed to evaluate ourselves, our own present condition, against what Christ reveals was in the people in those congregations.

I want to emphasize this very clearly: those seven congregations were not in any way intended to represent eras. You have heard of the Laodicean era, Philadelphia era, and so forth. Nothing like that exists, because the book was not even opened until after those era teachings came and went.

One of the other things that tends to indicate that all of these congregations existed at one time, and the characteristics of those people in those congregations carried through to the end time, is because Christ gave us a very interesting and easily understood clue. Five of the churches have information indicating, in one way or another, that they were to look forward to the return of Jesus Christ—soon.

In order for the book of Revelation to apply only in the way I am saying, the people had to be in a circumstance where Christ's return was in a sense just a few years away. So that note of urgency is given to those people, a note of urgency that would not have

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If it only existed for first century usage, He probably would have worded it like this: get yourselves ready before you die. No, He said, I am coming, in one way or another. In fact He said, to the Laodiceans, I am standing at the door and knocking. That is how close He indicates that period of time is to His return.

Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea all have a note in them regarding Christ's imminent return. This teaching, then, on eras is totally uncalled for. It does not fit the book.

The characteristics given by Christ are those that are held by individuals in the congregations, but each congregation has some dominant characteristic. Everybody knows about Philadelphia, they are faithful, there is Laodicea, those people are not zealous, they are out having a lot of fun. One congregation, He even tells them they are dead. Then there is Thyatira, they have all kinds of doctrinal problems.

Those characteristics existed in the congregations then. We are to measure ourselves against those characteristics that are given there, so that we are able to repent if our characteristics fit the kind of thing that Jesus said needs to be repented of. Each member is judged on the quality of his relationship with Christ, and his spiritual growth. Christ is our Savior; the congregation cannot save us, the ministry cannot save us, and the entire church cannot save us. The weight of responsibility is on each individual member and how he pleases Christ with his relationship with Him and of course his attitude toward the church and its program.

Revelation 2 and 3 is Christ giving the end time church an evaluation as the prophecies begin unfolding to those individual members so that they will have time to repent and grow as the following events occur. Where do you stand in evaluating yourself against the evaluation that Christ gave to those seven congregations? That is what it is there for, so that when the events in the book of Revelation begin to unfold we still have time to repent, to grow, to overcome.

The book of Revelation is written to the end time church. I hope you get that correct, because it is going to determine the kind of attitude we have toward the circumstances we live in and our own circumstances in relation to God.

In the sermon that I gave on Pentecost, I asked the question, why is God doing this, this way? The 'this' in that question is the combination of events taking place, especially in

The Source of Church Characteristics (Part One) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>) regard to the spiritual configuration of the church.

Another vital question is, do we perceive the church in this end time in the same way God does? All of the messages in that world view series involved the unique identity of the church. There is no other organization on earth that has its characteristics. That is one reason why Paul, in Galatians, distinctly calls the church, The Israel of God.

That title implies that there is another Israel and it does not belong to God, but it carries the same name. Can we identify it? The answer to these questions are important to our understanding of eschatology. Where does the church fit in this period of times, and events? That also means, where do each of us fit individually? We are where the church is, I hope.

There definitely is another nation that openly claims the name Israel, it claims it is Jewish, and that they are descendants of Judah, but there is a very strong likelihood that claim at best is only partially true. Please turn to Revelation 2 and the letter to the Smyrna church.

Revelation 2:9 "I know your works, tribulation, and poverty (but you are rich); and I know the blasphemy of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan."

What we need to think about is: did the risen Christ, who did this evaluation, intend for the apostle John to understand and write 'Jews' in a purely ethnic sense? Or did He intend we understand Jews in the manner Paul used it in Romans 2? This synagogue of Satan exists in the end time, and it is part of what is beginning to unfold to us and it is going to have impact on what is going on in the world.

Romans 2:27-29 And will not the physically uncircumcised, if he fulfills the law, judge you who, even with your written code and circumcision, are a transgressor of the law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outwardly in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

Paul used 'Jew' here as a metaphor for somebody who was deeply converted and a real Christian. That might put a little tingle in your mind regarding those who say they are Jews and are not, but a part of the synagogue of Satan. There is something there that is

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going to be important in the end time, or it would not be there. It could be false Christians, that is a possibility. It is something to think about.

The nation of Israel—those who claim that they are from Judah and are not. We were talking about the Israel of God, and that there is a Judah that exists calling themselves Israel, and they have existed for about fifty years as a nation. In addition to that, what about all of the nations of the western world who may very well be part of the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, even as real ethnic Jews surely are?

These people are Israelitish in the western world, and they have every bit as much right to the claim of the national name Israel because they too are descendants of the Israelites who had a relationship with God through the Old Covenant. These people do not call themselves Israel—they call themselves England, France, Ireland, Norwegians, Swedes. Those people are overwhelmingly descendants from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and there are more besides them. They really do historically have a right to the name Israel, but it is not the same Israel as the Israel of God.

The Israel of God is the only one that has the right to that name, because they are converted, they are the real Jews, as Paul defines Jew in Romans 2.

I am drifting toward this subject of characteristics. It is important that we understand the characteristics that are at work in this time in our life so that we are not easily moved away from the truth of God. So we already saw one that might be a real impediment down the road somewhere. That is the synagogue of Satan, those who say they are Jews and are not.

I think we can look at the western world where our view is concentrated on because that is part of our world. The United States is just one part of that Israel, that is, the ones that are truly descendants from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but they are not converted. The United States is just one part of that Israel and many within this nation think it is Christian, and it is not. It has some areas with strong elements of the true Christian religion, but the nation is not Christian.

There is no doubt in my mind that God has blessed Britain and America especially, greatly, at these times, partly because He chose to place the seed of the true Christian church in those nations at this time.

All of these questions that we have been going into are part of eschatology, as we begin to take a look at some important spiritual characteristics of the church that identify it to those who understand where to look. What we are going to look at first here makes it

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unique.

Matthew 16:18 “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

He delivered that to Peter, the apostle. All I want out of this at this point is, Jesus Christ said that He will build His church. He only built *one* church. He did not say I will build My churches, there is only one church He built.

We might say today that if we were looking for the true church, we would look for the church that had Jesus Christ’s fingerprints all over it. Did you ever see a movie in which it was kind of a mystery, maybe somebody stole a very valuable painting, something that was painted two or three years beforehand and the thing was worth millions of dollars, so the art expert would look at that painting with magnifying glasses. They would evaluate the paint to try to get clues to understand whether this painting really was done by this artist, or was it a well-done fake.

The one church that Jesus built, and many churches that others built that may have a similarity to Jesus Christ’s church that He built, how are you going to tell them apart? They have to be evaluated.

My first point is: if Jesus Christ built the church, it is going to be the way He Himself configured it. Just like the picture, the real artist cannot hide himself, because his characteristics are going to come out in the painting.

If we think of the church as being a building, which Paul uses as a metaphor, then that building is going to be constructed according to the design of the architect and the builder, Christ is both Architect and Builder. The true church is going to be configured by Jesus Christ and He will build His characteristics right into the church.

In one sense, this is the answer to the whole sermon, the whole point. The people in the church will end up having the same characteristics as the Builder. This is important to understand. The people who are members are going to act and react in the same way that the Builder would act and react. This is not something that takes place in a moment’s notice, it takes place over a long period of time.

Matthew 16:18 “And I also say to you that you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

The church that He built has eternal life in it from the time He puts a person in it, because they will have the same characteristics as He does. He is eternal and the characteristics of the building pass on to those who become part of it. I am not saying that the eternal life is guaranteed. I am saying that it is there as we become a part of it. If we are going to lose, it is going to be because the stupidity of the people who give up on what Christ is doing in them. It can be lost, but on the other hand, the eternal life is there.

That the church exists is not the question, because it does exist. If God promises to build it, He is going to build it, if He promises it will never die out, it will never die out. That is not the issue. God's Word can be understood and believed. He never anywhere says how large it will be, He does say it will be a little flock. It is not going to be big, it is not going to be the size of the Catholic Church, or the Muslims, it is not going to be big like any one of the large Protestant groups. It is going to be pretty insignificant in terms of its size.

What kind of characteristics do we continue looking for? If one is searching for the church in that period of time between the apostles and now, you would look for evidence in a church carrying certain characteristics that pertained to the Builder. If you were in the world you would look for things that you feel configured into that particular group. We can mention doctrines that are pretty clear—you would look for a church that believes in the trinity, that keeps Sunday, Christmas, Easter, and you would keep going down that line of beliefs that you already knew these churches already kept and observed.

If you knew characteristics of the true church you would start by looking for characteristics of Christ, and Christ kept the Sabbath, He kept the holy days. The apostle Paul said, in I Corinthians 11, this is what Christians are supposed to do, imitate Christ.

I Corinthians 11:1 Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.

Paul got the point, and so should we. On a worldwide basis, how many people beyond the small nation of Israel, Judah, knew what was going on in Jerusalem when Jesus was crucified, spent three days and three nights in the earth, and then arose from the dead?

Regardless of people's perceptions regarding the true church of God, God's purpose for

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the church moved on. Nothing changed in the world while God was producing that by which He was going to lead the world into His purpose.

The true church of God is not going to change things in the world. It may do a work as a witness, it will do it to some extent, but it is not going to change anything either in that witness or by the lives of its people. We have to look for a church that seemingly is not having an impact on the world, but it exists and it has a determined purpose in the membership of its people in which they are headed toward—all of them, the same goal, the same destination, the same kind of determination—because they are striving to be like the One who is building them.

Regardless of people's perceptions regarding the true churches purpose, everything keeps moving on. It is even possible for those of you who were in the Worldwide Church of God, that we were somewhat misled by our experience in that church, this thing about size matters. I heard Herbert Armstrong and Dr. Hoeh say at different times that the size of the Worldwide Church of God was abnormal for what we know of the history of the true church, because as far as anybody researching from within the Worldwide Church of God was able to find, it was never large by modern standards, of any part of its past.

Jesus truthfully called it, the little flock. It is so small He said, do not fear. Anything that is small appears weak, has a proclivity to get fearful. Our Builder says, you are going to be small but do not fear.

It is entirely possible that the size of the Worldwide Church of God was dictated by the means that was used to preach the gospel. It took a lot of people, it took a huge income to do what it did by way of television broadcasting and so forth.

God blew the church apart, and the way it is doing its work now, by comparison, takes almost no money at all, because it is using the Internet. I am convinced that the scattered churches of God, which I call fellowship groups, is actually doing a bigger work than Herbert Armstrong ever did. Every one of them is reaching out on a worldwide basis. That is quite a witness.

God does not have to send workers all over the place. All the people have to do is to turn the switch and He can make those people tune in to somebody's website and bring it in touch with His truth if He wants that person to be a part of His church. They can be in China, they can be in Manchuria, they can be in South Korea, Philippines, Australia, or the Union of South Africa. It does not matter where they are they are going to hear basically the same message though it is coming from different groups. They

The Source of Church Characteristics (Part One) by John W. Ritenbaugh (<http://www.cgg.org>) almost all have the name, church of God, which is the only name the Bible gives to the church.

If we look upon the blowing apart of the church as something that happened positively because that is way God wanted to put it so it is in the configuration that He wanted it for the end time, that was a plus. That was something that was painful to go through but at the same time it turned out to be a plus, a blessing.

The Builder is going to configure the church, not only in the way we might say He wants it, but He is going to configure it so that it is in the image of the One who is doing the building.

If you are going to identify it, you have to know something about Jesus Christ in order to identify the church and have this principle on your mind. If this Builder is configuring it, it is going to be following the pattern that He finds within Himself. That is what builders do, that is what architects do, they pull that stuff out of themselves and that is good. Jesus is following a pattern that He put in people whenever He created them in the first place, so that some of their abilities and they way they think, will come out in what they produce.

Now here is Point number 2, this is exceedingly important: the next source that shapes the church's unique characteristics is directly tied to the builder, Christ. It is, that the Holy Spirit possessed by the Father and the Son is the enabling tool that configures its members in unity with them. This aspect is critical to our calling and God's purpose.

It is first essential for us to understand that the way the Bible uses the term spirit becomes very important. I will give you what it is, the definition is not complex. Spirit is an invisible immaterial power or influence that motivates to action according to its characteristics.

Job 32:6-8 So Elihu, the son of Barachel the Buzite, answered and said: "I am young in years, and you are very old; therefore I was afraid, and dared not declare my opinion to you. I said, 'Age should speak, and multitude of years, should teach wisdom.' But there is a spirit in man, and the breath of the Almighty gives him understanding."

If we did not have a spirit we would not have understanding, we would not know anything—it is that spirit that makes us human. Otherwise we would be just like an animal. Mr. Armstrong did not have any other word that he could put in there to try to

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describe it, he just called it a human spirit. There is a Holy Spirit, there is a human spirit. That Holy Spirit makes God, God. It is that human spirit that makes humans, human.

What happens if a person receives God's Holy Spirit? Do you understand what occurs? By receiving the Holy Spirit it makes the possibility of humans and God communicating with one another. That is the deal. It makes communication possible so that we can understand God, we can understand His Word, His purpose, and what He is building. We can get in harmony with Him, because we have the power to begin to be able to act the way He acts, because we have a part of Him in us.

Ecclesiastes 3:19 For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over beasts, for all is vanity.

In regard to life we have no advantage over animals. One thing we do know, we have a spirit and that makes us different. We are not animals, that spirit makes us different from animals.

Ecclesiastes 3:20 All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust. Who knows the spirit of the sons of men, which goes upward, and the spirit of the animal, which goes down to the earth?

Animals have a spirit. How many different categories of spirits has God made? A dog is different from a cat. Is it possible, that though they have the same basic makeup—they both have brains that God created—that God gave the dog a dog spirit, and He gave the cat a cat spirit, so that they have different personalities, and they are able to perform certain things? What one can do, the other cannot. I want you to see that it is the spirit that makes the difference.

Do animals have an invisible, immaterial power working in them too? The Bible presents us with two parallels of great importance so that we can grasp this aspect of spirit's importance. It is important because it enables us to function with understanding within God's awesome spiritual purpose. Why does God need to give us His Holy Spirit? Because without it we cannot function like He does.

What does this mean in terms of characteristics that begin to occur in our life? It is these characteristics which God begins to build in us when we are part of His church, converted, having His Spirit as well, so that we begin to look and act like our creator.

John 6:44a “No one can come to Me. . .

He means come for the purpose of conversion, come for the purpose of salvation, come to Him for the purpose of being like Him, come to Him for the purpose of being fed by Him. He describes Himself in this chapter as being the manna that came down from heaven on which men can eat—you have to eat of Him, spiritually.

John 6:44b . . . unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

This first parallel helpful to understand is with God's calling of ancient Israel given in Deuteronomy 7:6-8. There are many parallels between the church and the nation of Israel that God called out of Egypt. We find a great deal of this information in the book of Deuteronomy, but there is a major difference right at the very beginning, as God begins to explain the calling of Israel out of Egypt there in chapter 7. As we move from that point, He says, I called you out of Egypt because I love you. It is not because you are such great people, I love you and I am going to do something with you.

Here is the important part. These people were already under the Old Covenant, because the Old Covenant was made way back in Exodus 20-23. They signed on the dotted line, they said everything that God has told us we will do, they gave their pledge to Him. He never gave any promise whatever that He would give them His Spirit, therefore they were being used for a different purpose than the church in God's overall purpose.

They were going to be an example nation for all the world to witness, but it was going to be an example given by people who did not have His Spirit. Therefore the whole world has a whole book written about these people that shows how much we need His Spirit to be a part of His church and the purpose that He is working out.

God never promised them access to Him in prayer, they could pray and He would hear, but I am talking about something specific. They did not have promise of going right into His very presence in prayer. He did not really formally say that He would forgive them for their sins.

This is interesting when you begin to find out all of the stuff that is missing for ancient Israel, and all of the stuff that we have. Sometimes we take it for granted, all of the blessings that come along with making the New Covenant, and being called in the way

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we have been called.

These are all characteristics of the church. They are all coming to us from one source, that is from the Builder. The purpose of Israel, the nation, was never from the beginning to be conversion. You can begin to see much more clearly why there is an Israel of God, and there is an Israel that does not belong to God.

The Israel of God are His own children, we have His Spirit and are part of what He is working out. So whenever God called Israel, the nation, He did it in one fell swoop to millions of people at one time. With us, we are all picked and chosen individually—no one can come to the Son except the Spirit of the Father draws Him. **No one**. What an awesome gift.

There is a characteristic there. Each and every one of them in the church are *personally* called by our Father in heaven. He knows our history from the get-go, and He took us anyway. In the New Covenant, which is a covenant with better promises, we are promised the gift of God's Holy Spirit.

It is clear that the callings of the two nations is entirely different in terms of their purpose in order that we rightly perceive ourselves as recipients and possessors of an unearned, undeserved honor. This is intended, I am sure, to keep us humble as we begin to grow and understand what is happening in our lives, why it is happening, and the end result of why it is happening. It begins to work on our mind and humble us before Him in a sense a very deep appreciation as we see what is going on in this world.

John 6:53-56 Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood, abides in Me and I in him.”

I think we all understand that He is speaking in a spiritual parallel here, as if it was something that we could do to eat of Him, but the eating is all spiritual. We take in His Word, which is a part of Him, we receive of His Spirit, which is a part of Him.

John 6:57 “As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me.”

Anybody who comes to Christ is already alive. This is a different kind, a different quality of life that He is talking about. It is everlasting life that He is talking about. In order to sustain this everlasting life and accumulate the characteristics of the source of the food that we are eating from, we must eat of Him. It is something that we deliberately do.

John 6:58-63 “This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.” These things He said in the synagogue as He taught in Capernaum. Therefore many of His disciples, when they heard this, said, “This is a hard saying; who can understand it?” [Receiving the Holy Spirit makes it possible for God to communicate with us and we understand.] When Jesus knew in Himself that His disciples murmured about this, He said to them, “Does this offend you? What then if you should see the Son of Man ascend where He was before? It is the Spirit who gives life [Until we receive the Spirit of God we have only human life. When we receive the Spirit of God we get the down payment of a life that is everlasting.]; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.”

Virtually everyone took what He said literally. I think that we are coming to understand, (it is noticeable in the book of John), how often people did this. They completely misunderstood what He was saying. To you and me it is pretty clear, we are speaking the same language that David was talking about, the same that Christ is. So we get it and it makes a difference in our life, because we believe it, and it is lodging in our hearts. It begins to motivate us to do things that are along the same lines as our Father and Builder is doing. Everyone took what He said literally and it offended them, motivating them to drop out, as it were, by quitting following Him.

Not to get it is a characteristic of those in those churches who call themselves Christian, but they are not. Did you ever stop to think this is why they keep Sunday? They just do not get it, it is as though Jesus and the Bible is speaking Russian to them. We have nothing to brag about as He continues to conform us to Himself by using the language that passes between Him and us.

Please turn to John 3. This is when Nicodemus came to Jesus and Jesus sprung one on him that he did not understand. Nicodemus, like most people who were listening to Jesus, took it literally. Jesus did not mean it that way.

John 3:2-7 This man came to Jesus by night and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs

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that You do unless God is with him.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” Nicodemus said to Him, “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’”

The only ones who are going to enter the Kingdom of God are those who are constructed, or reconstructed, into the same configuration as the Son. They will enter because they are all of the same mind. They will enter because they are all of the same character, have the same kind of attitude, same kind of actions and reactions, they make the same kind of judgments, and so forth. That kind of person can enter the Kingdom of God.

The key here is that Jesus is speaking of the quality, the power that changes us and becomes in us a being like Him. We can easily accept and agree with Jesus' statement because of our experience as a human—that which is born of the flesh is indeed flesh, a baby from its mother's womb is flesh.

Regarding the other birth that Jesus introduces here, it is in that order for one to see the Kingdom of God it is necessary for one to experience a supernatural birth initiated from above, that is by God in heaven.

Without that supernatural birth occurring, one cannot see the Kingdom of God, he cannot experience it, he cannot partake of it, he cannot possess nor enjoy it. What Jesus is talking about here is the beginning of everlasting life. It begins the process of regeneration and it is the initial stage of the process of conversion produced by the receipt of that Spirit.

I am going to say something that might disturb you a bit. That is, in order for this to take place, (that we are reading of here), a person has to receive the Spirit of God *before* they are baptized, *before* they have hands laid on them. It is actually *impossible*, in a sense, that we will do things properly if we do not have that Spirit working in us before we ever get baptized, before we ever have hands laid on us. When Jesus came to John the Baptist, John said to Him, “I need to be baptized of You.” Jesus replied, “Go through with it so that all righteousness can be fulfilled.” He already had the Spirit of God, He had it from birth. That does not happen to us, but in order for us to get the Kingdom of

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God, in order for us to partake in the Kingdom of God, in order for us to proceed onto baptism and the laying on of hands, we have to already have the Spirit working in us, converting us.

Why do we go through baptism? Why do we have hands laid on us? To fulfill all righteousness, because that is what God wants us to do, it is a witness to us. We go through that because God wants us to be committed to what we said that we agreed to before. Baptism is a witness to the one who made the deal with God.

Going through something like that, you never forget it. I have never ever come across a single person in my ministry who forgot that they were baptized. They usually remember not only being baptized, they remember who did it, and who laid hands on them. For the sake of this sermon, that is when Jesus Christ really begins to 'earn' His money, to build us.

God is doing things—like baptisms and the laying on of hands routine—that is for our good. Here is something else that is important for us to understand, and be thankful for. In Genesis 1, Adam is created as the sixth day begins. Before that God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." Jesus Christ is our literal Creator, He created Adam and Eve. How much did Adam contribute to his creation? Nothing.

God is going to follow the same basic parallel. How much are we going to contribute to our spiritual creation into the image of Jesus Christ? He is the Creator of His children, and He is forming us and shaping us into what He wants. He is putting together a perfect family, a perfect Kingdom that He and His Son are putting together. We do a little bit, by yielding to Him and giving Him the opportunity to freely work on us till we become in the image of what They are.

We will be configured in the way He wants us to be configured, so that we fit within that group that is going to follow the Son wherever He goes.