

Back To The First Century (Part One)

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I was preparing a sermon on Thursday to be delivered on the Feast of Trumpets, and a combination of thoughts took me to something I felt that we needed to better understand so that we have a better chance to really and truly fear God to the level that we should.

To fear God as we should requires that we take everything that He says so seriously that we truly search out the wisdom in what He communicates to us. God's word is deep. In this case, I do not mean "deep" in the sense of difficulty. I mean "deep" in the sense that in almost every case there are far more applications in life's activities that His word touches on (in almost every case) than appears obviously and clearly on the surface of what we might think is going on.

For example—a simple, clear example. The Fourth Commandment tells us that we should keep the Sabbath. To many in America, Sabbath means Sunday. No, it doesn't. One has to search out more deeply than that which is right on the surface. To others who search more deeply, they conclude more correctly that—scratching a little deeper—He means Saturday. He still means a day, but it's a different day than most assume well. That is a step in the right direction. But there is yet more because the commandment also says no work is to be done on that day. So, what does God mean by work on that specific day of the week? Is it somewhat different than the other six days of the week? Is work, then, defined in the same way as with other days? Takes a bit more thought to go that deeply.

If you begin to see what I mean, we find when we become more familiar with God's word that there is layer after layer of applications possible in what God says. Those things need to be searched out, and there is much wisdom and understanding that can be mined from one fairly simple Sabbath commandment.

Back in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Evelyn and I were in the Pasadena area, and at that time I was the pastor of the Ambassador Auditorium AM congregation. But many of us—others besides the Ritenbaughs—were asking, "Why is this happening, and who is causing this to happen?" Our search led Evelyn and I to resign our position while we were here in the Charlotte area, pastoring that congregation. We did that in January 1992. So, the question then was, "What do we do now?"

We were upset by what was going on, but neither of us was deeply angry. We concluded that the best thing to do first was to be patient, because after all, God still existed and so did the church. It might be damaged, but the church was still there. So we concluded, like so many others, that the church left us. Were we right?

We need to do some more searching. Therefore, with that conclusion, we could not go back to who we worshipped or the way that we worshipped before our baptism. We had already proved that that was wrong—dead wrong—and that that signaled to us that the first step was to make no sudden moves. Stay put. So we made that decision, actually fairly quickly. This was still January, 1992. Within about two weeks after that decision was made, we began to hear from scattered church members all over the United States. They phoned us, and they wanted to know if we could pastor them. Here I am in Charlotte. Who could pastor somebody up in Spokane, Washington (for example)? We had no answers.

It was not a flood of people who were calling us, but the members were still out there and they wanted to continue. It was to me, though, as though the first layer of revelation was being lifted up so that we could see a bit more. I took it that God was saying to Evelyn and me that He trained me to be a teacher of His word, so keep on doing that. Some things were changing, but the most important elements remained. God still is—this is 1992—God still is, and so is His purpose, and so is our calling. The gates of the grave had not yet prevailed against the church.

And so I thought, when God scattered first Israel and then Judah (over one hundred years later), it did not change God's promises to Abraham. Those promises were not yet completely fulfilled. Therefore, Israel and Judah still existed, and God's purpose for them continued right on. So in like manner, then (in the 1990s, when what I am now speaking on was taking place), the church continues on and God's purpose for the church, and my place in it, still exist. As far as we were concerned, everything truly important spiritually to us still mattered.

What was changing was the state—the condition; the operating circumstances—of the church. It was still there. What Evelyn and I did not fully grasp when we resigned was that the Worldwide Church of God era, and how that era conducted the work of the church, was ending. It was *ka-put*. In another couple of years, it was done completely.

This is what I was referring to a couple of weeks ago when I told you that I answered that man who asked me what happened when God did what *He* did. He did it, brethren. I showed you that absolutely conclusively in the book of Lamentations. *He* did that to the Worldwide Church of God. He used representatives, but He was the source of it:

destruction.

My answer to that man, I am sure, was mystifying to him because I answered by saying the church—we—were knocked back into the first century. What I meant was that the church, because its members were scattered all over God's great green earth and had no central human leadership (as it had under Herbert Armstrong), it was put into a state of organizational disarray for a while. It was a reality that major portions of communication broke down, and we began discovering how much disagreement remained regarding some doctrinal issues and how to do things, and that some of those things still remain to this day. So, the church members had to learn how to adjust—to deal—with what God did.

In the first century, there was no electronic communication and nothing more rapid in the way of transportation than a horse. The Apostolic leadership then had to communicate through hand-written letters. So what do we find in Revelation 2 and 3 describing conditions in the church then and today?—because what Christ describes then exists in the church today.

We read what was a preview of what we now live in. We find spiritual conditions in Revelation 2 and 3 that might be considered startling to some when one considers that God's talking about His church. Perfect unity was not existent from congregation to congregation. In fact, those chapters come very close to describing what exists today. Some had lost their first love. Some were being deceived by false teachings. Others were very lax regarding commandment keeping. And if those churches are viewed as passages of time, and Laodicea portrays the end-time church, then I will inform you right now that if that is true—I do not believe it really is—the church has become largely a social club.

Is that what we are? Have we been knocked back to the first century that far? I do not think we have, but from things that I am hearing, there are some areas of the church that are in that condition.

The church has not lost its central doctrines, but it has lost something that is spiritually very valuable.