

Why Are You Here?

God's Sovereignty in Choosing and Placing Us

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We are going to begin this sermon by turning to Revelation, chapter 1.

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.

I am beginning here because I want to use this verse as a bridge into chapters 2 and 3, which we will be in shortly. I just want to assure you that Christ's words in this verse do not mean that the prophecies would be happening immediately, and unfold without stopping. Rather, it means that they will begin happening immediately, but the expanse of time between events is not specifically designated. As history proves, centuries might have occurred between the fulfillments of some events of prophecy.

Now more important for us for this sermon is the word "must." It says there, "things which *must* shortly take place." That word has in it the sense of necessity. It is necessary that the events shown in the prophecies occur, and God is saying, "I, God, am going to see to it that they do." That is the sense. He is going to oversee what is going on and see that these things do take place. God, foreseeing the end from the beginning, sees their end, and will oversee and guide these events to occur for the best purposes of *His* purpose.

Turn now to Revelation 2 and 3. We are not going to go through this in any detail, because He uses the first century churches as models of conditions in the churches just prior to Christ's return. We know that these chapters picture the end-time circumstances, because the messages to Sardis, Thyatira, Philadelphia, and Laodicea all mention Christ's return as imminent.

Without going into the messages in detail, I am sure that you know that Christ considered all of them—all seven of those groups—as part of His church, and that the spiritual levels of these end-time churches are vastly different from one another. I am sure that there are some of you who would far rather be members of one or two groups than you would of any of the others.

This sermon involves the upcoming feast, and I am going to put our attendance at the

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feast in a context you may not have ever thought of. I learned it from Herbert Armstrong. I do not mean that he set me down and personally taught me. Rather, I mean that I learned it from many of the sermons I heard him give during the many years I was in the church at the same time he was alive. I see that what he taught was true.

Virtually every year Herbert Armstrong would begin a sermon at the Feast of Tabernacles by asking us, “Why are you here?” Now *I* am asking this question, as we begin today, with the emphasis on the “you” and “here.” Why are *you here*—*you* personally—and with the Church of the Great God? Why not out in the world attending anywhere, even with a nominal Christian organization? Or why not with United, Living, Philadelphia, Restored, Christian Biblical, or whatever? Are you sure that you truly grasp how closely God is overseeing things in this work? I do not just mean the CGG. I am talking about His work worldwide, and how necessary it is for us to choose to respond correctly.

There are three themes that impact on this sermon. One is God’s sovereignty that plays a large role. The second is the governing operating principle of the Church of the Great God which has been in place since we began in 1992. This operating principle should be *every* Christian’s operating premise. The third is each member’s responsibility to respond to the first two. To respond requires an understanding of the first two, and agreement with them, combined with a willingness to make sacrifices necessary to follow through. This is required just as much of me as it is of you.

The terms “sovereign” and “sovereignty” came into the English language through the French. They indicate authority, dominion, jurisdiction, rule, and power. They are derived from three roots. Two of those roots have the sense of high, elevated, over, and above, and it is as though they indicate someone doubly elevated. In fact, the word “super” and “hyper” both bear a relationship to those roots. A sovereign is a person who bears rule over others. Sovereignty is the exercise of that rulership. It is what a sovereign does.

I went into that detailed explanation for a reason that touches on each one of us personally. It is a fact of two responsibilities that all of us have to accept and deal with. The first is that God is Sovereign over all. Each of us is personally answerable to Him. The second is a little bit surprising maybe. It is that all of us—each and everyone of us—is a sovereign to a greater or lesser extent, but all of us hold authority and rulership to a greater or lesser extent. We can give it away, or increase it, but ultimately we cannot ignore it. This sovereignty exists because God has given us free moral agency.

Genesis 1:26 Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to

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Our likeness; let them have **dominion** [rule and authority] over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

Genesis 1:28 Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have **dominion** over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

From here we are going to pick up a couple of verses from Genesis 4. God is speaking to Cain.

Genesis 4:7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. And its desire is for you, but you should rule [have dominion, sovereignty] over it.”

The use of our individual sovereignty is shown in a context of sin, of exercising our power to choose in very personal circumstances.

He just gave a listing of those animals in Genesis 1:26 and 28 as representative of other living things over which we bear authority. There is more that we bear authority over, but that was just a generalization to help us to begin life, as it were, with an understanding that we are bearing sovereignty. All of us are over situations. God has given us this authority, and we cannot ignore it, and we are responsible to Him to exercise it as He continues to show us throughout the entirety of the Bible. Some use it lightly, but all of us fail as well; some more often than others, but all of us fail to use it correctly.

We have sovereignty almost over an endless stream of choices, but unfortunately, through a lack of good teaching, ignorance, and in many cases, sheer willful foolishness, we gradually give up our right as bad habits form, and we all become enslaved to them, to someone, or to some evil system. Besides that, we have sovereignty to a lesser or greater degree over areas like a marriage, our childrearing practices, the way we work, our attitudes toward or against a multitude of family, societal traditions, practices, entertainment, fashion, and on and on, almost ^{AAD} infinitum. Our life consists of a stream of choices, and we exercise our authority to do, or not do, as these things occur.

We are going to touch on another large principle.

Genesis 3:6-7 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.

This was another very large foundational principle, because, brethren, God is giving us a report here where everything began to go out of whack, and it was a misuse of the sovereignty, the authority, or dominion that God gave to our original parents. In this case, they did not sin out of ignorance, because they were schooled by the Father, but neither do I believe that their sin was willful either. It was just plain dumb, because they did not trust what God said. It is that simple. Because they did not trust what He said, they abused their sovereignty right from the beginning.

We are seeing this in a very small area of life, but that is the way God put things at the beginning so that we can see the foundation of the way things went. These things are simple to understand, but I changed the words “free choice,” “free moral agency” into “the exercise of sovereignty.” They were given the Garden of Eden to rule over, and they messed it up. All of us have done the same. I can make this very simple: They did not follow through with what God told them to do. Very simple. They simply did not follow through with what God told them to do. This becomes very important as we move through this sermon.

A careful study of God’s Word reveals a number of story-threads that clearly reveal God exercising His overall sovereignty over His creation, always advancing toward a definite conclusion that He has purposed in making everything in the first place. We are going to be following one of those threads, because believing it, and understanding how we might fit into it, is very important to our exercising of our individual sovereignty. Brethren, let me put it this way: We have to *get it* in our head that God is not doing things in just a random way. Things in His purpose do not happen randomly. They are *caused* to happen, because God exercises His sovereignty.

The Church of the Great God began with the sermon “Do You See God?” That is absolutely vital importance for the outcome of our lives. Do we see God exercising His sovereignty? Are we persuaded by the exercise of His sovereignty? Do we believe that He is exercising His sovereignty?

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A couple of weeks ago we had a split-sermon detailing the incredible diversity God designed and created into birds. It described some of the figurative uses God put to those birds, which illustrate characteristics He wants us to understand and make use of in our lives—the characteristics of a huge variety of birds, from giant condors and eagles all the way down to storks, to doves, to sparrows, to hummingbirds.

Do you not think that the same Creator God, who created such beautiful complex diversity for our pleasure, would put even more intense effort and concern into His greatest creation of all, which is us, who are still in process of being created in His image? A major difference between us and the birds is that the birds act and react by means of instinct. We though, have a mind, and we must use these minds to think and to exercise our sovereignty, to cooperate with God's purpose. All of life, brethren, from the time He has called us now, we are faced with this: Which will we choose to do?

Go with me to Hebrews 11, where we have a reference all the way back to the beginning of the book.

Hebrews 11:4 By faith Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts; and through it he being dead still speaks.

God's Word reveals in all of mankind's history Abel as its first converted person—the first to truly choose rightly. We must understand—and I mean understand well—what was his bedrock foundational belief that helps guide our life. This is that Abel's conversion did not happen randomly. God exercised His prerogative and *caused* that conversion to happen, and Abel became converted in the same way *all* of us become converted. And how did we become converted? God called us. That is how. God called Abel, and Abel *believed* God. God *also* instructed Cain. Cain only *partly* believed God.

Verse 4 here says “he [Abel] obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts.” Now how did Abel show us that he was converted? He followed God's instruction. God told them both what He required, that He wanted an animal sacrifice. Abel believed Him, and brought an animal sacrifice. Cain got the same instruction, but Cain did *not* bring an animal sacrifice, as God required. Abel *followed* God. Cain did not. Abel *chose* to follow God. Cain did *not* choose to follow God. It is that simple.

Adam and Eve did not choose to follow God's instruction. They exercised their sovereignty wrongly, and sin entered the world. According to Jewish tradition, Adam and Eve had 56 children. That is a long time. I do not know whether that is correct or not, but

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it was certainly possible for them to have 56 children in 900 plus years of life. Now out of all that 56, as far as we know, Abel is the only one God chose to work through, and he passed the test with flying colors, as the Bible gives us witness of.

It is interesting that Cain and Abel have interesting names. We are not going to deal with Cain, but with Abel who, as far as we know, was the second born. There is even a possibility, from the Hebrew, that it can at least be speculated on that Cain and Abel were twins. But Abel has a very interesting name. It means “vanity.” It means “nothing.”

If Adam and Eve gave the name, it gives you a pretty good insight as to what they thought Abel was as compared to Cain—that Abel was nothing. This begins to develop another thread to this story that is very interesting. It is not super important, but it is important to you and to me, because we see that a pattern begins to develop, as God made a choice of the one of their sons that they did not think very highly of.

I want you to go with me to I Corinthians 1:26. Everyone of us knows what this says because we have seen it, heard it often, frequently.

I Corinthians 1:26-30 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence. But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

Paul marks this pattern. Even as God called Abel, who seemed to be the lesser of those two sons, God has continued to call those who appear to the world to be weak; less than nothing sometimes. Now God does this with wisdom. God tends to choose and direct in such a way to deflect glory away from those called, and toward Himself, and through the calling verse 30 begins to be fulfilled because the calling provides the “weak” access to these gifts that are listed in verse 30. If we choose, by faith, to follow the commands, principles, and patterns in God’s Word, then Christ becomes to us wisdom, etc.

God deflects away from us to protect those He calls from overweening pride that can quickly arise in us as if we were some great and important person doing some great

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important work by our own wisdom and strength. We *are* involved in something that *is* great, but it is being accomplished by God in and through us. He is doing this to protect us. I want you to see that He continues to follow through with this pattern, as He did with Abel, and as Paul said, with the church. I want you to turn back with me to Deuteronomy 7.

Deuteronomy 7:6-7 “For you are a holy people to the LOORD your God; the LOORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. The LOORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples.

We are seeing two patterns here now. I began with one at first, and we will get back to that one, but I wanted to put this second pattern in here as well, and that is that God has a tendency to call the weak. Not everybody is one of the weak of the world, but He has that tendency to call the weak.

Let us go on to the book of Zechariah 4. Right here is another major principle.

Zechariah 4:6 “This is the word of the LOORD to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’

God is going to work through the weak of the world by His Spirit; not by human power, nor by human might.

God is sovereign over His purpose. He is running this operation, and He intends that we choose to follow Him so things will work out as He intends. We do not want to be like Adam and Eve. We do not want to be like Cain. We want to be like Abel, despite the fact that we are the weak of the world. God wants us to trust Him by faith. In order to follow Him, we have to exercise our free moral agency, and as we are exercising our free moral agency by faith, it begins to produce a pattern which God wrote.

Turn with me to Revelation 14:4. In verse one it tells you that we are dealing with the 144,000. We will see this pattern unfold.

Revelation 14:4 These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the

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Lamb.

This is a distinctive characteristic of those who are going to be part of Jesus Christ's personal retinue. They will continue doing what they have faithfully done in their former physical life—faithfully following Christ, because that is right, and that is where the action is. Now to do this, I again remind you that we must see Him.

Let us go to John 3 where Jesus said something significant here in regard to this.

John 3:3 Jesus answered and said to him [to Nicodemus], "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

That word underlying the English word "see" is *eido*. It can mean a number of things, including "to see visibly," but it is very frequently used where the context means "to know by perception," "to understand," "to consider," "to be aware," and this verse is one of them.

Again, I say, "Do we see God?" Do we consider, do we understand, do we know by perception?

We are going to go all the way back to book of Genesis again. We are done with Abel. We are done with Cain. We are done with the sin of Adam and Eve, but God's purpose continues.

Genesis 5:1-3 This is the book of the genealogy of Adam. In the day that God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and blessed them and called them Mankind in the day they were created. And Adam lived one hundred and thirty years, and begot a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth.

After Abel was murdered, God's plan went on. Following that death, God picked up His purpose through the family of Seth. This listing given here is not given to indicate that all of these people were converted, but rather it is given to trace the family God chose to do His work through. Now mark that word "family" well because it is a major pattern of God, and family means "a distinctive grouping."

We are going to go back to the New Testament now to pick up an important principle

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there so that you can begin to see more and more clearly that God is directing this whole thing.

Turn to Romans 9. Here is a major principle.

Romans 9:14-16 What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion." So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy.

The calling of anybody at any time into the work of God is *completely* the work of God. It is His choice, and He follows through. Abel was His choice. And then after Abel was murdered, His choice was Seth, and that is the man whose family God has worked through for the entire history of man until a certain time, and we will get to that. God gives the over-details of this. The Bible follows Adam's family through Seth. God was exercising His sovereignty to guide things in the general direction that He wants, but in virtually every case, allowing enough leeway within His calling so that the chosen ones exercise free moral agency, and can even make terrible, bad choices. He permits them to do so.

Now Noah was a son of Seth. We come up to the time of the Flood, and Noah found grace in God's eyes. Of Noah's sons, God chose to work through Shem; not Ham, not Japheth. He chose to work through Shem. From Shem comes the term "Semitic." Many people think that the Semitics are all Jewish, but Shem had five sons, and so many families in the Middle East are Semitic, and this includes all of the Israelitish people who went right through Europe, Australia, South Africa, Canada, New Zealand, and if any other place, fine, but it includes the Israelitish people *besides* the Jews. They are all Semitic.

Now of the descendants of Shem, God chose to work through Abraham. Abraham lived nine generations after Shem. He was a grandson of Shem with eight "greats" in front of the word "grandson." But God is still working through the same family.

Abraham had two brothers, but God chose Abraham, and not the other brothers. Of Abraham's sons He did not chose Ishmael, who was the older. He chose Isaac. And then of Isaac's sons, He did not choose the elder, Esau, He chose Jacob even before Jacob was born. And then of Jacob's children, God deliberately chose Judah to be the royal line from whom His promised Messiah would be born, and He chose Joseph, who

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also was not a firstborn, as the birthright tribe. Then of Joseph's children, God chose Ephraim, the younger of Joseph's two children.

So we have a little bit of time go by, and along comes Moses. Aaron was the elder of the two, but God chose Moses. The study of Moses is really an interesting little study. You can see God's hand all over the place. Whoever would come up with a strange idea to put their baby in a basket and shove it out into the Nile River where there might even be crocodiles? The basket could have sunk. It could have drifted all the way out into the Mediterranean Sea, but that basket drifted right into Pharaoh's daughter's place.

And so, here was this baby cast aside, you might say, to save its life, and he goes to the king's daughter, and he gets reared as royalty. We even find from profane history that Moses was a man accustomed to authority and power, and very possibly a general over armies. And then God was the One who chased Moses out of there, using a murder to do so, but He did it to humble Moses and to prepare him for the job of leading the children of Israel out of Egypt.

Are you getting the idea? *God is in control all the time.* We may not see Him. We may not hear from Him. He may not send a prophet directly, but we have got to operate our lives with the understanding that God is on His throne, and that He has not stopped doing what He began His creation for, and He is in charge.

We can follow the history of the Israelitish people. It was God who chose Joshua to succeed Moses. It was God then who chose the judges He raised up to give Israel guidance, and one of them was a woman—Deborah. It was God who led Ruth, a Moabite, into marriage with Boaz, an Israelite, and they became the ancestors of David, and therefore they became the ancestors of the Messiah. Jesus Christ had Moabite DNA, as it were, in His blood as well. He actually probably has some Canaanite blood in Him as well because of Judah's fooling around with his free moral agency.

So each of those judges was chosen by God. It was God who chose David out of eight brothers, and probably did it when David was a teen, and even had him crowned king when he was still a teen.

Now not all of the people God chose were vibrantly successful. Samson had a very rough time disciplining himself. Saul seems to have been an abject failure even though he got off to a glorious start, but he faded. He began making bad choices as a result of foolish envy, hatred, and fooling around with demons.

God intervened a number of times in the lives of the kings, especially the kings of

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Judah. He did it through men like Asa, Uzziah, and Jehosophat, and Hezekiah, and Josiah. Although God was working with them, they did not always have happy endings either. Asa and Uzziah, both of whom were very fine kings, but at the end of their lives, somehow or another, they lost it. Whether they are entirely lost, I do not know, but they had very bad endings. Asa died of a disease in his feet. Uzziah did a foolish thing, taking the place of a priest, and God struck him with leprosy right in his forehead where everybody could see it.

I want you to note too the variety of the men God chose, let us say, to write the Bible, as prophets. What about Isaiah? There is pretty good indication that Isaiah was of royalty. The Jews say that he was a cousin of Uzziah, the king. Jeremiah was from a priestly family, but God called him from the womb. He never got to practice as a priest, but he was a prophet. He was higher than a priest anyway, so he never served in the responsibility of a priest.

Ezekiel was a priest. Daniel was a young Jew when God began using him, and as a Jew he could not be a priest, but he too apparently was from a noble family.

As to Hosea's background, the material there is quite skimpy. He appears to have been from one of the Ten Northern Tribes. Amos was apparently a Jew from a small town south of Bethlehem. Tekoa was the name of the place, and that overlooks one of the bleakest areas in the whole earth. So he came from an undistinguished Jewish family; common stock. He was a shepherd, and he was an orchardist. God sent him into the wealthy and sophisticated capital of the Northern Ten Tribes.

To this point, one will see one clear thread in all of God's choices. Though nothing is done haphazardly, nor randomly, all of the choices were from the family of Seth—through Shem, through Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob. This does not mean that these people were better than other families. Rather, it simply means what God has chosen to do. What we are has nothing to do with God's calling. We are not earning it in any way, and none of these people earned the calling that was given to them. It was thrust on them by God. It was Amos who said, "I was just sitting there, and the first thing you know, off I go to the Northern Ten Tribes."

To this point in time, I said that all of the choices have been from the family of Seth, through Shem, but things are about to change. I want you to turn with me to John 15. Before the change takes place, I want you to see what Jesus had to say just before He was put to death. He said this to the apostles.

John 15:14-16 You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No

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longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain, that whatever you ask the Father in My name He may give you.

Jesus said, "I have chosen you." He is following the same pattern He did when He was the God of the Old Testament in choosing the judges, the prophets, the priests, and so forth. So right here He is affirming the very process that I am speaking on here today. The apostles were not sitting there listening to Him by random chance. They were individually and personally chosen to be there, and they had a responsibility, as Jesus said there, to chose to follow Him and bear fruit. To that point they were indeed following Him.

We are going to leap through time a bit and we are going to go to Acts 9. Here we have the conversion of Paul.

Acts 9:15 But the Lord said to him [Ananias], "Go, for he is a chosen vessel of Mine to bear My name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.

Nothing has changed. It was God who chose Paul. Paul was an enemy of the church. God continued making sure that we understand that Paul, like the others before him, was individually and personally chosen.

Now does being selected by God apply only to kings, prophets, and apostles? Not on your life!

Acts 10:28 Then he [Peter] said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

Peter was the one speaking. Peter was minding his own business there, and he was given a vision—the sheet being let down to earth which had all the animals on it. Peter was dumbfounded. "What in the world does all of this mean?" So he went up on the roof of the building to meditate there and to pray about it, and then we find that somebody was sent to him to tell him to go with men who were going to show up at his door. Verse 28 tells us that he was then at the house of Cornelius—the man and his family to whom

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he was sent. Cornelius is a Gentile. God is going to break the pattern away from the line of Seth.

Acts 10:28 Then he [Peter] said to them, "You know how unlawful it is for a Jewish man to keep company with or go to one of another nation. But God has shown me that I should not call any man common or unclean.

Now Peter understood the vision that was given to him.

Acts 10:39-48 And we are witnesses of all things which He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem, whom they killed by hanging on a tree. Him God raised up on the third day, and showed Him openly, not to all the people, but to witnesses chosen before by God, even to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead. And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness that, through His name, whoever believes in Him will receive remission of sins." While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who heard the word. And those of the circumcision [the Jews] who believed were astonished, as many as came with Peter, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. For they heard them speak with tongues and magnify God. Then Peter answered, "Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord. Then they asked him to stay a few days.

I do not know whether you know what happened here, but Peter was really on the ball. He was spiritually perceptive, and when he saw the evidence, he did not hesitate one second to baptize these people because he saw the evidence in what happens if God's hand is in it. He did not even need the word. He followed what God commanded though no words were spoken. That is how in tune he was with God.

And so the very first Gentile was baptized into the church, and it is specifically shown here God chose Cornelius and his family. He specifically singled them out to be the ones with whom He would begin the conversion of the Gentiles. As far as we know, Cornelius never became any great leader. He was not an apostle. He was not an evangelist. No doubt, he was a very fine man, a very fine converted person.

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Now God has deviated from the pattern that he set from Seth on for thousands of years. He broke that pattern now, and something else has occurred.

From here we want to go to I Corinthians 12.

I Corinthians 12:12-13 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

I Corinthians 12:18 But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased.

I Corinthians 12:27-29 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles?

The point Paul is making here is that everybody has been personally and individually chosen by God to be part of His church, and the model for this is the human body. Did anyone besides God decide where your liver is supposed to be, where your kidneys are supposed to be, where your hair is supposed to be, where your eyes are supposed to be, where your heart is supposed to be?

God designed the human body, and now He has given to us this word-picture, this image, to see that even as He designed the human body He is designing His church with every bit—and *more*—care and concern He did the human body. He is putting every part, every cell (if I can put it that way) where it pleases Him, and He is doing it with infinite care, with purpose, and with love.

Do you begin to understand what a responsibility it is for us to know this, and to make use of it, that this Great God, who made everything that is, is so great that there is nowhere in the universe that anybody can go to escape from His Spirit? He has His eye on you and me as His precious jewels. Do we feel responsible to respond to the greatness of this calling? I sometimes wonder whether we live life really seeing God.

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Where is our mind, brethren? That is something we have to answer to.

Knowing this, like the apostles, we too must choose to follow and to bring forth much fruit. We must do it by living life, with all of its problems, by faith. Not by sight. Not by feeling. Not by guesswork, but by following the pattern, the evidences, and the clues that God gives for our decision-making purposes.

Let us update the church to our time. God kept the church going following Christ's ascension to heaven, and there is not a great deal of church history available until the 20th century. There is some, but skimpy though, until the 20th century and the ministry of Herbert Armstrong. The church grew very large by comparison to what it had historically had been. That size and that unity was actually an anomaly.

Jesus' parable of the mustard seed growing into a tree full of unclean birds of all kinds is something that it should not have become. This means that the church grew into a major irregularity. After Herbert Armstrong's death, God moved again, and He moved dramatically to take the church into a significantly different configuration; historically though, a more normal one. He accomplished it by driving the church apart. Satan did not do it. God certainly used Satan as an instrument, but it was God who did it. Something of that magnitude could never have happened unless God engineered it. We have historical records in God's Word.

Turn with me to Jeremiah 7. Listen to these words. Jeremiah is speaking them for God. Jeremiah is saying this to the Jews.

Jeremiah 7:8-12 "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 LOORD. "But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, . . .

Shiloh was a small city. It was there God chose to place the Tabernacle after they came out of Egypt, and so that city became the center of the worship of God."

Jeremiah 7:12-15 . . . 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 LOORD, "and I spoke to you, rising up

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early and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you, but you did not answer, therefore I will do to the house [in Jerusalem where the Temple had been placed] 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.

I have seen pictures of Shiloh. You will never see anything more bleak than Shiloh. It is nothing but a desert. Nothing will even grow there. God was warning these people just before He blew Judah apart, and about twenty years later, He blew Israel apart. He was warning the Jews, “I am going to blow you apart the same way I did to Shiloh because of the way you are conducting life.”

Now continue through the book of Jeremiah right to its end, and right into the book of Lamentations. In Lamentations 2 we are going to see what God did to Judah and Jerusalem. I want you to notice how God takes the blame. Throughout this He says, “I did it.” “I did it.” “I did it.”—God exercising His sovereignty.

Lamentations 2:1-3 How the Lord has covered the daughter of Zion With a cloud in His anger! He cast down from heaven to the earth the beauty of Israel, and did not remember His footstool in the day of His anger. The Lord has swallowed up and has not pitied all the dwelling places of Jacob. He has thrown down in His wrath the strongholds of the daughter of Judah; He has brought them down to the ground; He has profaned the kingdom and its princes. He has cut off in fierce anger every horn of Israel; He has drawn back His right hand from before the enemy. He has blazed against Jacob like a flaming fire devouring all around.

I am not going to go through all ten verses. You get the point.

What happened to the Worldwide Church of God would never have happened so quickly and so devastatingly had God not done it. God exercised His sovereignty for the greatness of His name and the continuation of His purpose. He blew us apart for our own good. Now He did not abandon us, but He re-gathered us and reorganized us into smaller groups, as in Revelation 2 and 3, in order to finish His purpose.

When you look out on the scene—those of you who experienced this after Mr. Armstrong’s death—I think you will agree with me that many appear to have given up.

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They seemingly have just disappeared into the woodwork. As this scattering has happened, I cannot say I had perfect understanding, but some things I did understand. I understood that Satan never could have done such a thing unless God directly permitted it or engineered it, and that happened.

Now, why did God do it to the church? Because of His name's sake. It was going in a direction He did not approve of, and so He blew it apart so He could work with us in a different configuration. His name was at stake because we were bearing that name.

When this was occurring, Evelyn and I had no intention whatever of beginning another organization at all. We were simply going to withdraw and sit on the sidelines, I guess you might say, and watch. But people began to call and say, "Will you pastor us?" These people were scattered all over the country just like they are today, in the same way. So I agreed to do that. I did not know how I was going to do it, but the way things worked out, slowly but surely God gave us the ability to do what we are doing right now.

I also understood that there were some things wrong in the way the things were administered in the Worldwide Church of God. That affected the way I decided to do things in what became the Church of the Great God. I felt that the administration on a local level, maybe all the way from the top on down—(I could only feel with what was on the local level)—which I had seen in my lifetime in the Worldwide Church of God was something I felt was not really biblical, and this was that the ministry bore its authority much too greatly. I could see what it was creating.

What it was creating was that the people believed generally that the Worldwide Church of God was the true church, but their fear was of the minister. Their fear was of the church, not God. In order for that to be corrected, people had to be free to make mistakes without the ministry being on peoples' tails all the time, checking up on them. It was God they had to answer to, not the minister.

In that period right after the Church of the Great God began, I gave a sermon on government. In fact it was a whole series of seven sermons. I believe the last sermon I gave in that series was on self-government. When that seventh sermon was over, one of the men in the congregation, who was an elder (not ordained under me, and I agreed with his ordination) came up to me and said, "Mr. Ritenbaugh, aren't you afraid of what you just said?" And I said, "Yes, I am."

The natural proclivity of a minister, or of anybody, is to want to control everything so that it works the way *he* thinks it should. I cannot do that. The reason is because God wants people to fear *Him* and to operate their lives by faith in *Him*, not faith in the minister, not

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faith in the church, if you understand. The dominating belief in peoples' minds has to be the fear of God, and then they act and react. Then they use their sovereignty. Then they use their free moral agency in relation to our Creator, and not to the minister.

He said, "How far are you going to let this go?" I told him, "I don't know. I've never done it before." Well, he is not with us. As far as I know, he is still with the church of God. He is a fine man. I do not know why he left us. It may be for some other reason altogether. I do not know.

Brethren, do you understand that we have to be free to make foolish mistakes just like these other people did, and to actually be free to lose salvation, to give it up because of bad choices? We have to really be tuned in to God. We have to see Him and to be responding to Him, and our lives conducted because of Him.

I said in the beginning that this sermon was about the Feast. I want you to consider something as we begin to close off, because quite a number of people have chosen to keep the Feast of Tabernacles somewhere apart from the Church of the Great God. Well, you are free to do that, but I am going to ask you, "Is that wise for you to do that?" I asked you this question in the beginning: "Why are *you here?*" Do you not think that God is able to put *you* where He *wants* you to be when we begin to see I Corinthians 12:12 and on of God setting everybody where He wants them?

When we begin to expand out, do you not think that God arranges His Feast of Tabernacles for each group according to what *He* wants them, and *where* He wants them? Does God not have enough power to do that? He certainly does. Let us give Him credit. So He makes these choices. He gives us the evidence to work with, and then He says to us, "Choose."

You may think that going to some other group's Feast of Tabernacles is spiritually the same as going to the feast that *God* designates for the Church of the Great God. Instead, He designates some other feast [site] for Living Church of God, for United Church of God. Please do not get the idea that I am looking down on them at all. God is organizing them too in what they are doing, but He wants us always to make the best of choices available to us. Do you understand that?

What I am talking about here is this. I am not saying that going to another group's Feast of Tabernacles is sin. It is the difference between hitting the mark head on, right in the middle, and being willing to settle for a Feast, a "C" or a "D," as God grades us. Which will it be? Do you understand? That is pretty clear.

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It is your choice, and I am not going to stand in your way, but I have the responsibility to let you know how you can get the best out of life, how you can get the best out of a Feast of Tabernacles. Always remember this: God says, "These are *My* feasts." It is not *our* feasts. It is *His*. "I want you to go here for the purpose of fellowshiping with *this* group, not the other group."

It is He that will make things work. That is the issue. Whom do we trust? Whom are we going to respond to?