

Been There, Done That!

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Been there! Done that! Most of us have said or have thought that at some time or other. For example, we may relate to a co-worker's frustration with a particular manager, because we too have worked with that same individual. We know what it is like; we can commiserate. Been there! Done that!

In a significant way, we in God's church have been there, done that. As we will see, that is a very good thing for us if we do not forget the lessons that are learned.

I want to take a few minutes today, to explain what I mean when I say that we in God's church have been there, done that.

For some time now, the Internet and talk radio has been a buzz—perhaps we should say the Internet is a twitter—with a noisy, cacophonous chatter about impending change in America. Talk about the fall of the American democracy, the destruction of American institutions, the dissolution of American's liberties. This palaver has been around for decades and decades, but the notion that American freedoms are in clear and present danger seems to have reached a critical mass.

Some of this talk is based on substance; some is just plain wacky, or even irresponsible. I term it cacophonous because this clamor is basically unorganized, often contradictory, sometimes more rumor than substance. But, it is unmistakably there, all the same, all over the place, loud and clear—and it is so ubiquitous and so ear-splitting that it has virtually taken on a life of its own. We can say that this talk reflects a spirit—a zeitgeist—of desperate fear and dismay on the part of many thinking people, from all walks of life, around the nation.

Today, many people are anguishing over what they see as the imminent loss of American liberties to a totalitarian, and to an elitist federal government. This distress is not distress at the loss of something far away and something useless like a cell phone tower in Mongolia, but rather, brethren, it is a fear of a loss of something very close to us and something that is very valuable. These people are sounding an alarm of forced alienation (hang on to that word) from something of great value. The fear is that Americans will be obligated to disassociate themselves from something we prize, and something we have had all our lives—a nation of liberty and prosperity. Many Americans feel estranged from their own government. Like the death of a loved one, this

Been There, Done That! by Charles Whitaker (<http://www.cgg.org>)

is a great loss.

Have we in God's church been there, done that? Have we been there before, collectively experienced our own version of significant loss? Have we been forced to disassociate ourselves from an institution that we loved very much? I submit to you brethren that most of us have; that we have been there, done that. In the late 1980's, and into the 1990's, we collectively experienced loss of this magnitude when a church body in which we were deeply invested—I mean invested emotionally, financially, spiritually, in every proper way, really—when that church body changed, and forced us out. We all have stories to tell, and they are all a bit different. In some cases that church threw us out; and in other cases we understood that we had to withdraw ourselves from fellowship with those who no longer espoused our convictions. But, in all cases, brethren, we became estranged from a church body around which our entire lives had revolved for years. We were impelled to disassociate ourselves from people we had known and respected for decades in some cases. We became as strangers to them, sharing no common ground anymore. This too was a very great loss.

Importantly, through all this process of alienation, surrounded as it was by individual variations, God provided. For example, He provided the Internet; it was a ready and cheap facility by which we could communicate with those of like minds. He provided alternative church organizations to which we could flee—and make no mistake about it: we did just that; we fled. He provided encouragement and instruction from a number of ministers who remained loyal to God's calling. Our presence here today proves that God provided a way of escape, for which we should be deeply, deeply thankful.

And, God provided memories. Not vague memories, déj?-vu type memories which we have trouble pinpointing, but living memories, clear memories of having been there, done that. These memories provide the substance of lessons learned, lessons about fidelity and infidelity, lessons about standing firm in a maelstrom of change, lessons about God's providence. If we do not make the terrible mistake of forgetting these lessons, they will serve us well in the maddening vortex of change that is coming upon us very quickly now, and in fact that we are already in.

I want to delve a little bit deeper into this line of thinking. Let us look at a couple of parallels between the Worldwide Church of God then and America as she is now, and see if there are any lessons for us to note.

Would you agree that the leadership of the old church, epitomized as it was in the person of Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong, was committed to God and to His truth? This is not to say that the apostle made no mistakes, or that he did not wander at times. And,

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certainly many of those under him did not share his commitment to the truth. But, thankfully, Mr. Armstrong himself did remain true and he taught us the truth to the end. Once his influence was removed, through his death, things radically changed. Virtually without exception, the leadership, which replaced Mr. Armstrong, lacked knowledge of God's truth, and they certainly lacked commitment to that truth. In fact, the new leadership actively sought to undo what Mr. Armstrong had done in his life. The new leaders by and large disliked (we can even say, hated) Mr. Armstrong and all that he stood for. They consistently displayed (and display to this day) no commitment to teach the truth of God at all.

Likewise, America's new leadership knows about as much concerning the Constitution of the United States as the current leaders of the old church know about God's Word. America's new leaders have no commitment to that document or the ideas and ideals it espouses. When it comes to the degree of commitment to the Constitution, there is a vast difference between such Presidents as Washington, Madison, Jefferson, Monroe, Teddy Roosevelt, Ronald Reagan and the ilk of Wilson, Clinton, Bush and Obama on the other. These men have no understanding of, nor respect for, nor commitment to the Constitution at all. Their orientation is toward the world; it is a global system to which they are committed, not America per se.

What happened in the old church? What is happening in America now? It is basically the same thing: it is the denial of exceptionalism. I need to define that: Exceptionalism is the idea that a nation or institution, or church—really anything like that—is different, is special, is unique, is extraordinary, and in that sense, is exceptional. The exceptional is in a class by itself. There is nothing run-of-the-mill about the exceptional. The exceptional does not fit with what would be expected. For example, one would not have expected Japan, which had been bombed virtually into the stone age by America during World War II, to ascend to a place of industrial leadership in just a few decades after that war. But she did, and so historians and economists speak of Japanese economic exceptionalism. It was so different to what was to be expected.

Exceptionalism often carries with it the notion that ideas or institutions are better by virtue of their uniqueness. They are not just different, not just odd-men-out, not just weird and wacky, but they are better because they are different. So, exceptionalism is not a derogatory, it is not a pejorative term, or a negative and it certainly does not mean exceptionable. There is a big difference between exceptionable and exceptional.

Mr. Armstrong, as we all know, thundered that the Worldwide Church of God was different, it was exceptional. Absolutely, it was not like other churches. Its teachings were unique—true, while those of other churches were false. Its members were not to

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live like people in the world, but were to be sanctified, they were to be separated from the world. We were to come out of Babylon, away from the world. In sermon after sermon, he and his associates made sure that we understood that we were not better than other people, but that our way of life—which was in fact God's way of life—was absolutely better. He understood the Church of God, and the doctrines of God, to be what exactly what they are: exceptional by dint of their truth.

This thought is absolutely basic, and it is absolutely foundational to our thinking. It runs as a fundamental theme through all of the Scriptures. God is different from the world. His ways are different, and His children are to be different. We are exceptional. Here is a good New Testament example, but there are a lot of others that we could pick. I am going read from the Amplified Version:

II Corinthians 6:14-17 Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers [do not make mismatched alliances with them or come under a different yoke with them, inconsistent with your faith]. For what partnership have right living and right standing with God with iniquity and lawlessness? Or how can light have fellowship with darkness? What harmony can there be between Christ and Belial [the devil]? Or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? What agreement [can there be between] a temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God; So, come out from among [unbelievers], and separate [sever] yourselves from them, says the Lord, and touch not [any] unclean thing; then I will receive you kindly and treat you with favor.

How different? How exceptional is God's Truth, our way of life, from the world? Paul compares it to the difference between light and dark. Now, given the depth, the profundity, of that difference, do we dare—and this is just one of many examples, and we could pick a whole lot of others, for instance returning to the occult, but I am going to pick this example instead. Do we dare listen to Sunday morning religious broadcasts from worldly ministers? I know of a number of people, especially a while back, not so much now, who listen to Sunday morning religious broadcasts from worldly ministers, and they tell me that those people have "some truth," and that they are doing a good work. They have used that kind of terminology in talking to me.

Let us see what the Apostle Peter has to say about that. He is talking here about those people who return to the ways of the world. Brethren, I want you to notice the graphic language that Peter uses to describe the world to which they return.

II Peter 2:22 It has happened to them according to the true proverb: A dog

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returns to its own vomit, and a sow, after washing itself, wallows in the mud.

You will find this also in **Proverbs 26:11**.

Brethren, Peter is not saying here that the world's ways are a "little bad," or that some ministers have "some truth." You see, brethren, we came out of a mire, and if you know anything about pigs, you know how totally filthy that mire is. Dogs return to their vomit. When we make compromises with the world, we are returning to vomit. This is graphic language, but that is how God sees the world. That is how different God's ways are from the world's ways.

What mud did you come out of? Some of you may have come out of the occult; some of you may have come out of Catholicism, and many out of Protestantism. My parents dragged me off every Sunday to the Baptist church down the street. We came out of that mud and out of that mire. God's way is different, it is better, and it is exceptional. Let us look further.

Here we have an Old Testament example, in the book of Ezekiel. God is speaking of apostate religious leaders in Jerusalem:

Ezekiel 22:26 (Holman Translation) Her priests do violence to My law and profane My holy things. They make no distinction between the holy and the common, and they do not explain the difference between the clean and the unclean. They disregard My Sabbaths, and I am profaned among them.

In context, God explains how He will destroy the priests and leaders who refuse to separate themselves to live His way of life. You may want to write down:

Leviticus 10:10 You must distinguish between the holy and the common, and the clean and the unclean, and teach the Israelites all the statutes that the LORD has given to them through Moses.

Here God, through Moses, instructs the priesthood :

Leviticus 20:25 ...you must distinguish the clean animal from the unclean one, and the unclean bird from the clean one. You are not to make yourselves detestable by any land animal, bird, or whatever crawls on the ground; I have set these apart as unclean for you.

These are not instructions for the past, having no application to us. Hardly. Notice Ezekiel 44, which speaks of the work of the priests in the millennial temple. This is future, but I want you to notice the similarity of language between this passage and Ezekiel 22:26.

Ezekiel 44:23 They must teach My people the difference between the holy and the common, and explain to them the difference between the clean and the unclean.

As priests of God, we are to draw a line in the sand between the holy and the profane. We are to recognize that difference and indeed, brethren, we are to cherish that difference. We are to act accordingly, deliberately detaching ourselves from this world. And, as priests, we need to teach accordingly as well.

To do otherwise, brethren, to fail to recognize, cherish and teach the difference between God's way of life and man's way of life is to basically accept the precepts of moral relativism, which posits that there is no absolute difference between right and wrong. Basically, what they say is that anything is okay if it is expedient, and that everything is okay in the right situation. You have heard of situation ethics. This is the "I am okay; you are okay" philosophy, the notion that what is morally right for you may not be morally right for me. Relativists do not recognize the difference between the clean and the unclean. They do not recognize how exceptional God's truth really is. There is a vast difference between God's way of life and the world's.

The leadership that took over after Mr. Armstrong's death totally denied the difference between the clean and the unclean. At heart, what they have done is to refuse to teach the people the distinction between God's way of life and Satan's way, or as Mr. Armstrong so memorably used to put it, as the "way of give" and the "way of get." As an example, this new leadership returned to a dog's vomit when it asserted that it is okay to eat meat that has not been sanctified for human consumption by God's Word. They returned to the mire of the world by denying that the seventh day is set apart, is made holy by God. In area after area, in doctrine after doctrine, they taught that the truth of God is not exceptional, but that it is simply common. They have done a horrible, horrible thing, that is what they have done, brethren. They teach their followers that they can live like their unchurched neighbors across the street, in the world—that there is no difference—and no adverse consequences to their returning to the ways of the world. At heart, they are teaching relativism, that there is no essential cleavage between right and wrong, between light and dark.

Likewise, for more than a decade now, America's leaders have inched toward a denial of what historians have come to call the American exceptionalism. This is the conviction, as stated by some historians, that American institutions are different from, and better than, the institutions of other nations. By institutions, I mean such governmental frameworks as separation of church and state, separation of powers, and state rights versus federal rights, all of which play important roles in preserving our liberties.

Today's national leadership, which is oriented toward European thought, is global in orientation, cosmopolitan in outlook. It is oriented to world government, to world economics, to international law, at the expense of American sovereignty. Today's national leadership is essentially saying that America is not exceptional, but just like any other nation—run of the mill. This is exactly same thing that the leadership of the Worldwide Church of God tried to foist off to us.

Now, we all know that America is not the Millennium, but that she has become Babylonish, especially since after 1913, with the Federal Reserve banks and other things that happened. But, I am also convinced that the liberties that we enjoy are not like those of other nations, and that America, as conceived by the founders, has a better governmental system than that of, say, Poland or Mexico or Tibet. That may not be a politically correct statement, but it is a statement that is true.

Just as we, God's people, left the world, but the leaders of the old church tried to drag us back when they returned to that world, so America long ago left that horrid European existence. I do not mean to say anything bad about the Europeans who are among us. But it was a Europe at the time that was given to status, lack of opportunity, elitism, and poverty. Everything that we have come to dislike, and we built over here a new nation founded on a rule of law and equality under that law. But, America's new leaders want to return America to European ways, placing America under international law, a new world order. This, at heart, is what is happening on the national scene—a denial of American exceptionalism, a patent disavowal that America is different and that America is better.

Okay, so much for theory. What does it all mean to us and to the man on the street?

Mr. Ritenbaugh has addressed that question. We will have to get a permit to mow our lawns. That is, the federal government, which has been encroaching on our rights and our liberties since the 1930s under Franklin Roosevelt, will powerfully extend its tentacles into virtually every aspect of our lives. We will be regulated to death, all for the sake of international treaties and conventions supposedly established to protect our health, world environment, children, or whatever. It will mean, ultimately, the setting

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aside of the Bill of Rights to make room for other international conventions. It will destroy our prosperity and ultimately our freedom to raise our children as we wish. We will become slaves of a totalitarian, all encompassing world state, from conception to grave. And by the way not from birth to the grave, because they get rid of some people before they are even born.

It will only be a matter of time—and probably not much—before such pervasive governmental influence and control will butt headlong against our worship of God—by that I mean, our living of God's way of life. Some bureaucrat, under Satan's influence, surely will convince another bureaucrat that our way of life is not politically correct, it is not in line with status objectives. Persecution will surely result.

So, God's way of life—our way of life—and the power of an evil, satanically controlled and motivated state are on a collision course. This should not surprise us one little bit, brethren. For, we know that this nation (and Canada as well) are parts of modern day Israel. The dual witness of both history and prophecy indicates that Israel has been a persecutor—not a protector—of God's people. That is sad, but it is true.

We see here in Matthew, where Christ scathingly sets the historical record straight for everyone, and at the same time issues a prophecy for today.

Matthew 23:29-32 Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, and you say, "If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we wouldn't have taken part with them in shedding the prophets' blood." You therefore testify against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers' sins!

We can expect the modern day sons of these murderers to carry on their fathers' ways, to fill up the sins of their fathers.

Matthew 23: 33 Snakes! Brood of vipers! How can you escape being condemned to hell?

God does not want these people to be condemned. Notice:

Matthew 23:34 This is why I am sending you prophets, sages, and scribes. Some of them you will [notice the future tense] kill and crucify, and some of

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them you will flog in your synagogues and hound from town to town.

Brethren, I want you to notice the inclusiveness of Christ's next statement to these people:

Matthew 23:35 So all the righteous blood shed on the earth will be charged to you, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the sanctuary and the altar.

The Scribes and Pharisees to whom Christ spoke were not alive in the days of Abel and Zechariah, both of whom lived centuries earlier. But the attitude, the mind-set of Cain, Abel's murderer, was alive and well in Christ's day, and brethren, it is alive and well today. These Scribes and Pharisees were, therefore, the children of Cain, and Cain's children live on to this day.

From a historical and a prophetic perspective, this is how Israel works and how it will work. They did it to Christ; they did it to Paul, hounding him from city to city, and finally arranging his death. We can expect physical Israel to do it to us; we are not better than our Master.

Christ characterizes Jerusalem. Not a pretty picture at all:

Matthew 23:37 Jerusalem, Jerusalem! The city who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her.

Yes brethren, we have been there, done that. There are differences, of course. The old church lacked the power to kill us or to imprison us. But, its leaders could, and did, throw us out—exile us. The old church, as God's church, shattered, and became less than a shadow of her past glory. We scattered, some physically actually fleeing in some cases. We regrouped, establishing new organizations. We were estranged for a while, alienated, disorganized a bit, discouraged at times, disoriented, perplexed, and we were frightened, as our faith forced us to disassociate ourselves from what had been our church home. But, looking at it all in retrospect, as we reflect on the power of God, on the commitment of God, to provide, we understand that we more than survived this whole thing. In one sense, our presence here today, indicates that we thrived, at least we grew from the whole experience, and we became stronger spiritually for the experience. The basest of leaders were placed over us at that time, when we learned of

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God's power to deliver and indeed to bless. We lived right through it.

Today brethren, our national leaders are among the basest of men. And we will soon re-experience this phenomena of dissociation and of estrangement. But this time, the object of our separation will not be a church, but our nation, which will in time become less than a shadow of her present glory. America may become shattered, fragmented not only in public opinion and policy, but politically and perhaps geographically. It might become regionalized. Persecution may abound in one area, but not in another. The historical pattern for God's people in such straits is to flee, as the early church fled from Jerusalem—just as we, spiritually, fled from the old church. So it may be that we may physically flee to a safer region of the nation, and then flee again, and flee, perhaps even to another nation. That is the pattern. Time will tell.

I will wind down with Psalm 37, a song we sing, apparently written by David himself. Here there is instruction and encouragement for a people who have been there, done that.

Psalm 37:1 (Holman Translation) Do not be agitated by evildoers; do not envy those who do wrong.

I mentioned earlier, brethren, the buzz, and the clamor about all of this on the Internet and talk radio. People are agitated; they are apprehensive. God says not to become anxious by this sort of thing. Why?

Psalm 37:2 For they wither quickly like grass and wilt like tender green plants.

The way that God sees them they are virtually history already, brethren.

Psalm 37:4-7 Take delight in the LOORD, and He will give you your heart's desires. Commit your way to the LOORD; trust in Him, and He will act, making your righteousness shine like the dawn, your justice like the noonday. Be silent before the LOORD and wait expectantly for Him; do not be agitated by one who prospers in his way, by the man who carries out evil plans.

It says there to be silent. I almost would suggest that this might mean we should not join the fray on the Internet, not pass emails around that are sometimes filled with hype and

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rumor. Instead, wait for God to act. "He will act." We have seen Him act before, and He will act again.

Psalm 37:8 Refrain from anger and give up [your] rage; do not be agitated—it can only bring harm.

By entering into the fray, the battle going on now on the Internet and talk radio and so on, we may be only making matters worse, giving the government the opportunity or the excuse to persecute us later on, and calling attention to ourselves perhaps.

Psalm 37:9-12 For evildoers will be destroyed, but those who put their hope in the LORD will inherit the land. A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for him, he will not be there. But the humble will inherit the land and will enjoy abundant prosperity. The wicked schemes against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him.

Brethren, do we fully understand how much Satan's ministers, the liberals and the conservatives together, and the Baptists out there, how much they hate God's way of life, and how much they hate us? They really do! Should we be upset by all of this, brethren?

Psalm 37:13 The Lord laughs at him because He sees that his day is coming. The wicked have drawn the sword and strung the bow to bring down the afflicted and needy and to slaughter those whose way is upright.

Already, we have seen the government that has drawn its sword to destroy the helpless, the unborn, and they are slaying them by the millions. Now, it seeks to control population by destroying the infirm, that is, the afflicted and the aged. David knew exactly how the liberal's mind works.

Psalm 37:15 Their swords will enter their own hearts, and their bows will be broken.

Psalm 37:35 I have seen a wicked, violent man well rooted like a flourishing native tree.

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That word native kind of interests me there! We now have a leader in the country that appears to be well rooted, powerful, flourishing like a native tree. But he may not even be a native, perhaps not even a citizen. God says his days are numbered.

Psalm 37:36 Then I passed by and noticed he was gone; I searched for him, but he could not be found.

Now, brethren, do not mistake me, I am not saying that we are going to leave the Feast of Tabernacles tomorrow and that everything will be just be hunky-dory with America. No, this trial is going to have to run its destructive course. And, that will take time. But God is in charge, brethren.

Psalm 37:37 Watch the blameless and observe the upright, for the man of peace will have a future.

I hope you young people do not allow yourselves to be overtaken by this zeitgeist of dismay that is all around us, do not allow yourselves to become catatonic, paralyzed, discouraged into inaction by all of this gloom-and-doom talk on the Internet. Brethren, God says, and He is right, that we have a great future.

Psalm 37:38 But transgressors will all be eliminated; the future of the wicked will be destroyed.

Right now, brethren, this is the liberals' moment in the sun. They are hard at work in an attempt to build their futures, to secure perpetual power and wealth for themselves and for their families. The futures they are constructing so assiduously will simply soon go up in smoke. But God's people have a glorious future.

Psalm 37:39 The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD, their refuge in a time of distress. The Lord helps and delivers them; He will deliver them from the wicked and will save them because they take refuge in Him.