

Where Is
The True Church
Today?

By
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Outline:

One Church or Several?	3
An Imitation “Rapture” Makes It Plain!	4
The Wheat and the Tares	5
Schisms Demonstrate Carnal Behavior!	6
What Is the Correct Form of Church Government?	8
Fear and Disfellowshipment	10
Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth!	11
Sharing the Gifts	12
Wolves In Sheep’s Clothing!	13
Where Is the True Church?	14

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Where Is **The True Church** *Today?*

By
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Whatever became of the true Church of God? Since the Worldwide Church of God drastically changed its doctrines, many no longer consider that church organization to be “the true Church.” If that’s the case, where do we look to find the true church today?

In these days of religious confusion, many people have been struggling, searching, trying to locate “the true Church” once again, and fellowship with it. Many people, upon leaving one church fellowship, have joined another church group, only to be disappointed later when the new group they thought to be “the true Church” let them down, offended them, adopted strange doctrines, changed their approach, or in some other way proved to be only another organization of men. People have been left asking, “How can we find the organization of God, the one true Church of God on earth?”

There have been different criteria used to identify whether or not a religious organization is “the true Church.” One question that needs to be asked is, **“Does this church teach the truth of the Bible?”** Unfortunately, asking ourselves this question doesn’t always give us the correct answer, for two main reasons: To begin with, every Christian church organization whole-heartedly believes it is teaching the truth of the Bible, even though there may be wide, gaping doctrinal differences between the creeds of one organization and another.

Secondly, seekers of the true church have their own personal beliefs, their own set of doctrines, to compare with the doctrines taught by any church group being considered. Using this guideline as a method of determining the true church can lead to

a totally biased, and therefore inaccurate, decision. Suppose we have a wrong understanding of truth, and we find a church organization teaching the same erroneous understanding. We might decide to join that group, since it has what we consider to be “the truth.” The end result is that we continue in error along with the group of like-minded but mistaken people—thinking we are all “in the true Church,” while we actually continue to propagate error.

This is an important consideration for those who formerly attended services with the Worldwide Church of God (WCG), and who consider the WCG of the past to be “the true Church.” Many former WCG members have attempted to remain steadfast and loyal to “the faith once delivered” by WCG’s founder, Herbert W. Armstrong (HWA), using that body of doctrine as a comparison test to see if a new church group may be “the true Church.” Others, however, sensing that HWA made some mistakes, have decided that if a group has most of HWA’s doctrines, but has corrected his mistakes, this might be “the true Church.”

But who is to judge what was a mistake and what has been corrected? And were HWA’s mistakes only little ones, or was his entire approach incorrect and unbiblical? WCG refugees include, on one extreme, people who virtually worship HWA and everything he said, and others, on the other

extreme, who regret ever having heard of him. The rest fall somewhere between the two extremes.

Some ex-WCG people, in search of a “church home,” see strict adherence to old-line doctrine as important, while others take a more fluid approach to doctrine, allowing God to lead them into further, deeper understanding. Some see the Spirit of God moving among the membership, revitalizing the faith and “first love” of many, and they view this as important. To others, the form of church government adopted by the organization is of paramount importance. Still others are quite unsure of what to look for!

Many former WCG members have attempted to remain steadfast and loyal to “the faith once delivered” by WCG’s founder, Herbert W. Armstrong.

Perhaps the most elusive of all concepts continues to be: **“What is the correct form of church government?”** That question generates further questions, such as, “If I find the true Church, will it have the correct form of government?”, or “If I find the church with the correct form of government, will that be the true Church?”

Christ commanded His people to come out of spiritual Babylon (Revelation 18:4). Paul wrote that true Christians are to come out from religious confusion (2 Corinthians 6:17). How then do we pick our way among the confusion, disagreement, outright rancor, accusations, and general bitter feelings among the various groups calling themselves “The Church of God” today? If we must choose one group, how do we choose it? For that matter, must we choose a group at all? Can we “go it alone”?

ONE CHURCH OR SEVERAL?

Most of the leaders of the WCG spin-off groups tend to regard their church organizations and the other groups as “branches of the church.” Indeed,

these groups **are** branches of WCG! However, when the expression is used, it is generally understood that the phrase means “branches of God’s true Church.” Most of the leaders admit that there are “true Christians” in each of the daughter organizations. It can also be assumed that all of the leaders, in spite of what they say publicly, would love to see the majority of ex-WCG people come fellowship with them.

Yet they have forgotten what HWA so boldly proclaimed for decades: “Christ said, ‘I will build My church’ (Matthew 16:18). Not churches—one church!” Then, do all these church groups claim to be the same church? No, they don’t. They call themselves “branches.” Outside observers are calling

them “denominations.” The Bible calls them divisions, factions, dissensions (1 Corinthians 3:3; 11:18-19; Galatians 5:20). The groups are not quite the same as each other, so they’re not the same church; yet they’re not quite different, either. Their leaders seem reluctant to call them separate churches, because they need the connection to WCG to legitimize themselves in people’s eyes, or perhaps in their own eyes. But at the same time, no one refers to all the groups as being the same church, either!

However, rather than concentrating on the issue of why there should be so many “WCG look-alike” church groups, the purpose of this paper is to focus our attention on how each one of us relates to the growing number of spin-off groups, and how these groups affect our relationship with our Father and Christ. This article will suggest a different way of looking at “the church of God” and the application of certain words, so that we may better understand **what the church of God really is**, and be better able to communicate our thoughts on the subject.

How many times in the past have people departed from WCG, and the ministers would say, “They’ve cut themselves off from the vine, the church. They’ll wither and die spiritually.” Some did. No one should rejoice in that. But some have not withered and died. Why? Because **the ministers were misquoting the Bible**, and reinforcing an erroneous concept! Christ said, “**I** am the vine, **you** are the branches” (John 15:1-5). Some found that it was quite possible to separate themselves from a church organization, even the somewhat large and powerful WCG, and still remain firmly attached to the true Vine, Jesus Christ.

The faulty concept is that WCG was the vine and the offspring groups are the branches, and any “dissidents” who “go it alone” are cut off from the vine, meaning the church organization, altogether. Yet Christ plainly said that **He** is the vine, and that **individual members of His church** are the branches!

So is it appropriate to call these recently begun church organizations “branches”? Yes, but only if we recognize that they are branches of WCG, and not necessarily branches of God’s true church!

AN IMITATION “RAPTURE” MAKES IT PLAIN!

Let’s look at it logically. The leaders of the various church groups say there are “true Christians” scattered among all the groups. Apparently, none of the leaders dares to claim that **every** member in any one of the groups is a true Christian. But there are true Christians sprinkled in among all the groups. What does that mean?

Let’s play a game. We’ll pretend there is something called a “Christian magnet.” In our game, God comes down with an enormous red and white horseshoe magnet that pulls all the true Christians out of all the groups. As God brings the magnet down toward the earth, we can see people being lifted up in the air, out of the congregations, even from many places outside of the organizations, as the Holy Spirit in all of them is attracted to the magnet. (This is not to suggest that a rapture, in the traditional sense, will actually take place; we’re just using this picture for illustrative purposes.)

Now there are two groups of people: those who were pulled up by the magnet (the “true Christians”) and those who were left behind (people who attend church services but are not “the true church”).

The meaning is plain: If God were to remove all true Christians from these organizations of men, the organizations of men would still remain, while the true Christians would be someplace else!

The “true church” is the group of true Christians! The church organizations of men are nothing more than church organizations of men. And the true church, the body of true Christians, is said to be scattered among the various groups. In addition to those, many true Christians are staying home and obeying God, quietly, by themselves or in small groups, rather than associating with *any* of the church organizations of men.

The conclusion is obvious: **None of these incorporated church groups of men is “the true Church.”** It’s pointless to look at any organization (even the WCG in its glory days) as “the one true Church.” They are all just organizations of men, set up so that the true church can come, meet together, learn together, and fellowship together. But the church organizations are just that—church organizations, set up to help the true church of God meet its needs!

The true church has been referred to alternately as the firstfruits (Romans 8:23; James 1:18; Revelation 14:4), the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 4:12), the elect (Matthew 24:31), saints (note the salutations at the beginnings of the epistles), and other such terms. Even so, we understand that there will be some in each congregation who will be in the first resurrection and some who won’t. The true church is mixed in among the congregations.

Paul began his letter to the Corinthians with this salutation: “Paul, **called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ** ... To the church [Greek: *ekklesia*] of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified [margin: set apart] in Christ Jesus, **called to be saints** ...” (1 Corinthians 1:1-2). Just as Paul was called to be an apostle, many were called to be saints, and were set apart as a church body, although it’s not likely that everyone was chosen (Matthew 20:16). In other words, we must not

assume that everyone actually **became** a saint, scheduled to rise in the first resurrection. We can hope that this was the case, but we must allow for the possibility that not everyone made it. Just being in the congregation does not guarantee being in the first resurrection.

What is the church body called? For many of us, if we don't know any other Greek at all, we are aware of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which (among other things) means "called out ones," and in various translations is rendered as "church," "assembly," "congregation," etc. We are reminded that many are called—many are invited to join the *ekklesia*—but few of those are chosen (Matthew 20:16). Those who are chosen (to be in the first resurrection) are the people from among the congregations who overcome (Romans 12:21; Revelation 2 & 3), hold fast to the truth (Hebrews 10:23; Revelation 2:25-27), keep the testimony of Jesus Christ (Revelation 12:17), love the brethren (1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:14), and in other ways take their calling seriously.

In several translations of the Bible, the true church is referred to as both "the elect" (Matthew 24:22-31; Luke 18:7; Romans 8:33; Colossians 3:12; 2 Timothy 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Peter 1:2) and those who have been "chosen" (Matthew 20:16; 22:14; Romans 16:13; 1 Peter 2:4, 9; Revelation 17:14). The same Greek word, *eklektos* (chosen), is used in both instances. To become one of the **elect**, one must be **chosen** by God to be placed in that special category. The same Greek word is translated into the two different English words! Note especially Mark 13:20: "And unless the Lord had shortened those days, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect's sake (*eklektos*), whom He chose (*eklektos*), He shortened the days."

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

Can we know who will be chosen and who will not? We might be able to know them by their fruits (Matthew 7:16, 20). But we may not be able to tell who is a "true Christian" in this life and who is not, by the simple principle Christ gave us in the parable of the wheat and the tares.

"The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat

and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn"' (Matthew 13:24-30).

Jesus explained this parable: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world [Greek: *kosmos*], the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age" (verses 37-40).

Although Christ identified the field in this parable as being the world, rather than the church specifically, many lessons have been taught over the centuries using the principle of "tares in the church," and we can find some usefulness in examining this principle.

One well-known commentator wrote, "Our Savior did not mean such tares as grow in our country, but a sort of mock wheat common in the East. The evil one could not prevent the springing up of the good seed, and therefore he tried to impede its growth, and spoil its harvest by throwing in among it noxious seed. The devil cannot destroy the church, and therefore he endeavors to mar its beauty by the introduction of hypocrites. These are in many respects so like to true Christians that it is not possible to remove them without expelling genuine believers with them by mistake. Open sinners we can easily remove from the church; but not those who have the outward manners of Christians; however wrong at heart they may be, we are unable to judge them, and must let them remain" (Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Devotional Bible*).

Of course, weeds are undesirable in the farmland because they draw moisture and nutrients out of

the ground which should go to the cash crop instead. But other than that, tares are not of and by themselves evil. They exist. They are plants which God made. But they happen to look a great deal like wheat. If someone were to sow tares among real wheat, all the waving stalks would look alike. Apparently (for the purpose of this parable, at least), no one could tell the difference just by looking.

But at the time when the wheat is supposed to be productive, and sprout into abundant heads of grain, the tares just sit there, unproductive, while the true wheat blossoms into fruitfulness. The message of the parable is plain: The only way to tell which stalk is genuinely wheat and which stalk is a tare is to let both grow together. At the appropriate time, it will become evident which is which.

It's pointless to accuse a tare of sinister motives. A tare is a tare. It's not that the tare is possessed of a certain hostile mind or attitude and simply refuses to produce fruit. It can't! It's not wheat! It looks like wheat, it grows up among the wheat, but it simply can't do any better than it's doing.

Here is the wisdom of the owner of the field: If someone tries to pluck out the tares, some of the real wheat stalks will also be uprooted. That's why tares should be left in the ground with the wheat, so all of the wheat will have an opportunity to grow and ripen.

Worse yet, if the one attempting to pull out the tares notices a piece of wheat and *thinks* it's a tare, he will pull out and uproot a viable piece of wheat, and perhaps several stalks of wheat around it, destroying a portion of the crop, thinking he has done the owner of the field a good service! Instead, he has destroyed some of the owner's valuable crop, and has deprived the owner of some precious wheat the owner was looking forward to harvesting!

How many times over the centuries have overly zealous ministers performed this very tragedy, uprooting and casting out true Christians, thinking them to be something else? And how many times have other true stalks of wheat, genuine members of the body of Christ—family, friends, associates of the one so carelessly thrown out—also gone out as a result? How many have lost faith and fallen

away because of the cavalier attitude of false “ministers”? (See Matthew 18:1-14.)

Unfortunately, the casting out of true Christians didn't end with Diotrephes!

SCHISMS DEMONSTRATE CARNAL BEHAVIOR!

But what about division among the church organizations? It can't be denied! People choose sides, throw in their lot with a human leader they like, and adopt an “us versus them” attitude. It's human nature to divide, categorize, pigeon-hole, build fences, section one thing off from another, and in every way imaginable break things into little pieces!

God doesn't think that way. He says, “‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,’ says the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isaiah 55:8-9). God has a different perspective than we have.

He also says, “Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, And are counted as the small dust on the balance” (Isaiah 40:15). While we tend to categorize and break things into smaller pieces, God can see the entirety of the nations—all the great wealth, all the billions of people, all the military might, even all the religions of the world—as nothing more than the proverbial “drop in a bucket”!

It must be tiring for God to hear men say, “I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas” (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-7). It continues today: “I am of Herbert, I am of Garner Ted, I am of Meredith, I am of Flurry,” and on, and on. When will it ever end?

Paul wrote that if we do those things we are carnal! No matter how much doctrine we know, no matter how much Bible we can spew out from memory, Paul says we're carnal if we insist on identifying ourselves as followers of Mr. So-and-so!

And as long as we're carnal and not spiritual, as long as we can only tolerate milk and are not yet ready for meat (even after 20 or 30 years in the

church!), is it any wonder God has not continued to reveal knowledge to such carnal people? Is it any wonder that these people are still nursing on pabulum every week, dished out in loving little spoonfuls by their human leaders? And is it any wonder that these people, lovingly fed on milk, go back to sleep, and remain spiritually immature?

The human leader of the largest incorporated Church of God group of this century—perhaps of all time—was taken out of the picture in 1986. Since that time, some of his followers have huddled in tight little groups, following their chosen successor. Some have been led astray, “tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive” (Ephesians 4:14).

Others have realized that the only leader the true church of God is to look to is Jesus Christ, their Savior, who promised He would **never** leave or forsake them (Hebrews 13:5), and that He would be with His church every minute, right up to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20)!

Jesus Christ, the Revelator, the Word of God, has revealed precious knowledge to many of these people who look to Him, knowledge that has been hidden from the human-led groups that no longer see the need to plumb the depths of scripture for further wisdom.

Unfortunately, new knowledge is not always welcomed by the church organizations. “We have received the major body of doctrine from HWA,” they seem to say, “and if we should perchance encounter some ‘new truth,’ our doctrinal committee will have to examine it, and deliberate about it, and decide by a 90% vote if it is a true doctrine or not.”

Incredible! If the church organizations don’t see the need for continued Bible study, for growing in both the grace and the **knowledge** of our Lord and

Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18), perhaps they need to have their eyes examined (Revelation 3:17-18)!

If someone brings to a minister of one of these organized church groups a scripture which shows that the church corporation has been following the wrong practice, or has misunderstood the scriptures on a point, the person who has discovered the amazing truth has traditionally been laughed to scorn, ridiculed, hushed up, warned, silenced, snubbed, and ostracized, until the person either conforms or departs! Not only was this a common practice in WCG, but the sad fact is that this practice is continuing today in many of the spin-off groups!

Today, in at least one of the splits, the official method for the unordained (the so-called “lay-person”) to introduce a new doctrinal understanding to the organization is, first of all, to shut up, and tell no one about it, then write a paper on the doctrine to present to the local minister. If the minister is unable to refute or explain away the doctrine, he will then send the paper on to headquarters, where it will languish in somebody’s file cabinet,

possibly to be discussed by the doctrinal review team, and perhaps years later the corporation may, possibly, consider accepting the doctrine.

Is that how Christ puts doctrine into His church?

In the meantime, though, the minister is putting pressure on the person to forget about the doctrine, and let the corporate church handle it from headquarters. When someone succumbs to this kind of pressure from the minister, he or she is made to feel compelled to forget what they have just learned. In effect, they are told to “repent” of finding something in the Bible which has not been accepted by the religious institution, and they are encouraged to feel shame because of it.

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When that happens, the person may willingly allow the new knowledge to just slip away, never to reappear in his or her mind, because God will reveal knowledge only to those who love and cherish His truth, but will conceal truth from those who don't appreciate it and who will treat it lightly.

Fortunately, there are some people who see that the Bible takes precedence over the rules of a church corporation, and that we must obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29). However, these people are often forced to leave the organized church body with whom they have a disagreement. This is not an easy thing to do. For those who had earlier come out of WCG, it was a traumatic experience to separate from the church organization they had considered to be "the true Church." But once that break was made, if the person is then faced with the prospect of separating from a church group a second time because of a doctrinal dispute, the experience may not be quite as traumatic as it was the first time, even though it is still difficult to do.

Many over the past few years have felt the need to take this course. Sometimes the newly disenfranchised member will be able to find a group of like-minded people with which to fellowship. Sometimes, though, they must "go it alone," staying home and using study aids and sermon tapes provided by various "ex-WCG" resources. Many people leaving WCG have affiliated with a new church group, settle themselves in, and are content to be led by the doctrines and literature of that group, since they feel a sense of "being back home again" in a comfortable and familiar environment.

Others may fellowship with one of the new church organizations but continue to study their Bibles independently, showing God that they love His word and are eager to learn more. God often al-

lows these people to grow in understanding of what the Bible says. But when this knowledge stands in conflict with the "accepted doctrine" of their organized church group, then heavy-handed politics take over, the "offending" member is chastised, the church group "wins" the dispute, and the unfortunate wayward person with the allegedly "deviant" doctrinal understanding loses.

WHAT IS THE CORRECT FORM OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT?

In a few cases, however, a church member will "stick to his guns," stand up for the truth, and not give up what God has revealed to him or her in the Bible. Many times, then, it becomes necessary to

separate from the church group which put down the member and his or her Bible study, since perceived "dissidents" are not welcomed in most church organizations.

HWA experienced the need to do exactly that in the 1930s. That's how the WCG came to be! Yet, during the time of WCG's greatest strength, there were some who felt the need to depart WCG for the same reasons. Now, since HWA's death, there are several more groups which sprang

from WCG, and people are already leaving those groups, all over doctrinal dissension!

As strange as it might seem, though, this is all being done in fulfillment of prophecy. Paul wrote, "For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized [margin: manifest, evident] among you" (1 Corinthians 11:19). It is God's will that those who are spiritually minded (who hold to the truth, who look to Christ as the true Vine, who overcome and endure to the end, even against great odds) will become evident to God, while those who display carnal behavior (following after men, hiding behind bu-

We may now be in a better position to answer the question that has stumped church leaders over the last six decades: "What is the correct form of church government?"

reauracies, spoon-feeding basic doctrine, letting others do their thinking for them) will become obvious to God.

As we look with greater understanding at the relationship between (1) each church member, (2) the various incorporated church organizations of men, and (3) the true spiritual church of God, we may now be in a better position to answer the question that has stumped church leaders over the last six decades: **“What is the correct form of church government?”**

It would be so simple if God had included instructions in the Bible in how a local congregation should be run, the order of services, who does what, etc. In fact, there are clues in the New Testament regarding how things were done during the first century. But God knew that the visible church would take different forms over the centuries, operating under different circumstances, under different civil governments. God purposely left out detailed instructions for just that reason: to allow people the freedom to operate their local congregations according to the various needs of the time and location.

But is there one right way to administer a church congregation according to the New Testament? What does God want in the way of local or centralized government among the churches?”

If we are considering a modern, organized religion, a twentieth century incorporated church group of men, the answer now becomes plain” **IT DOESN'T MATTER!** Any form of government structure will do, whether it be democracy, totalitarianism, monarchy, parliamentary, hierarchy, oligarchy, or anarchy! None of it makes a bit of difference, because **none of these churches of men are the church of God!** Whatever is appropriate for the circumstances, whatever is needed in a particular place and time, God allows, because all church organizations are temporary, and must be adaptable to fit changing circumstances. Those who are looking into the Bible for a tight, concise list of do's and don'ts become frustrated in their search, because the little details they seek are apparently not as important to God as they are to that group of people! The details simply aren't there!

But on the other hand, if we are considering **the one true church of God**, the spiritual organism

throughout the world composed of Spirit-led, begotten children of God, then there is only one form of government” **Theocracy!** Each member of God's true church is connected to God, **ruled by God**, by means of the Holy Spirit, on a personal, intimate basis, **with no human church leader standing between Christ and each member, and with only Christ standing between us and the Father as a Mediator** (1 Timothy 2:5)! Consider what the Apostle Paul wrote to the church (*ekklesia*) at Corinth: “And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for **you are still carnal**. For where there are **envy, strife and divisions** among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men” For when one says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and another, ‘I am of Apollos,’ are you not carnal?” (1 Corinthians 3:1-4)

Continuing in Paul's letter to the church at Rome: “For **to be carnally minded is death**, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh [carnally minded] cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, **if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you**. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His. And **if Christ is in you**, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness” (Romans 8:6-10).

Notice Paul's opinion of carnal people. Of course, he's not talking about the people themselves, but about the carnality that was running rampant through the congregation. Notice also how he does not presume that each member of the congregation has the Holy Spirit! He says, “**if** the Spirit dwells in you” and “**if** Christ is in you.”

“For **as many as ARE led by the Spirit of God, these** are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of [sonship] by [which] we cry out, ‘Abba,’ ‘Father.’ The Spirit [it]self bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Romans 8:14-17).

Here Paul assures us that, if we are led by the Spirit of God, it is **not** a spirit of fear, or being in bondage again, which is the condition in which so many people have found themselves with organized church corporations; but rather, it is a Spirit that allows us to call out directly to the Father, in the most endearing terms, as we anticipate inheriting our heritage, being glorified together with Christ!

“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ” (1 Timothy 2:5). Does any man stand between us and God? Only Jesus Christ! Not a church leader, not a “minister” who swaggers about boasting that he has the “rule” over us, threatening to “throw us out of the Church”!

FEAR AND DISFELLOWSHIPMENT

Of course, we need to understand that if someone desires to be a member of an organization, and they place themselves under the authority of the organization, then they are indeed subject to anyone in authority within the organization who happens to rule over them, as long as they would like to remain with the organization.

Does that authority extend into the member’s home, into his pantry, into his marriage, into his mind? Only if the member voluntarily submits to the person in charge. The fact is, though, that no one has any authority over someone else’s home life, unless it might be the civil government, and then only to a limited extent.

Secondly, if a minister employed by a church corporation decides to disfellowship, excommunicate, or in some other way cast out a member, does that have a direct bearing on that person’s salvation? Can a church leader take away someone’s eternal life? Of course not!

The ninth chapter of John is devoted entirely to the story of a blind man who was healed by Jesus, then shortly afterward excommunicated from the synagogue.

Jesus healed the sightless eyes of a man who was blind from birth. As it happened, He did this on the Sabbath day. Of course, that angered the super-righteous Pharisees, who immediately began

an “investigation” into this alleged incident of Sabbath-breaking, rather than rejoicing that a great miracle had taken place! They even brought in the man’s parents and questioned them closely. The parents gave carefully worded and guarded answers, “because they feared the Jews, for the Jews had agreed already that if anyone confessed that He [Jesus] was Christ, he would be put out of the synagogue” (John 9:22).

Then, on the very day that the blind man received his sight, when he could see for the first time in his life, rather than looking at some beautiful scenery, or the happy faces of people he had known all his life but couldn’t see, rather than investigating colors, shapes, the perspective of distance, the brightness of the sun, the joy of the world around him—instead he found himself looking at the angry glares of hostile Pharisees who argued with him, belittled him, and finally cast him out of the synagogue (verse 34).

Did the man sink into despondency, terrified that he had lost all hope for the future? Absolutely not! He met Jesus again, “Then he said, ‘Lord, I believe!’ And he worshipped Him” (verse 38). Jesus immediately taught a lesson regarding this incident, showing that He came so the blind could see, and that those who thought they had excellent visual acuity could nevertheless be totally blind spiritually (verses 39-41).

When the blind man was thrown out of the congregation, did that deprive him of his life or liberty? No, he was merely being excluded from fellowship with the rest of the religious Jews. Was it the end of his life? It may well have been the beginning, for now the man was free to follow Jesus as a disciple, and find the true life!

What about someone who is thrown out of a church organization of men? Is that person’s salvation somehow canceled? Absolutely not! Disfellowshipment is from that particular organization of men, not from the body of Christ! Ministers of a given denomination may have some amount of authority over members of that organization, and may be able to allow or forbid someone attending services there, but they have no jurisdiction over the salvation of the firstfruits of God!

What about Diotrophes (3 John 9-10)? When he was putting true Christians out of the church (the

ekklesia, the congregation), was he canceling their eternal salvation” Was he cutting those people off from God” Did the disfellowshipped true Christians suddenly find themselves without hope, stripped of eternal life, and fit only for the lake of fire” Of course not! All Diotrophes could do was put them out of local fellowship. He had no power to come between the true church members and God! What happened” The true church went somewhere else!

Notice Jesus’ words in His letter to the Ephesian church: “Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place— unless you repent” (Revelation 2:5). What did the lampstand represent? “The seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches” (Revelation 1:20). The lampstand represented the church in Ephesus!

How could Christ remove the church from the church”

Christ was warning that He would remove the true Ephesian church—the firstfruits, the elect, the chosen ones—from the Ephesian congregation! In the city where Diotrophes had the pre-eminence, Diotrophes was actually speeding up the process!

At the base of it all is the understanding that we must obey God rather than men. If obeying God results in our being excluded from fellowship with a group of people, so be it! Christ warned of religious persecution. But at the same time we have the assurance that we are following God to the best of our ability, and we can rest assured that our salvation is sure! In fact, we should “be even more diligent to make [our] calling and election sure, for if [we] do these things [we] will never stumble; for so an entrance will be supplied to [us] abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:10-11).

Peter referred to our **calling** and our **election**

(Greek *ekloge*, being chosen). Many are called, but few—the very elect of God—are chosen! If we are diligent to make our calling and our being chosen sure, if we do everything we can to be among the very elect of God, in spite of whatever mistreatment we may suffer at the hands of human religious leaders, our entrance into the kingdom will be supplied!

WEEPING AND GNASHING OF TEETH!

We must be diligent, because there is no “universal salvation,” as taught by some Protestant churches. The concepts of “Once saved always saved,” “Just claim the name of Jesus and you’re saved,” “Christ did it all for you” and “Just believe” are simply not true. There are things we need to do. Salvation cannot be earned—but it **can** be lost!

Can we apply this warning to WCG and its offshoots” Does membership in WCG or one of its successor organizations ensure salvation” Many

members believe they are in the one true Church, and are on a straight track to the Kingdom of God, simply because they go to a particular church congregation. But is that true” There may be a great deal of surprise in store for some people.

“Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it” (Matthew 21:43). “And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 8:11-12). In the parable of the wedding feast, the king saw a guest who was not properly dressed. “Then the king said to the servants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matthew 22:13-14).

We must be diligent. There are things we need to do. Salvation cannot be earned—but it can be lost!

What is the fate of the evil servant? “But if that evil servant says in his heart, ‘My master is delaying his coming,’ ... the master of that servant ... will cut him in two and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 24:48-51).

And the man who hid his talent? “And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 25:30).

Was Jesus teaching the Jews about Judaism? No, He was teaching His disciples about the Kingdom of God! The message was concealed from the general public through parables, but the interpretation was made plain to the disciples (Matthew 13). The messages of these parables are to the church! It is possible to follow Christ, attend services every week, fellowship with the best of them, and yet be cast into outer darkness—the second death! (See Matthew 7:21-23; Luke 13:22-30.) And these parables are worded to imply very strongly that there will be many people in that category! It is certain that we must obey God rather than men! We must please God rather than being man-pleasers!

SHARING THE GIFTS

What did Jesus think of people “outside of His organization” going around doing a work? “Then John answered and said, ‘Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and **we forbade him because he does not follow with us**’” (Luke 9:49). John may have expected a big thank you from Jesus for “defending His turf” and chasing off a potential competitor. There might even have been a big promotion in it for John for “saving the church”! No, Jesus didn’t give the

expected answer. “But Jesus said to him, ‘**Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is for us**’” (verse 50).

Jesus knew that, even though the other man wasn’t in the same “organization,” he was on the same team! He wasn’t a competitor at all! If the man was successful in casting out demons in Jesus’ name, he was certainly doing a good work. Jesus was not jealous for His “territory.” Jesus wasn’t the least bit concerned that some of His followers might “switch” and follow the other man. Jesus didn’t feel threatened in any way. Instead, he encouraged other people to go around doing good works in His name!

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Moses was of the same mind. “So the LORD said to Moses” ‘Gather to me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you. Then I will come down and talk with you there. I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone’” (Numbers 11:16-17).

“Then the LORD came down in the cloud, and spoke to him, and took of the Spirit that was upon him, and placed the same upon the seventy elders; and it happened, when the Spirit rested upon them, that they prophesied, although they never did so again. But two men had remained in the camp.... And the Spirit rested upon them. Now they were among those listed, but who had not gone out to the tabernacle; yet they prophesied in the camp. And a young man ran and told Moses, and said, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.’ So Joshua ... said, ‘Moses my lord, forbid them!’ Then Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous [margin] jealous] for my sake’ **Oh, that all the LORD’s people were prophets and that the**

LORD would put His Spirit upon them!”
(verses 25-29)

In both of these instances, the great men, Jesus and Moses, had the correct viewpoint. It was the men under them who were eager to get out there and throw some weight around, forbidding people to do good works, forcing people to get in line with the big boss, squashing the gifts that God had given people, and absolutely condemning anything being done outside the strict, governmental hierarchy! It takes someone with the vision and wisdom of Christ or Moses to see the way clearly. It somehow seems to elude the rest of us.

It seems difficult to us at times, just as it did to Joshua, and to the “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17; Luke 9:51-56), to think, act and live as Christ did, in a God-centered, loving, forgiving way, totally centered on what God wants. We must remember that, if it is difficult for us at times to be completely God-centered, it is also difficult for people in positions of authority.

WOLVES IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING!

That’s why Paul warned the elders at Ephesus, as he was ready to leave them the last time, of trials coming up in the church at Ephesus. Paul said, “You know, from the first day I came to Asia, in what manner I always lived among you, serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials...; and how I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:17-21). Note that Paul said he served the Lord with humility, tears, and trials, and pointed people to God and Christ, not to himself or to a strong church governmental organization.

Paul continued with his warning: “Therefore take

heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [not dictators], to shepherd [not boss] the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure **savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock**” (verses 28-29). Paul was painting a graphic picture in the minds of these elders, many of whom either had their own flocks or knew other people who did. The thought of even one savage wolf attacking a flock of sheep would be a crisis, but Paul foresaw several savage wolves, false teachers and false ministers, coming in among the congregation, not sparing anyone.

He continued, “Also **from among yourselves men will rise up**, speaking perverse [margin” misleading] things, to draw away the disciples after themselves” (verse 30). This should have sent shivers up the spines of most of the men present. They may have looked at each other, as the disciples did at Jesus’ last Passover, and wondered who it might be! And yet, many false preachers and teachers did spring up, not only in the first century church, but among the people of God today!

Paul’s admonition was simple: “Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears” (verse 31).

Watch and remember. A simple formula. By remembering what we have been warned, and watching to see if it is taking place, many have been able to escape some of the problems of the church groups over the past several years. By watching, by **knowing their Bibles**, some of the flock were able to see when a savage wolf was among them, and when someone from their own midst rose up and began misleading people. Others, **unable to watch because they did not know**

It takes someone with the vision and wisdom of Christ or Moses to see the way clearly. It somehow seems to elude the rest of us.

the scriptures, were not able to see the drama unfolding before their very eyes, and were easily led astray. It happened in the first century. It has happened again today.

Jesus said, "Beware of false prophets." Do we have predictors and prognosticators, those who foretell the future, among us? Does God speak directly to His church through prophets? Not today. But "prophecy" has also been defined as "inspired speaking," or preaching! Jesus also warned that someone could come along, claiming that Jesus is the Christ, and deceive many, including some of the elect (Matthew 24:5, 24)! Perhaps Jesus was including these false preachers, these supposedly inspired speakers who lead people astray, when He warned, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruit" (Matthew 7:15-16).

Christ's disciples have always been meek, gentle, sheep in His eyes. "Behold," He said, "I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves.... But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues" (Matthew 10:16-17).

How can Christ's sheep counter the false doctrines of ravenous wolves in their midst? How can they have scripture on the tip of their tongue when they are delivered up to councils? By **studying the scriptures**, not just to be approved by God, but to be able to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15), to "always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you" (1 Peter 3:15).

The tragedy is when someone attempts to do just that, but their own church leaders or members of their congregation suspect them, accuse them, and try to discourage them.

WHERE IS THE TRUE CHURCH?

There should be no question by now that "God's one, true church on earth" consists of all those true believers whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Revelation 20:15), who will be resurrected or changed at Christ's return, who will be sons of God in the Kingdom of God. Today these living human beings are known personally by God, right at this moment (Malachi 3:16), and more are being called to be added to this number as God desires.

These people are not grouped together in any one organization of men, in any one country, or in any one language group or culture. God's "little flock" (Luke 12:32) is truly worldwide in scope.

It is futile to look to any church organization of men, including WCG and any of its successor church organizations, as being "the true Church."

It is futile to look to any church organization of men, including WCG and any of its successor church organizations, as being "the true Church." Try as they might, and as much as we may have thought so in the past, they simply are not capable of being the true church. Likewise, it is equally futile to look to any man as being God's one true representative on earth.

In 1939, HWA published an article about church government, which gave one set of values for **shepherding church groups**. The article was apparently written for political purposes, to encourage a certain group of people to think a certain way" and undoubtedly reflected

HWA's thinking at the time. In 1974, HWA sent out a lengthy pastoral letter repudiating the 1939 article, and giving another set of values for **rulership in church hierarchies**. This letter was also written for political purposes, and no doubt contained HWA's actual feelings about the subject as of that time.

Since HWA's death in 1986, there have been "turf wars," allegations, accusations, injured feelings, bruised egos, corporate in-fighting, lawsuits, and countless shifts of both doctrine and employees in group after group. There has been needless duplication of effort in proclaiming the gospel to the world, endless arguing over what the gospel is, or if it even needs to be preached, and what the current understanding is regarding the function of the ministry.

The confusion continues, and as each group becomes more entrenched in its own way of thinking, bureaucracies arise, individuality is quenched (along with the Spirit), and business begins to go on as usual.

And Satan is having the time of his life!

No matter which church group a person may attend, or even if someone is not attending a church group at all, each person must ask himself or herself the following questions: "Am *I* getting close to God, yielding to God, searching *my* deepest innermost being and the depths of wisdom of God's Word, asking God to clean *me* out, and help *me* squash the evil human nature that I was born with and that Satan intensifies" Am I doing everything *I* can do to be a son in whom God is well-pleased, living my life with Christ living in me, making the old man die daily, and walking in newness of life" Will God see fit to bring *me* up in the first resurrection and say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant'" Am I seeing to the things I need to see to in order to work out *my own* salvation?"

These are the questions we need to be asking ourselves every day—because **WE are the true church of God!**

The organizations of men will go the way of all organizations of men. Babylon the Great will be reduced to rubble in one hour (Revelation 18:10). That includes the religious Babylon of confusion,

denominations, sects, corporations, big business, arguments, divisions, and hatred that separates one child of God from another. These things, too, will pass. But **the true church of God**, the elect, the firstfruits, those who overcome and endure to the end, will be resurrected out of this miserable system, out of the religious Babylon, and into the ever-growing, ever-expanding, wonderful, loving, glorious, peaceful Kingdom of God!

Christ is truly building only one church, as He said (Matthew 16:18). We are that church! God's church is not "them"—it's us! It's not a man in Pasadena, California, or anywhere else. It's not "him"—it's "me"!

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But don't we need to fellowship" What about Hebrews 10:25, "not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching"'"

Indeed, we do need to fellowship with like-minded believers. Whenever possible,

we should assemble together for Sabbath services, and keep in touch during the week, exhorting each other, to "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works" (verse 24).

If you are able to attend Sabbath services with a group which believes much the same as you do, and which won't exclude someone who might not agree in every last doctrinal detail, this may prove to be the best solution. But if the church group does not tolerate anyone there who has a differing opinion on some doctrines, there will be tension and a noticeable lack of true love. After awhile, it may become burdensome to fellowship with that group.

Several "non-aligned" ex-WCG resources are available for the "separated brethren" who are unable to fellowship with people of like mind. Many of these have been advertised in *Servants'*

News and *In Transition*. You may also wish to subscribe to our new publication, "*The WAY*." There are many converted teachers who would love to begin sharing with you the sermon tapes and literature they have prepared. All you need to do is ask.

Will you wither and die without a church organization? Not if you remember that it is not your ties to a corporation that saves you, but rather your direct connection to Jesus Christ. Our Savior told us, "**Abide in Me** [not in a corporation], and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it **abides in the vine** [not in a church group], neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. **He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing....** By this My Father is glorified, that **YOU bear much fruit**; so you will be My disciples" (John 10:4-5, 8).

Remember that the schisms and splits we see today among the "churches of God" were prophesied (1 Corinthians 11:19). God has everything under control. His plan is proceeding, right on schedule. It's up to us to choose if we will continue to follow our Savior into His Kingdom.

Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known of My own" (John 10:14). He also said, "I am the door [to the sheep-

fold]. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (verse 9). He assures us that "the sheep hear his voice; and **he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out**" (verse 3).

If you hear your Master's voice—if you read His *logos*, the Word, the Bible, and truly hear His voice in it—and He is calling your name—opening up your mind to greater, deeper understanding, and a more abiding faith and love in Him—follow Him.

"And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers" (verses 4-5). The true Shepherd leads the true church. Listen for His voice, and follow Him.

Learn what you can from church organizations. Fellowship with them if they appear to walk in the truth. But always keep in mind" No church organization is the one, true Church of God on earth. It can't be.

The one true church—is **you!** (and everyone else with the Holy Spirit.)

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