

WHEN IS IT A SPIRITUAL DUTY TO SPLIT A CHURCH?
The Scriptural Case for Leaving the Worldwide Church of God in 1995

By Eric Snow

Is it ever spiritually right for a group of people to leave one church organization and set up another? Were the Christians who objected to the Worldwide Church of God's apostasy on the nature of God and the Old Testament Law's continuing validity right to split from that physical corporate organization and start another? Is the true church (*ekklesia*) wherever the true Christians choose to assemble (re: Matt. 18:20)? Even today, there are some who, despite upholding many of the (major unorthodox) teachings of Herbert W. Armstrong as being true, still feel they can't leave the WCG and attend a split-off group instead because "God called them into the WCG." Could you give a specific text that justifies leaving one church for another? I couldn't have back in 1995, although I didn't hesitate to leave. Since this is the tenth anniversary year of the "great schism" within the old Worldwide Church of God, it's now a good time to look back and examine the Biblical case for leaving apostate church organizations.

Are there books available that make the case for church splits being both good and spiritual when true Christians leave false churches? Anyone who thinks staying in the WCG is what God requires of him or her despite objecting to Pasadena's major doctrinal changes should consult Ernest Pickering's Biblical Separation: The Struggle for a Pure Church (Schaumburg, IL: Regular Baptist Press, 1979). True, Pickering deals with situations somewhat different from what most of us in the Church of God movement faced in 1995. Although briefly surveying traditional Christian church history back to Augustine's attacks on the Donatists, he focuses on what conservative Protestants should do when attending services with a large denomination, such as the Presbyterian, Methodist, or Baptist, that also allows religious liberals to remain in positions of authority, power, and influence, such as pastors, bishops, seminary professors, and missionaries. Obviously, as a good fundamentalist Protestant, he upholds doctrines, including the Trinity and the personhood of the Holy Spirit, which we in the Church of God movement would object to. (But we clearly can't reject Pickering's work in advance as spiritually worthless because he (say) observes Sunday if we also think James Dobson's and Gary Smalley's books are valuable for marriage and childrearing advice and Henry Morris's and Duane Gish's for refuting evolution). Despite these limitations, Pickering still mounts a powerful case for true Christians leaving heretical churches that we in the various COGs could read with profit. His arguments are freely drawn upon here when making the case that God required those who believed Mr. Armstrong had generally correctly interpreted Scripture to leave the WCG in 1995 or earlier.

Consider the implications of a long familiar text, traditionally cited by many against the practice of Christians marrying non-Christians (2 Cor. 6:14-15): "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever?" Doesn't this Scripture in principle also condemn the practice of true believers in the same church

organization continuing in association with false “believers”? Just because some people label themselves “Christian” doesn’t mean they actually are. Believers must uphold doctrinal standards for sorting out who is and isn’t Christian; otherwise, anyone could believe anything, call themselves “Christian,” and still attend church with them. (Incidentally, this is the publicly proclaimed principle of the Unitarian-Universalist Church). Pickering uses the examples of liberal “Christians” who deny the Bible is (fully) the infallible word of God, who attack its miracles, including Jesus’ literal resurrection from the dead, and who reject such doctrines as the Deity of Christ, the virgin birth, and Christ’s vicarious, substitutionary, atoning sacrifice by His blood. Our situation in 1994-1995, of course, concerned Pasadena’s clear rejection of the Saturday Sabbath’s continuing obligation for Christians and (in previous years) the replacement of God Family doctrine by the Trinity teaching.

We know that a Christian is Biblically defined as someone who has the Holy Spirit in him or her (Romans 8:9; I John 4:13; II Cor. 13:5). Its continuing presence is certainly a condition for salvation (II Cor. 5:5; Eph. 4:30; 1:13-14; John 6:63; Romans 8:10-11). So then, if (Acts 5:29) “God has given [the Holy Spirit] to those who obey Him,” can someone who knowingly rejects one of the Ten Commandments still be saved? We believe that someone has to aim to avoid (say) adultery, idolatry, or false witness in order to gain salvation. (Obviously, occasional failures in practice and thought will inevitably occur, but they don’t imperil our salvation, since we’re saved by grace). So why should it be any different concerning the Fourth Commandment? Someone who breaks the Sabbath intentionally, as a matter of systematically deliberate conduct, who believes it isn’t binding on Christians despite being told otherwise, can’t be saved and eventually shouldn’t be regarded as “Christian” regardless of any of his or her claims to the contrary. Therefore, a line must be drawn. Believers must separate themselves from unbelievers when they are in positions of authority and can’t be removed from the church organization under which both fellowship together.

Now should Christians continue to attend an organization with leaders and large numbers of laymembers who should be disfellowshipped for doctrinal reasons? Paul said (II Thess. 3:14), “If anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed.” Likewise, we are to “note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (Romans 16:17). If we can’t avoid them by having them excommunicated, then we should avoid them by soon (not years and years later) starting a separate church organization once it’s clear their apostasy is irreversible. Note the command given in 2 John 10-11: “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.” This text doesn’t concern the visit of a casual stranger to our homes, such as a Muslim mailman, a Baptist plumber, or an agnostic roofer, or otherwise we would have to go out of the world (cf. I Cor. 5:10; John 17:15). Rather, it’s about the official visit of a church official (to a presumed “house church”) upholding a particular false doctrine that, if accepted, would cause a loss of salvation. As Pickering (p. 181) comments: “The verse forbids the continual fellowshiping [with] those who are in doctrinal error. By retaining associations with such within a denominational or other organizational framework, we disobey this

command of Scripture.” Hence, if some minister arrives to a local congregation to teach (say) the Sabbath’s abolition, all who uphold the Sabbath’s binding nature should stay away if that person can’t be kept from visiting and he (as shown by previous experience there or elsewhere) won’t repent of his false doctrine.

If we were in the world again and were called out of it, would we choose to go to an organization teaching major errors once we became aware of true doctrine? If we gained the conviction that the Saturday Sabbath had to be obeyed, would we go out and join an organization that denies it, such as the Southern Baptist Convention or the Roman Catholic Church? Now suppose we’re attending services with a physical corporate church organization that teaches God’s truth. But then over time, it stops teaching those truths. What makes it then any different from any Protestant denomination or even the Catholic Church? Has it not become yet another harlot daughter of Babylon the Great? What does Revelation 18:4 command?: “Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues.” A church that true Christians administer should be abandoned when they cease to control it. A physical corporate organization can choose to become an instrument of a daughter of Babylon after having been a tool aiding the true Church of God. If so, the true Christians left in it should soon choose to assemble elsewhere once its apostate state is clearly permanent.

What is the ultimate basis for the principle of Christians separating themselves from the fundamental evil conduct and doctrinal errors of others? Some of the essential characteristics of the Eternal’s nature are holiness, righteousness, and purity. Correspondingly, His people are to become holy, righteous, and pure, as per Lev. 11:44: “For I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore consecrate yourselves, and you shall be holy; for I am holy.” Why did Jehovah tell Israel to remain apart from the surrounding pagan gentile nations? “And you shall be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be Mine” (Lev. 20:26). This Old Testament principle also applies to new covenant Christians: We cannot develop the habits of righteousness and acquire the quality of holiness while being closely joined together with unbelievers who continually undermine our attempts to obey God more fully. The judgment of God is against His people when they mix themselves closely with unrepentant unbelievers, such as by marriage. Consider the incident in which Midian’s women, as advised by Balaam of Peor, enticed Israel into idolatry, which aroused Yahweh’s wrath against His chosen people (Num. 25:1-18; 31:15-16). The principle here applies to Christians as well. Do we really think we can remain holy, righteous, and pure when constantly hearing sermons from, reading articles by, and talking “spiritually” with “Christians” that tell us to be unholy, unrighteous, and impure?

Should the Scriptural principles of unity and holiness should conflict in a given situation, which should take precedence? Let’s contemplate this: Can there be spiritual “unity” between believers and unbelievers? “And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols?” (2 Cor. 6:15-16). Isn’t it a spiritual fraud for Christians to claim to be in fellowship and unity with those who aren’t Christians in God’s sight? If “unity” involves sacrificing holiness, the bogus “unity” needs to be sacrificed, especially when it’s a farce

anyway. Can apostates and true Christians have real spiritual unity, true spiritual association? Now someone may object, stating that requires judging the state of conversion of others (as per the principle of Matt. 7:1-6). But we know that judgments have to be made in major, publicly indisputable cases about outward behavior (as opposed to ambiguous actions based on disputable, private motives) in order to expel the unrepentant unrighteous and apostate unbelievers from continuing in fellowship with us (see 1 Cor. 5:1-13; 6:1-10; John 7:24; cf. Matt. 18:15-18; 1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Tim. 1:19-20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18). And if the false believers can't be made to leave, then the true believers should go instead. After all (Amos 3:3), "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" While citing an Old Testament text, Paul explained which principle took precedence (2 Cor. 6:17): "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you." Pickering (p. 167) was right to observe: "God's demands upon His people are based upon His own standards. Truth and holiness are inseparable companions. If God is separate from evil, He expects His people to be so."

We were clearly taught a defective doctrine of the church years ago in our old parent organization. We heard that it was the one true church, and learned that the spiritual organism and the physical corporate organization were one and the same. This false doctrine of the church's nature held in its grip many who (at least at the time) saw the errors of the "new" teachings. (Ironically, they rejected the "new" teaching that the WCG wasn't the one true church!) Perhaps they should have remembered back to when they were baptized that Christians weren't baptized into a particular denomination or church organization, but into the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (See HWA's booklet, All About Water Baptism, 1972, p. 11). But what did so many end up believing from 1995 onwards? That they were called into the WCG, a particular physical corporate organization, and couldn't leave? And how many of them eventually succumbed to the WCG's continual false doctrinal propaganda over the years since because they stayed in steady "spiritual" contact with an apostate organization? In point of fact, the invisible spiritual assembly of believers is distinct from any particular church buildings or set of physical assets. The true church is wherever the believers go to assemble. A group of men (or a man) sitting in a suburb of Los Angeles with voting control over the church corporation's assets aren't our intercessors with God. We weren't called by God and then required by God to stay with them unconditionally regardless of their beliefs or behavior.

In conclusion, Christians should realize that not only do they have the option to leave an apostate church organization; they have a duty to abandon it. Given the kinds of Scriptural arguments Ernest Pickering mounts in Biblical Separation, we in the COG movement have been (embarrassingly enough) busily reinventing the wheel on the subject of what the church actually is and when we should leave church organizations that have left the truth themselves over the past decade and more. If only this book had been known and widely available to members of the COG movement back in 1995: How much spiritual blood might have not been spilled! The conservative traditional Christians, between the "come-outers" and "stay-inners" in their large denominations, have spent decades thrashing out this issue, as is plain from Pickering's footnotes and

sources. The great Baptist minister, the “Prince of Preachers,” Charles Haddon Spurgeon, knowing that he couldn’t fellowship where unbelief was still tolerated (by a fundamentalist Protestant definition) in the partially apostate Baptist Union of Britain, proclaimed principles in 1887 that we in the COG movement should have heeded in 1995 or earlier: “Yes, we have before us the wretched spectacle of professedly orthodox Christians publicly avowing their union with those who deny the faith . . . It is our solemn conviction that where there can be no real spiritual communion there should be no pretence of fellowship. *Fellowship with known and vital error is participation in sin.*”