

Substance is enduring, form is ephemeral.
Failure to distinguish clearly between the
two is ruinous. Success follows those
adept at preserving the substance of the
past by clothing it in the forms of the
future. Preserve substance; modify form;
know the difference.

— Dee Hock —

GOD'S GOVERNMENT—FORM...OR SUBSTANCE?

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Ever since the massive exodus and scattering of the brethren who were once one united group under the banner of Worldwide Church of God (WCG), debate occasionally surfaces concerning the proper form of government for God's Church. It seems that quite a number of different organizations, each calling itself by some variation of the basic name "Church of God", espouse for the most part virtually identical doctrines except for this one area of disagreement. Weren't we all at one time in agreement on even this? There are also multiple thousands who refuse to attend with any of the so-called offshoots or splinter groups because they somehow feel that to do so would be disloyal to the concept of Church government which we were all taught under Herbert W. Armstrong's leadership. This group, if you can call them a group, are composed of people who don't attend anywhere, when they have the means to do so (and we're not talking about those who attend house-churches, who make up another genuine Church of God group). (And I'm also not talking about the elderly or infirm who no longer have the means to attend regularly or travel, but attend via online.)

What Government Are We Really Under?

Maybe we need to take a fresh look at the history of God's Church from the time of the early apostles on through the past 2000 years up to our time today, and ask ourselves a few questions concerning its structure and its continuity. If we are to believe Scripture, I think we can all agree that the Church of God has existed in an unbroken chain since its birth shortly after Christ's ascension (the gates of the grave shall not prevail against it--Matt 16:18). But does that necessarily mean that its means of administration or its governing body would continue unbroken from one generation to the next? I think we can all see after just a brief glance at its history

that this is not so. Throughout its history, whenever a presumed leader within the organized structure of the Church of God assumed a position of top leadership, then began preaching false doctrine and leading the flock astray, God ALWAYS raised up someone else to carry on His work. Sometimes He raised up someone from within the ministry, and sometimes, as in the case of Peter Waldo or Herbert Armstrong, He had prepared a particular individual beforehand who had no prior contact with or interest in the Church or the work of God, brought them to repentance and led them to bring spiritual revival to God's Church. **The continuity of God's government in the Church has to do, not with loyalty to any one human individual or organized administrative structure, but loyalty to God the Father and to Jesus Christ. And how have God's people down through history shown their loyalty to God? BY SIMPLE OBEDIENCE TO HIS WORD! By keeping the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ (Rev 12:17).** Whenever the phrase "Commandments of God and testimony of Jesus Christ" is used in Scripture, it is referring to all of Scripture, both old (Commandments of God) and new testaments (testimony of Jesus Christ).

Something we all need to think seriously about is a question Mr. Armstrong often asked, "*Why do we believe the things that we believe?*" And another question we might ask ourselves is, "*How do we reconcile our individual beliefs about Church government with Scripture and with Church history?*" **When an individual is called of God, is led to repentance, is baptized and given God's Holy Spirit, if that individual chooses (and the choice is ours, God does not force us) to be led by that Spirit, then he has placed himself under God's government and remains under that government as long as he continues to be obedient to the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ, regardless of the type of administrative structure assumed by the group with which he fellowships.**

Why Do We Attend Sabbath Services In A Church Congregation?

Now I'd like to address the reason for regular commanded assemblies. Shouldn't we be willing to learn from each other? After all, isn't that what our calling is all about, as explained in the 12th through 14th chapters of 1st Corinthians? Please consider why God commands us to assemble on the Sabbath day (Lev 23:3). The 12th chapter of 1st Corinthians shows us that God has given each one of us various spiritual gifts for the purpose of serving each other and helping each other to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord. By avoiding fellowship with others of like mind, we not only deprive ourselves of the possibility of greater growth through what others might be able to share with us, but we are also denying others greater growth by depriving them of the benefits of the gifts God has given us for the edification of the Church. This is why Hebrews 10:23-25 says that we should not forsake the assembling of ourselves together. In doing so, we actually deprive each other of wonderful growth opportunities (Proverbs 17:17 Iron sharpens iron).

Having A Form Of Godliness Without The Substance

What exactly is God's form of government? Is it possible to structure God's Church to work totally according to God's government in this age, with all our human shortcomings and failings, prior to the full establishment of the Kingdom of God at Christ's return? Brethren, I think our recent history should attest loudly enough to the fact that it is not. Anyway, do we really think that God is as concerned about form as He is about substance? Let's see what He says in this matter. In 2nd Timothy Chapter 3, He inspires Paul to write about the perilous times that would exist in our

day. Verses 2 through 4 talk about the various character flaws that would be prevalent, then Paul says in verse 5, "having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof (substance): from such turn away" (KJV throughout). Also, we might look at Jesus Christ's comments about the scribes and pharisees throughout the gospel accounts. It seems these teachers of Israel were very big on form and very small on substance. Can you find any comments about them that might be considered positive? The only one I can think of is verse 2 and the first part of verse 3 of Matthew 23, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do". But He quickly follows with an admonition not to do as they do (the rest of verse 3).

We Don't Have All The Answers--But What Should We Really Have?

Does not Scripture show us that we should not expect to have all the answers nor have all knowledge at this time? Let's look at 1st Corinthians 13, verses 9-12: **For we know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.** We should apply these verses just as much to our understanding of the proper form for God's government as we should to our understanding of the nature (form) of God. Again, form (what God looks like) should take a back seat to substance. Love is the *substance* of God's character; God *IS* love – 1 John 4:8 and 16.

Structure May Change, Substance Remains The Same

Whatever organizational structure is established by men under God's inspiration may work well for a generation under strong leadership totally committed to the substance of God's government (upholding the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ), and might even sometimes work for a second generation. But eventually, a leader will assume authority who is not as dedicated, or is easily swayed or misled by advisors, and Satan will move in and start the cycle of subtle deceit all over again. If one would examine the organizational structure of the currently existing groups using some variation of the name "Church of God", one would find that each has certain good points and bad points, advantages and disadvantages. None is perfect. But God is fully capable of taking imperfect humans and imperfect institutions and using them to His advantage in accomplishing whatever work He wants done at any given time.

Can We As The Various "Churches of God" Accomplish What Our Parent Church Accomplished?

Anyone who wants to take the time to investigate the groups that have formed out of the scattering of brethren in the past 30 years or so will see that most are doing a good work and producing fruit for the Kingdom. None of them alone is currently doing as great a work as was done under Mr. Armstrong's leadership. And I really don't think that any will unless or until we show our God that we can learn the lesson of cooperation and teamwork that is vital to accomplish anything approaching what he did. The administrations of the various groups have quite a challenge (think opportunity?) ahead of them, if they are only able and willing to rise above any petty differences of opinion and PERSONAL EGO and learn to work in cooperation with each other as much as possible.

We Have A Job To Accomplish Before Jesus Returns

The current situation in the scattered Church of God is such that we have all had to face various tests of our faith in the past 30 plus years. Remember, we are collectively being built into a HOLY TEMPLE to the LORD (Ephesians 2:21). Is God now in the process of measuring His Holy Temple (Rev 11: 1-3)? If so, how long will this measuring of us last? Will we all measure up to His standards? We will each have to answer in the final analysis, not to any human leader of any humanly devised hierarchical structure, nor to any general conference or council of elders, but to our Lord and Master, our soon coming King and elder brother, Jesus Christ. In the mean time, we still have a work to accomplish. The great tribulation has not yet begun. How close are we to it? Nobody really knows at this point, except our Father in Heaven. So we must continue to reach out to this dying world as much as possible with the Gospel of the Kingdom of God while we still have the ability and the freedom to do so. God has provided us at this time with a number of organized structures of dedicated individuals fully capable and willing to go forth with the Gospel. Let's show our God that we are fully dedicated and willing to complete His work. As the betrothed of Christ, we should be striving now as never before to make ourselves ready for His glorious return in all the power and majesty of Almighty God. Let's show this dying world, and EACH OTHER, that we are TRUE ambassadors for Jesus Christ. Let's show this world that we DO have God's Agape Love for one another, in how we interact with others, whether they are a part of our particular organization or not. Let's make our calling and election sure so that we can one day soon hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant, come and enter the joy of your master"!