

Local Assemblies Are NOT Social Clubs!

By Herbert W. Armstrong
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Here is what our newly converted brethren need to know. TRUE, we are commanded not to forsake assembling ourselves together -- and so much the more in these last days, as we approach the Day of the Eternal and the second coming of Christ.

But there are pitfalls. Those inexperienced and unlearned in all the instruction of God to His ministers would never see them. They would trap the unwary and the innocent. But pitfalls are there. And they are a very real and potential danger!

You have heard me say often that most of the worldly churches have degenerated into SOCIAL CLUBS. Most of us probably would never believe that could happen to any of US! We just don't think of ourselves in that language. Yet some of those oldest in our fellowship have actually fallen into that snare WITHOUT REALIZING IT!

When the PURPOSE of assembling in a local group departs from God's purpose -- when the METHOD of conducting the local assembly departs from the Bible instructions and example, members often are driven AWAY from God and into loss of eternal life!

For the safety and welfare of all, I must speak plainly and candidly. God commands His true ministers: "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things WITHOUT PREFERRING ONE BEFORE ANOTHER, doing nothing by partiality" (I Tim. 5:20-21).

An Unscriptural Attitude

Some, who have attended a local congregation of God's Church for years, have gradually succumbed to the influence of Satan and the pull of the flesh, until they have come to look on the purpose and function of the local church something like this (and I summarize their unscriptural view as a warning to ALL!):

"We just want to have peace," they protest, justifying their departure from the BIBLE ways. "We just want to attend church every Sabbath, and enjoy the fellowship, without having any preacher lambast us, or tell us what's wrong with us, or use the Scriptures to hit at us. We want a pastor who will show LOVE toward us, by letting us do as we please, and as each of us sees it for himself. We don't want a pastor to use the Bible to strike out at us, and tell us we're wrong, and make us feel uncomfortable.

"And another thing," this attitude continues, "we want to have the 'say-so' in what we do, and how our services are conducted. We don't want any part in what our pastor calls 'God's work' -- that's just HIS own personal work, and we're not interested, and we don't want to hear about it -- we want no part in it. We don't care anything about going into all the world and proclaiming the Gospel. We don't care anything about whether people in Florida or Maine or Britain are being brought into the truth and converted -- they live too far away for us to enjoy fellowship with them, and so we have no interest in them, and don't want to be bothered or made uncomfortable even hearing about them."

Rather astonishing, isn't it, that people who have heard God's TRUTH preached for many years -- people who at first accepted it in the love of God, professed it, started out practicing it -- should, through the years, FALL AWAY from the truth, reject NEW truth as it is uncovered, begin to embrace false doctrines and errors, and finally come to such an attitude as above quoted?

It Has Happened Here!

But I assure you, my brethren, that such has happened! I do not here accuse any individual. I say to those concerned, look down deep into your own hearts! If the shoe fits, either put it on and wear it -- INTO THE LAKE OF FIRE, TO BE BURNED! -- or else REPENT before it is everlastingly TOO LATE! But to those who do not share this degenerated carnal attitude, I say, "I DON'T mean you!"

But that's not all. Hear some more of this attitude into which ANY ONE OF US might degenerate, unless we are AWAKE to the DANGER!

These people, if they express how they really feel, would continue to say: "We just want to ENJOY this fellowship and Sabbath service each Sabbath. We want it to be a CHANGE -- a rest from our weekly work and routines -- a place where we can come for diversion and ENJOYMENT, and we want it to be uplifting and encouraging, so that we can go home feeling better pleased with ourselves. We don't want a pastor getting us all upset by showing us our sins -- telling us that because we were divorced and remarried we are living in adultery -- telling us we are robbing God if we don't pay tithes. Why, we don't think God would be fair if He split up families just because one member has a former living husband or wife -- and we don't want any of OUR money to go into a work we don't consider is OUR work, and we don't want any of OUR money to go to the preacher, either. Just because it is taught from Pasadena that divorce and remarriage is adultery -- just because Armstrong and his worshippers say it's a sin if we don't pay tithes -- well, if we disagree with what is taught at Pasadena, that's our God-given right! We want the right to believe as we reason it out for ourselves. We want a preacher to show LOVE toward us by telling us how good we are, and sending us home better pleased with ourselves, feeling good, encouraged for the week ahead."

Perverted Love!

To these people, the minister who properly uses God's Word as God commands, to correct and reprove, is not showing love. The preacher who will twist the Word of God to lull them to sleep in their sins -- actually condemning them to everlasting DEATH -- is showing what THEY call love!

Some of them derive a certain satisfaction out of a disagreement with God's chosen servant. Instead of feeling guilty where the BIBLE condemns what they are doing or believing, it seemingly elevates their ego. If they can convince themselves that God's chosen servant is wrong, and they are right in various points of Scripture, then they feel superior. This helps them ride right over their sins. But they are riding straight into the jaws of ETERNAL DEATH!

We might think: "Why, that couldn't happen to any of OUR people who have heard the TRUTH?" But I assure you, brethren, it has happened already, to a small few! Thank God! -- only a few!

What is God's sentence upon them? Listen!

"It is IMPOSSIBLE for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit, AND HAVE TASTED OF THE GOOD WORD OF GOD ... if they shall fail away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh" (Heb. 6:4-6).

Let it be a warning to ALL, and let all FEAR, and TREMBLE before the all-powerful WORD OF GOD!

Why, we would not be the true Church of God, unless a few had turned away from the truth! It happened in the churches God raised up thru the apostle Paul. Leaders rose up and turned brethren against Paul. To the elders from Ephesus, Paul said:

"For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:29-30).

It happened to Paul. It has happened in our experience. But never fear! All such shall be dealt with, by the power of God. God is showing His servants what they must do. And we shall know by the fruits -- the RESULTS -- whether the power and the authority of GOD in His chosen ministers is the stronger, and master of the situation, or whether perverted and disgruntled human self-will can triumph! God will DEMONSTRATE His power thru His servants! The gates of hell shall not prevail against GOD'S Church!

Purpose of Churches

Brethren, if we are to continue to grow -- and to grow SPIRITUALLY as well as in numbers -- we must remember that the PURPOSE of the Church is, first, to GO INTO ALL THE WORLD and preach Christ's GOSPEL. The FIRST commission to the Church is just that. Anyone who looks on that Great Commission of Christ as "Armstrong's private work" is just not a member of GOD'S one, true Church.

Anyone who does not have his whole heart in that work IS NOT A MEMBER OF GOD'S TRUE CHURCH, and has no right whatsoever to attend or fellowship in any of its local congregations. The very FIRST purpose, then, of each local congregation is the FIRST purpose of God's Church as a whole -- to encourage, pray for, hear reports about, and help in -- in whatever manner may be possible -- the great work of God of preaching and publishing the true GOSPEL to all the world.

After that comes the SECOND commission Christ gave His Church -- "FEED THE FLOCK." For this purpose, GOD has set some in His Church, first, apostles, then preachers, and then teachers, to be His instruments in feeding the local flocks each Sabbath.

No Elections or Politics

Yes, it is GOD who has set apostles, evangelists, pastors and teachers in His Church. The call must come from GOD. These men are merely HIS INSTRUMENTS. He trains them and prepares them.

And WHY? TO FEED the Church of God, as Paul told the elders at Ephesus (Acts 20). "For the PERFECTING of the saints," writes Paul in Eph. 4:12-13; "for the WORK of the ministry, for the edifying of the Body of Christ, TILL we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the KNOWLEDGE of the Son of God, unto A PERFECT MAN, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

And How does God instruct His ministers to preach? Does He say, "Don't tell them their sins"? Does God say to the ministers, "You are sinners yourselves, so you can't tell others their sins -- instead, show love by ENCOURAGING them IN their sins"?

He does not!

God's Command

God commands, "CRY ALOUD, and SPARE NOT, and SHOW MY PEOPLE THEIR SINS."

God's instruction to ministers of local churches is this:

"I charge thee therefore before God ... PREACH THE WORD; keep at it in season, out of season; REPROVE, REBUKE, EXHORT with all patience and doctrine" (II Tim. 4:1-2). He said the time would come when some in congregations ministered by GOD'S TRUE MINISTERS will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts heap to THEMSELVES teachers -- turning away their ears from the TRUTH."

Brethren, do you realize what that means?

In God's true Church, GOD has set His ministers in charge. He has given them AUTHORITY. He has authorized them to bind and to loose. He has told them to RULE -- to preach the WORD which, like a sharp two edged sword cuts both ways -- is profitable for correction, reproof, instruction. But this shows

the people would try to SELECT THEIR OWN pastor -- "heap to THEMSELVES teachers. Not the teachers God set over them -- those of THEIR choosing, who will show their kind of perverted "love" by turning them away from the TRUTH, pleasing them with what they WANT to hear!

God's true ministers WILL NEVER DO THAT!

God's ministers will never allow local assemblies to become mere social clubs!

Should the brethren HATE God's minister when he properly uses God's Word, and declares it boldly? If he does this, God will CHASTEN many in the congregation thru him.

True, God says, "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous."

What is Love?

But what is GOD'S kind of LOVE in this regard? "For whom the Lord LOVETH He CHASTENETH" (Heb. 12:6). "My son, despise NOT thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of Him," says God (verse 5). "If ye are without chastisement ... then are ye bastards, and not sons" (Verse 8).

What about those few disgruntled, unhappy and rebellious ones who twist the truth into believing a preacher shows "LOVE" by condoning them in their sins? Notice the inspired definition of LOVE:

"For THIS is the LOVE of GOD, that we keep His commandments" (I John 5:3).

And we break one of God's commandments when we live in adultery. And when we STEAL from God by embezzling HIS TITHE, we break another! There are TEN Commandments -- not just one about the Sabbath!

God has given instruction in HIS WORD as to how His ministers whom He has set in authority shall deal with those who have thus departed from HIS LOVE, and who stir up dissension among brethren.

Authority to Act!

We learn by experience. In past years your Pastor tried to show "love" by not acting drastically or harshly with such people. God has punished him, and brought him to see how such people MUST be dealt with, for a little leaven will leaven the whole lump. And hereafter God's ministers will demonstrate IN POWER, if necessary, the authority God has given, and carry out His instructions, that the love and the spiritual growth of THE MANY shall not be perverted and destroyed by FEW!

If in any local church, one member, or a few, offend and endanger the spiritual health of the whole body, Jesus' teaching is to "CUT IT OUT," for it's better to enter into the Kingdom with one arm or one foot, than to perish in gehenna fire!

In this way, it shall be possible in the future for ALL the membership to be FILLED with the true LOVE and the JOY of God the Father -- and, rejoicing together, we may PRESS FORWARD toward the mark for the prize of the HIGH CALLING of God in Christ Jesus!