

Church of God, The Eternal

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The Orientation of God's Holy Word—the Bible Part I

A Chronicle of Divine Revelation Followed by Apostasy

March 1992

Dear Brethren:

We are in a race, running for the reward—a crown of life. The latter part of a race is always the most difficult. So many times competitors, if not mentally conditioned, longingly desire to simply quit. Too many falter just before the finish line. By acceptable mental conditioning let us all be victorious. We can if we will.

Any book or written work has a basic purpose—a theme. The theme of the Bible revolves around the creation of man, the formation of the nation of Israel, Israel's call out from Egypt to become the called and chosen people of God physically, the history of Israel's trials and triumphs, the first advent of Jesus Christ, the creation of spiritual Israel—the church, and the trials and triumphs of that church. Without a grasp of that underlying theme of the Word of God it is utterly impossible to begin to comprehend the specifics.

Two basic areas constitute the realm of nearly all the physical and spiritual misinterpretations with which the human race in general has become familiar—concepts and doctrines of individual organizations and groups. Those areas are: 1) who and what the nation of Israel is, and 2) the transition from physical to spiritual. To illustrate, let us call to your attention the fact that many people comprehend the physical dimensions of the nation of Israel but completely miss the concept that the Israel of God today is not of the flesh but is of the Spirit. The Israel of God is the church.

Today, most people have some limited knowledge of historical Israel as the chosen of God. And that those who were not of that nation are called Gentiles.

If not born physically into the nation of Israel no human being could become a blood part of that nation. There was, by natural birth, an element of exclusiveness. This perceived exclusiveness precipitated endless wrath, war, and perpetual manifestations of hate and contempt. Regardless, the physical limits of the natural, physical, nation of Israel remained the natural limits throughout history. Concepts and ideas of men did not change the incontrovertible facts. Israel remained Israel; Gentiles—meaning non-Israelites, of the world—remained Gentiles.

The preceding facts are equally applicable to present-day spiritual Israel—the church. Only those called of God and added to that body which forms the church are truly a part of it. Claims and assertions on the part of millions of others do not change the facts. There is a genuine element of exclusiveness involved, regardless of all the contemptuous manifestations of those devoid of understanding. If one is not called of God or one departs from the faith originally delivered, and thereby refuses to acknowledge the exclusiveness of that call, the reality of facts involved do not change in spite of the belief and practice of those who do not comprehend. As it was with ancient Israel, there is a volatile reaction against any who assert the facts of their call and their continuity of faith and belief. Christ is the perfect example. He was the one and *only* Way of life. There was none other. Since Christ is one, there is one way and one body only which exists today.

People of the world or those who departed from the Truth—spiritual Gentiles—are troubled by any perceived manifestation of exclusiveness of those called. Fleshly minds demand the right to be "right." Any person may believe whatever suits his mind as long as space is given whereby the other people can feel equally "right." For one to be right to the exclusion of others is unthinkable to minds of men. A form of "relativity"—time and degree—is deemed essential to the minds of men as a moderator for the peaceful coexistence of human beings. In other words, you can believe yourself to be right as long as you give me the right to be right, too.

What Is Conversion?

Conversion commences with the recognition of the above natural tendencies of the fleshly mind. Since conversion is an ongoing process requiring a lifetime, the continual suppression of those natural tendencies is essential for that lifetime.

As long as one called suppresses that natural mind, oneness of heart and mind is made possible. Each must submit to the singularity of that one mind of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:5). Interestingly when initially called, the mind of man does not manifest defiance, rebellion, individuality—the "right" to be right—and, heretical orientation; on the contrary such a mind is pliable, teachable, and most responsive to instruction and the intervention of God. Such minds do not manifest a questioning spirit about the one called and commissioned to preach the gospel. As requisite trials and testing of faith and patience are allowed—even administered—by God, some grow hardened and thereby mentally turn from the truth once delivered. Harmony and accord are possible only as long as natural, fleshly, minds are kept under subjection to the revealed will of God. Problems—contention, strife, heresy—arise when one's initial faith in the truth heard and the commission given to God's chosen servants is questioned. A return to self-confidence—manifested in technical studies of the Bible, undue emphasis placed upon scholarly capabilities, and a personalized trust in one's own mental prowess—seems warranted. Forgotten is the clearly enunciated Biblical concept that faith must be tried and that the clear manifestation of that faith is seen in continuity of belief and practice. Any lateral move is absolute evidence that something is wrong.

Basis of Faith Tests

Faith is an orientation of the mind. It is a fruit of the spiritual mind. Therefore, any test of faith is a test of the mental orientation. Under adverse influences, of the world or demons, the mind is subjected to pulls contrary to its own best interest. Since man is most subject to his own natural mental rationale, whatever conceptions surface in those minds will seem to be right (Prov. 16:2, 25). What seems, appears, to be right will be pursued. The alternative is to trust a conviction, faith, given only once when the man is initially called. That faith is the evidence of things which are not seen (Heb. 11:1). The most difficult thing in the world is to trust implicitly that which cannot be seen, humanly proven, or subjected to some form of human test—that which occurs when man studies and arrives at conclusions on the basis of his own effort. Most men will accept that which they study out for themselves. They cannot, however, accept unequivocally that which comes as a matter of revelation. Such acceptance must come from the exercise of faith—faith which, in turn, comes as a gift of the Holy Spirit.

A significant number of texts state emphatically that man's faith will be tested and tried many times. Only he that endures the trials of this faith will be found acceptable to God at the time of judgment. Simply stated, the above concept means that your faith in the way of life to which you were called will be tried many times.

What are some of the broad ways in which you will be tried? A partial list of those basic ways follows:

1. Do you trust your original call?
2. Do you have confidence in who and what you are as one called of God?
3. Some former members—even ministers—will depart from the revealed way of God. Will you have faith in the original doctrine, not the emotional concepts of those who pervert that original truth?
4. Can friends, relatives and/or false ministers mislead you? Remember, the majority will be deceived.
5. Will trials, major tests of faith, financial and human difficulties experienced, cause you to turn from the truth? Remember, the godly will suffer all manner of trials.

History as Our Guide

When God created Adam and Eve, God gave them His truth. Of course they continued to learn and grow from that point of revelation from God, but that growth did not change that which God gave them initially. Many years later, God called a specific race of people and made them into a nation. These people became the recipients of divinely revealed truth. Though God added to that initial knowledge, no change ever occurred in that which He originally gave.

Those called were held accountable for remaining faithful to that which God gave to them. Israel rebelled. She formed her own concepts—concepts which she had borrowed from her neighbors, the pagans. Virtually from the day God gave His people, Israel, the truth and commanded them to be obedient they rebelled. From that point in time onward, God sent His servants the prophets to warn Israel of her error and impending doom. Every book of prophecy contains the same basic message. "You have violated the way which I gave to you. Repent and turn back to me," said God. But they would not.

In due time God sent His own Son to this earth. He was the same Truth made flesh who dwelt among us. The history of His preaching and teaching is an amazing example. The world utterly rejected Him. Even of those called and given an opportunity to understand, most, in due time, turned away. After three and one-half years of the preaching of Jesus Christ, only 120 people remained faithful. Following the ministry of Jesus Christ, a group of 12 men were commissioned and sent to proclaim that same truth. Eventually a few others were added to that select body which was to proclaim that way of life.

Only an approximate period of 20 years had elapsed before the Holy Spirit deemed it necessary to inspire one of those chosen servants to utter the first warning of an apostate attitude developing in the church. Tragically, every book written, from that point of time forward, is a repetitious warning of apostasy and the consequences for such rebellion—faithlessness—against the revealed way of life.

Those truly called know that the history of ancient Israel, circumstances related to the physical existence of Jesus Christ, and the history of the New Testament church during the first century—as recorded in the New Testament—are a revelation of what will occur in the last days. Incumbent upon the faithful ministry is the task, necessity, of warning the people of God against the temptations of apostasy—departure from the revealed truth. Today when we continually write and speak about the causes of apostasy we are merely repeating what the Holy Spirit inspired the first century servants of God to do.

Let us take a synoptic look, chronologically, at the contents of the epistles written from the beginning of that apostasy which occurred in the first century.

It is the history of what occurred to the church during that period of time as well as instruction to us of what is destined to occur in our own day. In effecting this review we can see not only what occurred to those early Christians but also what instructions are incumbent upon us.

A Review of the Epistles

Though no one seems to know the precise chronology of the books of the New Testament, we can come quite close to the dates of the writing and circulation of those

sacred books. The dates are sufficiently accurate for our present purpose. Paragraphs will indicate chapters.

1 Thessalonians (50 A.D.)

The called know their election of God. They know the true ministry and follow them. They turned to those ministers and embraced the truth taught.

Though the faithful ministry remains loyal to the truth they are accused of compromise, deception. They seek no glory of men, yet always nurturing the faithful as dear children—willing to give even their own physical lives. They conduct their lives openly and honestly before all—always exhorting and instructing those called of God. They are genuinely accepted by all until the devious and evil-minded cause some to question and reject. Even then they are willing to help those troubled.

True ministers shield the flock from excessive burden. Yet, trials are inevitable. A true servant's concern is that the tempter gain no advantage over the called. The true servant's joy is bound up in the faithfulness of the called. Always looking for opportunity to teach and strengthen.

The faithful minister is always hoping and praying that the called will remain faithful to the way taught. Knowing that some will despise—reject—not us but God (note: John 13:20). Some had begun to condemn the way because of sickness, trials, even death. They had forgotten that the death of the righteous, the faithful, is pleasant in the sight of God.

Some will go apostate thinking they have ample time prior to the Second Coming of Christ—tending toward worldliness and hedonism. The faithful are not worrying about death—only loyalty to God and His precious way of life given to them. Even with apostasy and rebellion occurring within the body, the faithful remain cognizant of those who serve them. The true ministry continues to warn and teach.

2 Thessalonians (50, 51 A.D.)

Those faithful to the Way—those who effect no lateral moves in belief or practice—are counted worthy due to acceptance of all trials and persecutions. All who

turn from the truth and attempt to destroy others will be the recipients of God's recompense and just judgment. At the same time God will manifest His love and mercy to the faithful.

Because of unfaithfulness many of the called will turn away from the truth. Strong delusion from God will ensue. The unfaithful will even believe a lie. This deception will be so severe that even the doubtful will be shaken and deeply troubled. Such behavior is a manifestation of the working of the mystery of iniquity within the body of the faithful. For this cause many shall lose faith and thereby be subjected to trials and tests which will result in their own destruction. Continuity of faith—*the* faith—is the only hope of salvation.

The real enemies of the truth come from within the body. The faithful must recognize the rebellious and separate themselves from their influence. It is the duty of all to recognize this responsibility and have no company with those who refuse to act on it.

James (45–50 A.D.)

Because God's chosen did not understand the necessity of trials they were beginning to manifest doubts, some even turning away from the truth. They were vacillating—a trait or characteristic unrewarded by God.

Enduring the trials of faith is absolutely necessary. The faithful must patiently and calmly walk in the way of the revealed truth. The manifestation of that faith is in continuity of belief and action.

The source of their trials stemmed from unfaithful ministers (3:1). These apostate members had resorted to diatribe and evil communication.

They had overlooked the nature which resides within themselves.

In the final analysis, we are informed that those who understand find happiness even in their trials (5:11).

Galatians (52 A.D.)

The true minister is called and commissioned by God. All others are impostors. Some of these will begin to preach a perverse way, not given by God. The test of faithfulness is seen in the conduct of our lives relating to the doctrine initially taught. That doctrine is given by divine revelation. The unfaithful even deigned to accuse the Apostle Paul of perverting the divinely revealed truth. As Paul certified that which was taught by him, so we today certify that which we preach is the very doctrine which we taught for 40 years. We lie not!

The resolution of conflict was effected by conference—not by any attempt to separate and merchandise the members of the body. All fearful actions are worthy of condemnation. Consistency of belief and practice is essential. The truly faithful, minister or layperson, has crucified all elements of the flesh and mind.

By turning to elements of the flesh, false ministers, those who once knew the truth, bewitched many members of the Galatian area. Only by genuine faith can one called remain faithful to God's purpose. That purpose is manifested in oneness. Any division is a manifestation of the operation of a different spirit.

The question: How can anyone called and knowledgeable of the revealed way of truth ever turn from it? Yet, many do, desiring to return to bondage. In this insidious turn, the called of Galatia had turned from the chosen servant which they once accepted as an angel. Why? Because they recoiled against the truth which they once accepted.

Though greatly loved and for whom many prayers are uttered, the unfaithful turn in contempt and bitterness, even persecuting those they once considered their brothers and sisters.

In spite of such turmoil, God instructs the faithful to remain loyal to that which was revealed. The faithful will continue to practice the way of the Spirit, not the orientation of the flesh, even under the duress of persecution from those who once knew and believed. The ministry will continue to instruct and point out the fallacies of those who depart. God will judge the unfaithful.

As long as possible, the faithful will attempt to help the weak and vacillating. They will not live their lives for them, for the servant of God must stand on his own faith and conviction. Change nor vacillation will be seen in the faithful, regardless of the threat of persecution or rejection.

1 Corinthians (55 A.D.)

One of God's churches existed in Corinth. It was made up of members called to become saints. A problem had developed. Divisions were being generated instead of the oneness which is required of God. Those divisions were surfacing because many of the members were resorting to the wisdom of flesh instead of maintaining faith in the revelation given.

The true ministry continues to speak the mysterious wisdom of God. Those with right attitudes understand. However, those relying upon the powers of their own minds will reject the faith of the original revelation.

Though one of the churches of God, members of the Corinthian church had lost true spirituality. They could not, or would not, grasp true and genuine things of the Spirit. They had become argumentative. Despite this condition, the true foundation of the church remained unchanged. That foundation was the unchanging Christ. Those who have turned to the wisdom of the world have entered the realm of vanity.

The faithful ministers are rejected by many who once knew the truth. Such people presume to judge. They forget by what means they came to the knowledge of the truth. Without fear they begin to second-guess and criticize the ministry personally. Yet, the faithful ministry will entreat and attempt to help the doubtful.

When the power of God's Holy Spirit is rejected, the called turn to many hurtful ways. They accept and practice a perverted version of the doctrine. They begin to condone and sympathize with the rebellious. The faithful will note such and refuse to keep company with them.

The just are called to judge the world in the future. Therefore, it is imperative that they be able to judge themselves and physical matters at the present time. Too many, rather than judging and acting on the knowledge possessed, were beginning to condone and uphold an alternative life-style. Essential for the faithful is self-control and self-mastery.

The Apostle Paul addresses questions about marriage and the marital relationship. He emphasizes the force of the law and our responsibility to it.

The faithful are warned that their liberty must be moderated in accord with the needs of those whose faith lacks. By a careless attitude against the weak we sin against Christ.

Instruction is given to the laity about their relationship toward and with the ministry. A true and faithful minister is under obligation regardless of how the laity may view him. He cannot turn.

Ancient Israel is a type of what to expect from the spiritually called. Some, because of a lack of faith and conviction, will turn from the way delivered. Passover is a depiction of our complete and unconditional surrender to Christ. Yet, far too many sacrifice to demons, not to the true and genuine Christ.

The battle of the sexes prevailed in the days of the Corinthian church. Because of a dominant ascendancy of women at that time the angels were embarrassed. At the same time, men had become effeminate. What about today? So many contentious heresies had arisen because of this deviation from custom. These heresies were essential as a means by which the faithful could be identified. Though many were "observing" the Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread they were failing to examine themselves properly and thus did not keep Passover acceptably.

Among the heresies which had surfaced in the church was a form of individualization. Though there are diversities of gifts, responsibilities, and offices there is but one Spirit and one body. God is the Author of the body's structure. He puts any called individual into the body in the area of responsibility as it pleases Him—not as the individual deems right. Amazingly human beings sometimes assert "their rights" and then assume that such responsibility is ordained of God. Confusion and individualization are not of God. When such is evident another spirit is at the root of the problem.

It is more important to manifest an attitude of humility and self-mastery than to possess responsibility. To really serve requires only a willingness to serve and to make personal sacrifices. The real servant is not looking for recognition, only the privilege of serving. Attitude reveals the heart of the individual.

The theme of humility continues. Why does anyone want office, gift, or responsibility? When called of God, we must learn self-control and self-discipline. Organization and order are of God. God does not counter Himself in the administration of responsibility.

The authenticity of Paul's preaching, his call and responsibility, and his call and conversion were severely questioned. The proof, however, was the initial obedience of those whom God had first called by the preaching of Paul. Any subsequent questioning of his authority and commission was invalid.

Witnesses are either true or false. Paul had seen firsthand what he was conveying to the members in Corinth. (Interestingly, there are some today who question the veracity of witnesses to unfolding events). The deceptive would under no circumstances make the sacrifices necessary to remain a faithful minister. They would take the easy route or seek more profitable advantage. Accusations against a faithful ministry, therefore, are meaningless.

Some, though called, had not really made the revealed truth a living part of their thinking. It was a shame. But, Paul proceeds to synoptically review the whole plan of salvation. He then emphasizes the necessity of remaining faithful to the call given.

Paul turns his attention to the needy. He asks those in Corinth to assume a part in this benevolent exercise. Then he reminds all of the necessity of remaining absolutely faithful to that which he had taught them as it had been delivered to him.

2 Corinthians (56 A.D.)

Paul's defense of his call and apostleship: One manifestation of that responsibility was the trials and sufferings being experienced. Another is that he continued to preach that which they had accepted—that which he had preached from the time of his call and commission. The premise of faith and confidence is God and the gift of His Holy Spirit. In spiritual matters, over which he did have responsibility, Paul avoided them lest he use his authority unwisely. He knew that it was necessary that they stand in their own faith.

Regarding fellowship Paul had tested the conversion of the members of the church. They were commanded to avoid one who had not lived up to the tenets of the church—a command the members were reluctant to accept. In the matters of obedience and affectionate regard for others, members can either resist Satan or become open prey to him. Though continuing to proclaim the revealed truth of God, the members had begun to assert that he was corrupting the Word of God, as others were doing in the church.

Some members of the church were beginning to assert a false concept of love, liberty. He reminded them that they are what they are because of his commission. Again Paul defends his call and ministry—the ministry of the Spirit, the New Testament Administration. He shows that a departure from the revealed way would make them comparable, regarding faith, to the people of ancient Israel.

The struggle against the New Testament ministry continues. Paul asserts that if the people departed it was due to a spiritual blindness which had been effectuated by Satan. The very departure, rebellion against the revealed truth, was a manifest proof of God's love for the true ministry and His personal approval of their teaching. Physically, such defiance is hard to take, but internally it is reassuring.

The physical shall be destroyed. Only the spiritual will endure. The faithful ministry, therefore, is always confident. Why? All shall stand before God and give an account in the day of judgment. The true ministry have no need to commend themselves. They will simply live confidently and warn the people with courage and conviction. The false are always looking to the physical (5:12). The real proof is found in the character of those called. They live the spiritual life, not the life of the flesh. They daily crucify themselves—the evidence of Christ living in them.

Proofs of the true ministry: The members were holding the ministry accountable for circumstances in their lives (6:12). Because of heresy and insurrection within the body Paul commands a complete separation from those within who were found in open rebellion against the truth revealed. God will honor only those who separate themselves from the rebellious.

Paul again defended his ministry. He was not defensive and hateful, his was a genuine concern and love. He rejoiced due to the results of the trials under which they all had existed. He yet manifested a hope and confidence in their integrity—their desire to do the right thing.

Apparently there surfaced much contention about the special offering Paul had requested for the poor saints in Jerusalem. He seizes the opportunity to instruct the members about giving and the attitude we must manifest toward one another. Indeed, there surfaced some question about the integrity of the ministry regarding money matters.

Contention regarding the offering continues. Liberality of heart and mind is essential. Too often there is an intent to leave an impression upon others which is contrary to fact (9:13).

Much Satanic contention arose against the ministry. Members were trusting their own minds, reasoning powers, not the divine revelation. Individualization became rampant. Much opposition sprang up, in which members were constantly second-guessing the ministry. Members were bowing before the self. Despite the rebellion of the membership, it is God who gave authority to the ministry.

It was Paul through whom the members had come to the knowledge of the truth. However, he feared that Satan had gotten hold of their minds. Some had even assumed the prerogative of preaching and teaching. They put on a humble appearance but were really inspired of Satan. They had exalted themselves—assuming office which God had not given. What were the proofs of their call and commission?

Proofs of the Apostle Paul's ministry continued. Even an outgoing love and concern of the ministry for called members will not sustain them. The true ministry does not seek a personal advantage. A warning is given that Paul, when present, would resolve the problem of contention and rebellion against the true ministry.

Finally, Paul emphatically warns the members of the Corinthian church. They were actually attempting to evaluate Paul—to ascertain a proof that he was truly a minister of Christ. Rather, he said, they should be examining themselves. By personal fruits borne we can ascertain the indwelling presence of Christ, unless we are reprobate. The true ministry would rather be "weak"—allowing the members to manifest the power of personal conviction. Once again Paul emphasizes the fabric of a member's responsibility—"Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace . . ." (13:11).

Conclusion


The real fabric of the writings of the epistles is becoming clear. The synopsis of the first six books is most revealing. The next will strengthen that fabric. When initially called, there is usually manifested a great excitement and conviction. However, as time passes, that conviction and love for the truth begins to wane. It becomes more and more necessary for the ministry to warn and continually prod. The essence of all the epistles is the consistent prodding by the faithful ministry who, unbelievably, are constantly harassed by the membership and challenged by those who assert their "right" to become ministers and teachers of the flock. The major question: Will you be able to tell the difference between the true and the false? Unfortunately, time will make the answer to

that question absolutely clear for all. At that time it will be too late for those who made the wrong decision. The just shall live by faith.

This subject will be continued in June 1992.

Times are most critical. Events are occurring with great rapidity. Are we preparing as rapidly as we should be? The most aggressive program possible will not be too much. We pray and trust that not one of us will look back in disappointment, regret, and sorrow. Our prayers and thoughts of kindness are always with you.

In love and affection always,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Raymond C. Cole". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned centrally below the text "In love and affection always,".

Raymond C. Cole