

Does the Church
Need
a
Ministry?

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Reprinted 1991, 2000

DOES THE CHURCH NEED A MINISTRY?

Many former members of the Church of God feel they do not need a ministry. They believe it is possible to gain salvation without the help of any man. Does the Bible substantiate this? This article will reveal the Bible answer and show the layman's responsibility before God.

It was not until the doctrinal changes of 1973–74 transpired within the Worldwide Church of God, that many began to question the ministry. They felt if the Church had been wrong on major doctrines, the ministry could not be relied upon as the final authority for determining Church beliefs. The natural consequence of this conclusion was the repudiating of the ministry in general.

Forgotten were the promises of Jesus, who said He would build His Church and that He would be with it until the consummation of the age (Matthew 16:18; 28:19–20). Forgotten was Paul's statement that Jesus is the head of the Church, the body of Christ (Colossians 1:24; Ephesians 1:22–23). Many not only lost faith in the Church as an organization, they also lost faith in God and in God's Word. Had they recognized the significance of 2 Thessalonians, chapter two, in the light of recent doctrinal changes, they would have realized prophecy was being fulfilled before their eyes. For the most part, those who left the Church have completely abandoned their convictions. And those who are still within the organization do not presently know what to believe; seemingly-endless doctrinal changes and "watering down" of truth continue to erode what little fiber of conviction remains.

What Is the Church?

The Church Jesus built is a spiritual organism. It is not an organization *per se*. This is not to say it is not, or has not been, organized. It has. But organization of itself, does not constitute God's Church. God's Church is neither an organization nor a building. It is a membership within whom dwells God's Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). The Church is the sum total of those people who are begotten by the Holy Spirit. At times it has been organized—"doing a Work." At other times, it has not. (For a clear explanation of God's Work, write for our article, *What Is the Work of God?*).

It is those called of God who are "added" to the Church (Acts 2:47). They are "added" when they receive the Holy Spirit; they then become "fellow-citizens with the saints" (Ephesians 2:18–19). Thus the body—the Church—is comprised of many members (Ephesians 5:30; 1 Corinthians 12:27). But as in the human body, not all members have the same function (1 Corinthians 12:14–27). Verse twenty-eight of 1 Corinthians, chapter twelve, tells us there is a supervisory responsibility placed within the Church. This supervisory responsibility includes apostles, prophets and teachers. This clearly means the ministry! It is God who placed the ministry within the Church! So, the Church membership contains a laity and a ministry.

The New Testament ministry was the continuation of that similar responsibility given in the Old Testament (Amos 2:11). Paul tells us that those responsibilities appointed by God must not be assumed by any individual (Hebrews 5:4). The New Testament ministry was put in trust of the gospel (1 Thessalonians 2:4). Ministers are ambassadors for Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20). They are made able ministers of the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6). They belong to a ministry received of the Lord (Colossians 4:17). Since Christ is the head of the Church, it is His responsibility to guide the Church. Therefore, the loss of faith by many of God's people over the matter of doctrinal changes reflects the insinuation that Christ is either derelict or incapable of directing His Church. God has always raised up during apostasy, those who are faithful to Him. The concept of thinking of God's Work in terms of size and numbers only is not substantiated Scripturally! In fact, Luke 18:8 substantiates just the opposite—that the true Church would be insignificantly small. The verse reads, ". . . when the Son of man cometh, shall he find [the] faith on the earth?"—implying it would be rare indeed!

True Church Never to Die

Salvation is directly related to Jesus' statement that His Church would never die (Matthew 16:18). If Jesus did not mean what He said, or if He is too insipid to keep His Word, we have no Savior! The fact that the true Church was prophesied to be small and insignificant at the time of the end, should be ample proof to those with "ears to hear" that ungodly doctrinal changes were to be the cause of the "falling away" to occur shortly before the return of Jesus Christ. At a time of departure from revealed truth, there would be only a remnant who would remain loyal and faithful to the Truth of God. And there would be those few ministers who would faithfully continue to feed God's flock the true message (see Matthew 24:45–51)!

Why a Ministry?

Those who have rejected the ministry as a whole need to realize why God gave a ministry in the first place. The Bible reveals it was the laity who first wanted a ministry. When God made Himself known to the nation of Israel, it was with such a manifestation of power that the people were terrified! In Hebrews, chapter twelve, Paul wrote it was so terrible a sight that even Moses feared and quaked exceedingly (verse 21). Moses knew no man could look upon God and live (Exodus 33:20).

In Exodus 20:18–19, ". . . all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die." So Moses became the human spokesman for God. He told Israel, "The Lord talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire, (I stood between the Lord and you at that time, to shew you the word of the Lord: for ye were afraid by reason of the fire, and went not up into the mount;) . . ." (Deuteronomy 5:4–5). Then Moses added, "And it came to pass, when ye heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, (for the mountain did burn with fire,) that ye came near unto me, even all the heads of your tribes, and your elders; And ye said, Behold, the Lord our God hath shewed us his glory and his greatness, and we have heard his voice out of the midst of the fire: we have seen this day that God doth talk with man, and he liveth. Now therefore why should we die? for this great fire will consume us: if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived? Go thou near, and hear all that the Lord our God shall say: and speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee; and we will hear it, and do it" (Deuteronomy 5:23–27).

Later, God chose the Levites to represent Him before the people as His priesthood. They were the ministers of the Old Covenant (Jeremiah 33:21, Joel 1:9). The natural sequence was the establishment of the New Covenant ministry. This is why Paul said God ". . . hath made us able ministers of the new testament . . ." (2 Corinthians 3:6). Paul knew the New Testament ministry was the continuation of the divine appointment made first to the Levites, then transferred to the New Testament ministry under the priesthood of Melchisedec (Hebrews 7:12). God does not change. Those who feel they do not need a ministry would soon change their minds, should God choose to manifest Himself as He did in the days of Moses! To repudiate the ministry on the basis of doctrinal changes and the questionable lifestyle of some in the leadership, is folly indeed! The disloyalty of a ministry in turning from revealed doctrine is no basis for excusing oneself from the

obligation to remain faithful to God's Truth. God does not take this lightly. There is ample Scriptural proof God has never abandoned His true people, even when the vast majority apostatized. He has assured us there will always be laymembers and leaders who will remain faithful to the Truth (1 Kings 18:4; 19:18, Matthew 16:18; 24:45). Those who repudiate doctrinal truth and the ministry *per se*, because they became disillusioned with men, had better start looking to the God who called them to a knowledge of that Truth and who is going to hold them accountable for failing to be faithful to it!

The Prevalent Idea Today

Those who have rejected the ministry have a particular idea in mind—an idea which has also resulted in the massive individualization with respect to doctrine. Briefly, it is the concept, "No man is going to tell me what to do"—a reaction which set in when the ministry failed to uphold truth and when some ministers proved they could not live up to it. Those who became completely "turned off" toward the ministry in general, did so on the basis of "guilt by association." That is, they blamed everybody. But this is not acceptable with God. The rejection of His Truth—and of His promise to provide a loyal ministry—will be judged by God as an act of faithlessness and defiance! Those who think they can qualify to enter the Kingdom of God on their own had better remember how they came to understand the truth in the first place! What led them to the Truth initially was the gospel message preached by the true ministry. Some few may have found much truth on their own but the overwhelming majority by far, learned the true message from a servant of God. They did not come on their own to a knowledge of the Truth!

Those who say they do not need a ministry are, for the most part, emotional reactionaries. These people can be characterized by the confusion they exhibit in equating the past with the present. Their emotional point of view makes them unable to distinguish the past from the present. Since they have lost complete confidence in the organization, they move laterally in order to repudiate the past with at least some degree of justification. They readily listen to any teaching which offers a "way out." They have strong feelings of personal hurt and their primary concern is security. They often display utter contempt toward authority and greatly resent any kind of correction which points out the fact that their approach is wrong. For while they regard the ministry as blameworthy, they cannot see that their own conduct is probably worse. Since they "don't need a ministry" to point out their faults there is little chance they will even recognize their problem, let alone overcome it.

What does the Bible say about the concept, "We don't need any ministry—we can qualify on our own"? Is there any positive Bible instruction which makes plain what the ministry is expected to do and what the layman is expected to do?

Responsibility of the Ministry

First of all, the responsibility of the ministry is to teach God's Truth. God has not given this responsibility into the hands of the laity. Jesus commissioned His apostles to preach and baptize (Matthew 28:19–20). Christians come to a knowledge of the Truth by the true gospel message (2 Thessalonians 2:14). That gospel message is preached by the ministry of the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Ephesians 3:6–7). Administratively, the ministry has the responsibility to keep blatant sin out of the Church, to maintain peace within the congregation and to prevent heresy. (For a clear understanding of the responsibility of the ministry within the Church, write for our article, *Should the Church Enforce Doctrine?*) The Church is to be the pillar and ground of the Truth (1 Timothy 3:15). It is to lead men to believe and practice all Jesus Christ taught (John 6:29; 1 John 2:6). This entails infinitely more than accepting and believing in the person of Christ. One who believes in Jesus Christ believes the message Jesus brought. This was not a message about His person, but was a message about the Kingdom of God and what one must do in order to qualify to enter it.

While the true ministry preaches and teaches the Truth, the layman is left with the responsibility of believing and practicing. It never was the responsibility of the ministry to enforce doctrine in the lives of individual members. Such enforcement exceeds the administrative responsibility to prohibit heresy, to keep blatant sin out of the Church, and to maintain peace among the brethren. It was that excessive personal control in the lives of the members of God's Church which deprived many of free-moral agency and made them incapable of developing faith.

Not recognizing the problem, the Church leadership was all too willing to "water down" doctrine in order to allow the members to do what they should have been allowed to do in the first place—to decide for themselves whether they would live by every word of God. The church leadership did not recognize the vast gap between "watering down" doctrine and putting the right kind of administration into practice. One does not solve the problem of wrong authority over the lives of members by doing away with doctrine. There was nothing wrong with the doctrine taught by the Worldwide Church of God. But there was a great wrong in the way it was administered in the lives of individual members. One of the saddest commentaries of the time in which we live is the inability

to recognize the difference between doctrine and administration. Many of the doctrinal changes which transpired within the Church of God were due to the inability to recognize the true problem.

All Qualified to Teach?

Aside from the administration problem, we need to ask ourselves whether everyone is qualified to preach and teach God's Truth. Paul tells us there are diversities of gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4). Not all members within the Church have the same capabilities. Some have the ability to preach, while others do not (Romans 12:6). Other members are granted special abilities for specific purposes (1 Corinthians 12:28). Not everyone is given the ability to preach or teach. A minister must be capable of feeding the flock (Acts 20:28). He must be skillful in teaching (1 Timothy 3:2). This requires not only natural ability but also training and experience. One of the problems of the past was that younger, inexperienced ministers—who lacked the ability to properly motivate others—were placed over congregations. While Paul told Timothy, "Let no man despise thy youth . . ." (1 Timothy 4:12), his instruction was not based on the ineptness and poor judgment of a young man who had control over a captive audience. Rather, Paul instructed the New Testament churches to respect the ministry and obey the Truth because of conscience, not of fear.

Ministers must not only be skillful teachers and preachers of the Word. They must also be men of character. The New Testament ministry must not be any less than ". . . able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness . . ." (Exodus 18:21). They must not be men who compromise with truth (2 Timothy 2:2; 1 Timothy 4:16). Ample Scriptural evidence proves it is only those called of God and placed in the true ministry, who are qualified to preach truth. There were many ministers who appeared qualified, but when apostasy set in they did not have the character to hold fast to the Truth. Now, hundreds, perhaps thousands of members probably feel they are as qualified to preach and teach as most ministers. But does that prove they have the necessary character in other areas, that they are called of God for that purpose and commissioned by Jesus Christ? Few realize the qualifications, standards and trials placed upon the true ministry.

God is the one who gives His people true pastors. Failure to acknowledge this fact is a blatant denial of God's Word! Those who like to think of themselves as Christians while rejecting the very ministry God ordained, had better take heed to the warning written in Luke, chapter nineteen, "But those mine enemies, which would not that I

should reign over them, bring hither, and slay them before me" (verse 27). A little strong? Jesus said, "He that heareth you heareth me; and he that despiseth you despiseth me; and he that despiseth me despiseth him that sent me" (Luke 10:16). Jesus will be the one to judge those who reject His true ministry (John 5:22). He is the one who commissions and sends (John 17:18; Acts 10:39–42).

Qualifications of the Ministry

It was because of a questionable lifestyle displayed by some ministers, that many members lost respect for the entire ministry. Too many exceptions were made for those individuals in the ministry who proved they did not meet even the minimum New Testament standards. One individual said he did not have to meet the qualifications of the ministry because he was a prophet. Yet, the New Testament makes no exceptions for any called and chosen servant of God. Even the minimum standards are strict. They are found in I Timothy, chapter three, and Titus, chapter one.

Notice how *The New English Bible* translates these qualifications: ". . . 'To aspire to leadership is an honourable ambition.' Our leader, therefore, or bishop, must be above reproach, faithful to his one wife, sober, temperate, courteous, hospitable, and a good teacher; he must not be given to drink, or a brawler, but of a forbearing disposition, avoiding quarrels, and no lover of money. He must be one who manages his own household well and wins obedience from his children, and a man of the highest principles. If a man does not know how to control his own family, how can he look after a congregation of God's people? He must not be a convert newly baptized, for fear the sin of conceit should bring upon him a judgement contrived by the devil. He must moreover have a good reputation with the non-Christian public, so that he may not be exposed to scandal and get caught in the devil's snare" (1 Timothy 3:1–7).

Note the qualifications listed in Titus, chapter one, according to *The Living Bible*: "The men you choose must be well thought of for their good lives; they must have only one wife and their children must love the Lord and not have a reputation for being wild or disobedient to their parents. These pastors must be men of blameless lives because they are God's ministers. They must not be proud or impatient; they must not be drunkards or fighters or greedy for money. They must enjoy having guests in their homes and must love all that is good. They must be sensible men, and fair. They must be clean minded and level headed. Their belief in the truth which they have been taught must be strong and steadfast, so that they will be able to teach it to others and show those who disagree with them where they are wrong" (Titus 1:6–9).

From the above texts, it is plain to see ministers of God must be men of character and devotion. They must not compromise for the sake of advantage—financial or otherwise. They must not be men pleasers—more concerned about pleasing men than about pleasing God. They must not preach to please people—unless, of course, the people to whom they preach love the Truth. Those who are quick to judge and criticize the ministry, might well ask themselves if they think they themselves are qualified to meet the above standards. Those who reject the ministry reject God's Word. If they reject God's Word, what makes them think they are capable judges of God's ministry? God will deal with His ministry soon enough (Malachi 3:3). But also, He will deal with those who reject true doctrine because they use a disloyal ministry as an excuse to turn from doctrine itself. They have forgotten Jesus' instruction: That a corrupt ministry is not an excuse to turn from truth (Matthew 23:3).

Present Thinking the Result of Past Problems

The attitude expressed by, "I don't need any minister to tell me what to do," is the result of past problems. The ministry failed in several areas. Because of a hierarchical form of church government which led to faulty doctrinal administration, the Church membership was badly abused (Ezekiel 34:4, 21). In addition, the failure of some prominent members of the leadership to live up to what was preached eventually led to ungodly doctrinal changes (Jeremiah 23:11, 36). There was entirely too much emphasis placed on financial support and financial burdens far above necessary were placed upon the membership (Matthew 23:2–4). A ministerial rank system which affected in turn, the laity, led to status-seeking, climbing up the corporate ladder as a means of success and lording it over one another (1 Peter 5:3; Matthew 20:20–28). Members were not allowed in most areas of their lives to make their own decisions. Whatever was recommended by the Church became law. Regulations in every conceivable facet of Church members' lives became equal to the Ten Commandments. The "Work" became the all-consuming purpose of life. Allegiance and obedience to God were thought of in terms of obeying, not God's Word, but rather the word of a minister. What started out in the life of each individual member as a commitment to God and Christ was transferred over to loyalty to an organization and to specific human beings. Loyalty was thought of in terms of dedication to the organization, rather than dedication to God's Word and His Truth. As noted, members were allowed to make few personal decisions. The "Church" did their thinking for them. It is small wonder the membership readily accepted the doctrinal changes. They had never been taught to think or act for themselves.

Because the members had never been taught to make their own decisions, and because the Church equated itself with Christ, particularly in the example of the vine and the branches (John 15:1–5), the greatest sin one could commit was to "leave the Church." Few members continued to "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Increasingly, the membership depended upon the Church to "prove" everything for them. With this arrangement, it was easy to accept any doctrinal change which came along regardless of the "proof" presented. What had not been impressed upon the membership was the importance of holding fast to the Truth as originally given (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

The ministry had utterly failed to teach the membership the kind of determination required to hold fast to the true doctrine. Few members had really been allowed to build character. They were motivated by fear of a hierarchy and of being "put out of the Church." Instead of developing stability, they were tossed about by every wind of doctrine (Ephesians 4:14). Some of the ruses used to confuse and destroy God's people were as cunning as they were crafty. The majority of the membership had long stopped really studying God's Word. Instead, reading Church-oriented literature substituted for intense Bible study and most members were unable to keep up with the volume of this material, let alone read their Bibles. They forgot the admonition, "Study to shew thyself approved unto God . . ." (2 Timothy 2:15).

Because of too many assumptions and the lack of real Bible study, Church members had no realization what was taking place before their very eyes. They did not recognize that the prophesied "falling away" was taking place. They had always assumed there was to be a falling-away from the "Church." They did not know the falling-away was from the Truth! (For a complete understanding, write for our articles, *Can True Christians Be Deceived?* and *How Do Christians Come to a Knowledge of the Truth?*). Those "turned off" over sin in high places, or because they could see a ministry which was no longer sure of itself, were part of a group who either had never proven the Truth initially or were merely enthralled by the personal charisma of one or two specific human beings. In either case, it was their lack of appreciation for God's Truth—and their failure to exercise the necessary determination to be faithful to what they once knew—which led to their rejection of the ministry. Those who compromised, yielding to unscriptural doctrinal changes, will now believe anything. Whereas those who rejected God's ministry and God's Truth now believe nothing! This latter group comprises the true Christian agnostics!

Can the Member Succeed on His Own?

Now we get to the basic question of this article: Can the member who has rejected the ministry qualify on his own to gain salvation?

We need only look at what happened to a membership with a ministry to answer that question. If almost an entire church membership could be led astray by ungodly doctrinal changes—paraded under the guise of "scholarship"—what is the individual member likely to do under the aegis of his own intellect? Today, more groups have splintered from the Church of God. Their doctrines are in disarray. In addition, there are perhaps several thousand who individually have developed their own doctrines. Look at the odds. The individual member who rejects the ministry *per se* has little chance of qualifying for entrance into God's Kingdom. Some few, perhaps, but not many. One thing is certain: Those who are in right standing with God will be searching for those true ministers who are still faithfully teaching the Truth. They will not categorically reject all ministers, but they will be cautious. They recognize the fact it was through a ministry that they came to know the Truth, but they also recognize it is through the faithful ministry only, that the revealed truth continues to be proclaimed. They know the significance of Paul's statement: "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent? . . ." (Romans 10:13–15). This text proves God does have a ministry and that it is sent by Him. To repudiate that true ministry is to repudiate God! God will not accept the reasonings of those who reject His ministry on the basis of another ministry's failure to live up to and proclaim the Truth.

In the ministry of the Church of God, loyalty toward God was confused with loyalty toward an organization. There are some who know better. Most of these men are hollow shells of the men they once were. There are others who not only have no knowledge of the ungodliness which transpired within the organization, they don't even know the issues behind the doctrinal changes. If asked to prove these changes from the Bible, they would tell you to write to "Headquarters" for a booklet.

Those who by referring to 1 John 2:27, justify their present posture of rejecting the ministry might well ask themselves the question, how did these Christians in John's letter come to a knowledge of the Truth in the beginning? In this text John is telling the Christian brethren that there is no need for them to learn the Christian principles again

since they had been led by the Holy Spirit to understand them when they were first converted.

What the True Ministry Must Do

Had the total ministry of the Church of God remained faithful to the doctrine there would be no real problem today. Those ministers who left the Worldwide Church of God organization had no excuse to turn from truth. But they found itching ears among disenchanting members, and some ministers succumbed to the temptation to gain a livelihood by this means.

Jesus said there would be true ministers faithfully teaching His Truth when He returns (Matthew 24:45–46). Those ministers who on the other hand justify doctrinal changes must admit they never knew the Truth or were never convicted of it. What they presently teach is what they have "conjured up" or from various facets of Protestant theology which they have accepted. The ministry's responsibility is to give right guidance to God's people. It is "For the perfecting of the saints, 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 fulness of Christ: That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" (Ephesians 4:12–15).

The ministry must guide the membership in building character. Character is the ability to discern right from wrong, and to always choose the right in opposition to the wrong. This is not accomplished by a form of administration which takes away the individual's right to make up his own mind in spiritual matters. There is a responsibility given the ministry in regulating individual conduct of the laymember in relationships within the Church, but all other matters are the member's private responsibility.

The ministry is, therefore, to "feed" the flock of God, not to force it into submission (1 Peter 5:2–3). It was this forced submission of the past which destroyed the character of individuals. Those who are the victims of forced submission through fear tactics or any other means, do not develop character.

Since the ministry's responsibility is to help people build character, it should not subject them to a form of church government which destroys character. God's spiritual

house must be built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, not on the ideas of men. The entire Christian experience rests primarily in one's association with God. There is the responsibility of proper conduct and relationships within the Church, but these too are based upon the individual's respect for God. Those who love God will make the effort to love and respect their fellow man. In the church relationship this is manifested by the willingness of the individual to conduct himself within those guidelines outlined in the New Testament.

God provides a faithful ministry by which His people can be rightly guided. When the priesthood went astray during the days of Eli, God said, ". . . I will raise me up a faithful priest, that shall do according to that which is in mine heart and in my mind . . ." (1 Samuel 2:35). Why should God act any differently today? It is your responsibility to find that ministry and to be loyal to the Truth God gave you! You must come to know who God's true, faithful servants are!