

Should
The Church
ENFORCE DOCTRINE?

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Jesus said, "If any man will do his will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself" (John 7:17).

For many years God's Church obeyed ". . . that form of doctrine which was delivered . . ." (Romans 6:17). Now we are told that doctrine was wrong. But was it wrong? Was it the doctrine or how it was administered? This article will explain the real problem!

Dramatic Changes

The first dramatic change was Pentecost—from Monday to Sunday. This was followed in May of 1974 by the divorce and remarriage announcement. We were told the Church had been in error and that it was necessary to change. We were assured change is good. "Change," we were told, "is necessary for spiritual growth." The Pentecost and divorce and remarriage changes were just two of many to follow. Most were not given official sanction in Church literature.

But is "spiritual growth" the same thing as new and changed doctrine? The recent changes in the Church of God are not mere alterations. They are radical departures from what was once believed to be the Truth!

"Scholarship" the Key?

We are now told that Truth comes through "scholarship," that in the past we did not have Greek and Hebrew scholars, so we could not fully understand doctrine. Understanding the Truth, we are told, comes through research and now, since "we have exhausted all avenues of research," it is permissible for anybody to divorce and remarry. We are told we could not count fifty properly without the help of "scholars." Those who "sacrificed" many years to pay tithes did it needlessly. Those who gave up jobs for Sabbath-keeping did so unnecessarily. They could have acquiesced and worked on that day.

Was It Doctrinal Error?

What is now being said is that we were in doctrinal error! We were wrong about divorce and remarriage. We were wrong in keeping a Monday Pentecost. We were wrong in giving up jobs to keep the Sabbath. We were wrong in refusing to celebrate birthdays. We were wrong in refusing jury duty. We were wrong giving up military careers, etc., etc. Almost every doctrine in the Worldwide Church of God, if not altered or reversed, has been seriously questioned.

But we need to ask ourselves, "Did we have the Truth?" And, if we did not have the Truth, how can we be confident we have it now?

Truth Is Revealed

Jesus said, "Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth . . ." (John 16:13). Did Jesus keep His promise? Or is He derelict? If the Church of God has been in doctrinal error these many years, then it has not been led by the Holy Spirit! And, if it has not been led by the Holy Spirit, then it has been led by fallible men.

If God did not open our minds to Bible Truth by revelation, there is no way we can know it! If salvation rests with "scholars," there is no hope, for scholars disagree with each other constantly! And if Truth comes through "scholarship," why have not the brilliant, established, and recognized theologians found the Truth?

Either God reveals Truth by the power of His Holy Spirit, or we can never know! One thing is absolutely certain: God did not lead His Church into error! Bible understanding results from Divine intervention (Luke 24:45). Clearly, then, we had the Truth REVEALED in the past, and what is now called Truth, under the guise of "change," is a major departure from God's Word! The past problems and grievances were not the result of doctrinal error. They were the result of faulty administration!

First Reaction

This became obvious when many ministers broke from the Worldwide Church of God in early 1974. That break was due largely to a reaction against past administrative practices. Doctrine became the "scapegoat"! However, most ministers did not know the difference. They confused doctrine with administration. But when doctrine became the issue, it was an erroneous admission that God's Church had not been led by the Holy Spirit, and that God had never been a part of the Worldwide Church of God!

God did not leave His Church in error forty years!

He led it into Truth! And if we were wrong in major doctrines, then God has never really been a part of any Work in modern times!

There was much emotion in early 1974, and along with emotion, confusion. Confusion contributed to the failure to see the real problem behind existing grievances. The "whipping boy" became doctrine rather than administration, and it would profit us to take a good, long look at the difference!

1972 Syndrome

Perhaps we should blame the problem, partially at least, on the 1972 syndrome. For years brethren had sacrificed, gone without, in many cases suffered, to be a part of what was called the Work of God. When 1972 came and passed there was much disillusionment, disappointment, and bitterness. This bitterness was aggravated by the realization that some leaders who preached the Truth made no attempt to live it themselves.

So, many ministers and brethren had enough. They lost confidence in the leadership and in the organization, and they began to look with a jaundiced eye at doctrine. Doctrine, it was believed, was the cause behind every hardship, sacrifice, and disillusionment of the past. They failed to realize the setting of dates was not a doctrinal matter—the setting of dates was mere guesswork. Nevertheless, doctrine had to be changed.

This feeling became so strong that what was advocated by the group of ministers who became known as the Associated Churches of God, became the viewpoint of many ministers in the Worldwide Church of God. The Worldwide Church of God followed the Foundation of Biblical Research and Associated Churches of God doctrinally. Since the erosion process was much worse in the smaller organizations, there was a more rapid departure from Truth. The Worldwide Church of God, due to its size, was much slower; but it, too, departed from Truth.

Past Administration

There was hardly an area of life untouched by past administrative practices. There were rules, regulations, recommendations, or prohibitions in every field imaginable. Besides major areas such as divorce and remarriage, tithing, Sabbath, and Holy Days, regulations were made for skirt lengths, pantsuits, make-up, dancing, business

arrangements, proper employment, hospital work, age for marriage, dating, hair lengths (both men and women), sideburns, beards, pierced ears, wigs, jewelry, farming, land Sabbath, adopting children, proper investments, voting, doctors and medicine, birthdays, music, drama, childrearing, etc.

These were not just free-choice "guidelines." It was insubordination if many of these rules were violated, and members could be and often were disciplined or suspended, or even disfellowshipped for infractions. This was how the Church of God "kept itself clean," and this was the way the field ministry was taught to enforce doctrine.

While the Bible does speak directly on many of the subjects listed above, where are Bible examples for severe discipline and the above type of ministerial enforcement? Christ came to build a New Testament Church, not a civil government, or the Kingdom of God here and now. The ministry is responsible for preaching the Truth. We shall soon see what enforcement responsibility Christ gave His servants.

Authority in the Church

Jesus told His disciples, "Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 18:18). There is no question here; the context limits the application to settling disputes between brethren (verses 15–18). So, one responsibility of the ministry was to keep harmony in the Church. Matthew 16:19 is open to broader application. The context does not limit its application to the settling of disputes—the words are much the same as Matthew 18:18. However, since "thee" and "thou" (Matthew 16:19) are singular and refer to Peter only, we could erroneously conclude that only Peter had the right to bind and loose. We see, though, from the historical examples related in the Book of Acts, that Christ's words included all the apostles; and most commentators feel the statement in Matthew 18:18 was given to include all in the binding-loosing process. In addition, John 20:23 gave the apostles the right to remit or retain sins.

Now, what Bible examples do we find to illustrate this authority?

Acts 1, the choosing of an apostle to replace Judas; Acts 11:18, the acceptance of Gentiles as candidates for eternal life; Acts 15, the decision concerning spiritual requirements necessary for Gentiles; Acts 21:24, the necessity of Paul's setting an acceptable example before the Jews; Acts 5:4–10, Ananias and Sapphira, whose sins were not remitted by God Himself (note John 20:23); 1 Corinthians 5:5, 13, the fornicator, whose sins Paul did not remit until later; Acts 13:9–11, Elymas the Sorcerer, whose sin was not remitted; I Timothy 1:20, Hymenaeus and Alexander, who were delivered to Satan to learn not to blaspheme.

There was authority.

Notice I Corinthians 4:21: "Shall I come unto you with a rod, or in love, and in the spirit of meekness?" II Corinthians 13:2—" . . . if I come again, I will not spare." II Timothy 4:2—" . . . reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." Titus 2:15—"These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority."

Yet, as strange as it seems, the only examples of disfellowshipping in the entire New Testament Church were the fornicator in I Corinthians 5, and Hymenaeus and Alexander who were heretical (I Timothy 1:20)

Examples of Discipline

How then was the early church disciplined?

Let's go back to Matthew 18:16–17, to the matter of disputes. "But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican." So, Jesus strongly implied the need, in some cases, to disfellowship. And this would certainly mean to avoid such an individual.

But let's continue.

Romans 16:17, ". . . mark [take notice of] them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." So the admonition here is merely to take notice of such and to avoid them. That is not to say such individuals should never be branded. Paul named some in his letters, but it should be done as the exception, not the rule.

Another example of discipline is I Corinthians 5:5: ". . . deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh. . . ." Such an one what? Such an one guilty of "fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife" (verse 1). Here we see a blatant sin! A sin so bad even the Gentiles were appalled. A sin that was a reproach to any man who called himself a Christian, as well as to the entire Church. So strong action should be taken here, as Paul said in verse 6, ". . . a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump." Then Paul adds, ". . . not to keep company [associate] if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat" (verse 11).

The matter of disfellowship is clear in verses 5 and 13. These refer specifically to the fornicator named in verse 1. The action taken for the sins named in verse 11 could be equated with what is said in verses 5 and 13, since "fornicator" is used in verse 11 as well. Here the problem would be a little more difficult since we often deal with degrees of sin. We can conclude since the fornicator in verse 1 is guilty of blatant sin, that the conduct of the covetous, idolater, railer, drunkard, or extortioner would have to be blatant, or obvious for all to see. It would have to represent a lifestyle and habit plainly visible to everyone. This would not refer to someone who slipped, made a mistake, was sorry, but did not practice this type of thing continually. But the blatantly covetous, idolater, railer, drunkard, or extortioner should be disfellowshipped.

I Thessalonians 5 deals with yet another problem. Here we are told, ". . . warn them that are unruly . . ." (verse 14). The same Greek word is used in II Thessalonians 3. The context here implies those who are idle or lazy (disorderly). Paul tells us if the unruly or disorderly refuse to change, ". . . note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed" (II Thessalonians 3:6–14). So, for lesser infractions the admonition is to "withdraw, have no company with him" (vv. 6, 14).

Then we have, as mentioned earlier, Hymenaeus and Alexander, heretics who were delivered to Satan (I Timothy 1:20). This is why we are told, "A man that is an heretic after the first and second admonition reject" (Titus 3:10), and, "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness . . . from such withdraw thyself" (I Timothy 6:3–5).

So what do we see?

We see that disfellowshipping was done only in very extreme cases—those cases of unresolvable disputes between brethren, of unrepentant heresy and of blatant sins. All other disciplinary problems were handled by "avoiding such," with the aim of bringing the guilty person to repentance.

Consideration for Growth

There was much leeway for spiritual growth according to various levels of faith. There was little administrative regulation into the private lives of Christians. What we really see is, MUCH TEACHING ABOUT CHRISTIAN LIVING AND CONDUCT, THE NECESSITY FOR THE MINISTRY TO SET THE EXAMPLE, BUT LIMITED REGULATION OR ENFORCEMENT.

The ministers of God are to teach, rebuke, exhort, "Cry aloud, spare not . . . shew my people their transgression, and . . . their sins" (Isaiah 58:1). But each man will be judged by what he does with God's Truth. Any member in a hostile, contentious attitude must not be allowed to influence others. God's Church recognizes no such habit or usage (I Corinthians 11:16).

Let us notice this consideration for growth.

"Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations" (Romans 14:1). "We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves" (Romans 15:1). "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Galations 6:1). And Paul clearly said, "Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand" (II Corinthians 1:24). It was never the Church's responsibility, nor the minister's, to enforce Christian principles. That is why Paul stated, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup" (I Corinthians 11:28), "For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened of the Lord . . ." (vv. 31–32). And again, "Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves . . . how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?" (II Corinthians 13:5). Finally, "But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another" (Galations 6:4).

So we can see the Christian individual had the personal responsibility to live up to God's Word. If he failed to live up to it, it became obvious for everyone to see. If his failure resulted in unrepentant, blatant sin, the Church's responsibility was to disfellowship, or to avoid him if the infraction was of a lesser nature. There was never administrative enforcement to keep the "member in check," to prevent him from sinning. And there was never the threat of "disfellowshipment" hanging over his head, ready to excommunicate him for infractions, lack of understanding, or spiritual weakness.

What Was Administered?

Obviously, there was administration. But what was administered in the New Testament Church?

Again let us examine the Scriptures, not reading ideas into God's Word. In the book Acts, the first area we can observe is that of Church administration. This included ministerial needs, organization, assignments, responsibilities, ordinations, etc. A few examples are those of the apostles selecting a replacement for Judas (Acts 1); the handling

and disbursement of funds (Acts 4:35); the laying on of hands (Acts 6); various ministerial assignments (Acts 8:14, Acts 11:22, Acts 19:22); relief sent to other Churches (Acts 11:29); selecting of elders (Acts 14:23); and calling a special Church assembly (Acts 14:27).

Second, let us consider the solving of administrative differences in the ministry (Acts 15). The problem here was administration, not doctrine. God had previously revealed Gentile acceptance for salvation (Acts 10–14). Third, the matter of keeping the Church free of blatant sin (I Corinthians 5), and preventing heresy (I Timothy 1:3, Titus 3:10).

We see that administration had to do with Church operations, ministerial responsibility, and keeping the Church free from heresy and blatant sin. However, in some areas there was freedom of choice to a large degree. Note I Corinthians 16:12. Here we find Apollos deciding for himself about a particular assignment.

Doctrinal Administration?

Search as you may, there is not one example of a divorce and remarriage decision. Why? Is it because Christ did not mean, "Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery: and whoso marrieth her which is put away doth commit adultery" (Matthew 19:9)?

Not at all!

There are seven texts in the New Testament that clearly state God binds marriages for life. The last place to look to understand the Truth about divorce and remarriage is Paul's epistles (II Peter 3:16). Yet that is exactly what has been done. A vague text (I Corinthians 7:15), wide open to interpretation, now "proves" anyone can get a divorce.

What folly!

Can't we realize that past teaching was correct? It was the administration that was wrong! Nowhere in the New Testament can we find the apostles or elders deciding who was bound and who was loosed. This was left up to the individual to decide, precisely as was practiced in Old Testament times (Deuteronomy 24:1). The parties involved would answer to God for what was done, and it was never the Church's responsibility to prevent sin by rendering decisions or separating couples. (For complete understanding on the subject of marriage and divorce, write for our article entitled "The Faith Once Delivered about Marriage and Divorce.")

Instead of reading into the Bible an administration we do not see, we should abide by what we do see—that in matters of obedience to doctrine, it was the individual's responsibility to decide for himself whether or not he would obey God.

Look and you will not see one New Testament example of tithing administration. Because Christians do not tithe? Of course not! A Christian is to live by every word of God (Matthew 4:4), not just the New Testament. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (II Timothy 3:16). The Old Testament shows how God's Work was financed. Does God change His mind to suit our reaction to past abuses?

Absolutely not!

God does not change (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17; Numbers 23:19).

Jesus clearly said, referring to tithing, ". . . these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (Matthew 23:23). But some say, "Jesus was speaking to the people in His day before the New Covenant took effect, so the command to tithe doesn't apply to us." Then the Sermon on the Mount does not apply to us, or anything else said by Jesus before His crucifixion. The only parts of the New Testament for us are the last few chapters of the Gospels and Paul's epistles.

What nonsense!

Yet, many have accepted that kind of reasoning today.

Where do we find in the New Testament an example of disfellowshipping for Sabbathbreaking?

Not one!

Because Christians did not keep the Sabbath?

Nonsense!

The New Testament Church was not a civil government made to enforce law. A Sabbathbreaker would answer to God for his sin. Any man led by the Spirit of God would not break the Sabbath, and if the Church were comprised of converted people this would rarely occur. The only Christian likely to be guilty was one "weak in the faith," or one who was falling away.

The same thing could be said about God's Holy Days, or any of the other subjects mentioned earlier. Instructions, principles, or guidelines were given regarding some of these areas, but doctrine was not enforced. There is no Bible authority for close regulation! Either a man was led by the Holy Spirit of God, was willing and eager to live by every word of God, or he soon became uncomfortable around those who did. He would not remain in the Church long if he did not desire to do God's will. And those few who did were not generally disciplined unless they were guilty of blatant sin or heresy.

Result of Faulty Administration

Paul warned the Ephesian elders, "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. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears" (Acts 20:29–31).

Surely God could have set up a system to prevent such a thing. Yet, Paul said there would be heresy, even among the ministry. Paul foresaw it. God allowed it.

This may be evil, yet it is a necessary test for Christians (I Corinthians 11:19).

God did not establish in the New Testament Church such tight control that this could never happen. And He did it for a reason. He knew tight control from the top down could be far worse if heresy set in at the top! God knew the vast majority would quickly follow a top-level administration, and if it went astray the entire Church would also go astray! It is plain to see why the Bible said there would be an apostasy in the latter days (II Thessalonians 2:3), and why "many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of" (II Peter 2:2). Faulty administration was the method Satan used to accomplish this!

Real Issue Was Church Government

Far too much of past obedience in the Church of God was due to a fear of the ministry. The real issue was obedience to the Church, not obedience to God's Word. Many remain in the Worldwide Church of God today, even though they are upset, disturbed about the double standard and doctrinal changes, because they fear being "put out of the Church." As a result, changes in doctrine are tolerated by those who are disturbed. Members feel they are "safe" within the confines of the Church, even if the doctrine is now totally different from what they believed when baptized. When "changes" began to occur, they felt if these changes were "all right with the Church" they must be "all right with God."

So it was the administration of doctrine that set up the syndrome of accepting change without question. That administration virtually destroyed personal responsibility to God. Obedience to the Church took complete precedence over obedience to God. Members were taught to fear the Church. Few were taught to fear God, to always put His Word first. People were "locked into" a system, a religious government that exercised complete control over their lives. That membership has been convinced that God's Word does not mean what it says. It is a "Doctrinal Committee," tainted by liberal concepts learned at worldly theological seminaries, that interprets the meaning of God's Word. There is no place in this configuration for divine revelation or being led by the Holy Spirit. What is now acceptable doctrine is totally different from that which was once believed!

Yet, members readily comply. Why?

Because they were taught to comply, to believe whatever the "Church" tells them; that they are not capable of deciding for themselves and that members can no longer be deceived. (Write for our article, "Can True Christians Be Deceived?") The local pastor "goes along" because he, too, has been taught to accept an administration which does his thinking for him. It is this system of administration which is wrong. It is not the doctrine!

In examining the New Testament Church, as seen in the book of Acts and Paul's epistles, there was never doctrinal policing. Administration was never intended to rule people's lives or to do their thinking for them. It was given to preserve harmony among the brethren, to help the ministry function, to keep the Church free from blatant sin, and to prevent heresy. Human weaknesses and faults taken into consideration and there was much freedom of choice in individual decisions.

It is not, and never was the Church's responsibility to enforce doctrine!