

Seek The Old Paths

"Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths... and walk therein."
(Jeremiah 6:16)

Vol. 6, No. 12

December 1995

Why I Left "The Church Of God" Denomination

Charles A. Huff

I must shamefully admit that for many years, I too was a religious zealot. I persecuted the Lord's church and traveled many miles worshiping and leading others in ignorant worship. Thank God, I met and was taught by faithful gospel preachers. How tragic for my soul if I had met one of the current "liberal change-agents" with an ecumenical agenda, who would have told me, "If you were baptized in Jesus' name to please God, you are alright spiritually. After all, there are saved people in all denominations."

Some of the most religious people we read of in the Bible were lost people. When in Athens, Greece, Paul the apostle observed those who worshiped many gods and said to them, "...I perceive that in all things you are very religious..." (Acts 17:22). The Holy Spirit dispatched Philip to overtake a very religious pilgrim who had traveled over one thousand miles from his home in Ethiopia in a chariot. On the road to Gaza, Philip taught this traveler about Jesus and he obeyed the gospel and became a Christian (Acts 8:26-40). Saul of Tarsus, a religious zealot of Judaism, thought he was doing God a great service by persecuting disciples of Jesus. On his way to Damascus to jail more Christians, he met a great light, brighter than the noon day sun. The voice from the light said, "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest..." (Acts 9:5).

These examples of religious, but lost, people remind us of many contemporary acquaintances, family and friends who too are very devout, and zealous, and as the religious Athenians, they seek to worship God in ignorance and error. I must shamefully admit that for many years, I too was a religious zealot. I

read the Bible regularly, yet as did the Ethiopian Queen's Treasurer, I needed someone to guide me. I persecuted the Lord's church and traveled many miles worshiping and leading others in ignorant worship. Thank God, I met and was taught by faithful gospel preachers. How tragic for my soul if I had met one of the current "liberal change-agents" with an ecumenical agenda, who would have told me, "If you were baptized in Jesus' name to please God, you are alright spiritually. After all, there are saved people in all denominations." If I had heard and accepted that error, what motivation would I have had to change?

For the twenty two years that I spent in a Pentecostal denomination called "the church of God," I was deceived into thinking that I was a member of God's church. But after studying the Scriptures, I began to realize that I was wrong, that my baptism was for the wrong purpose, that I was lost, outside the family of God, without hope and without the blood of Jesus covering the sins of my life. May I humbly say as did Paul: "Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; I obtained mercy

because I did it in ignorance and in unbelief" (1 Tim. 1:13).

There are many segments of Pentecostals. There are those who believe correctly concerning the god-head. There are some who believe in "Jesus Only." Some believe in speaking in the "unknown tongue" and some who do not. Those who identify themselves as "the church of God" also have a great deal of diversity, ranging from "Armstrongism" to small independent congregations of "snake-handlers" scattered throughout Southern Appalachia. These groups generally have their roots in "Methodism" and even though many of them had a beginning among the impoverished mountaineers of Appalachia, in recent years they have become highly influential and popular religions. I was baptized into the "church of God" in 1948, began preaching for them in 1953 and preached their error for seventeen years. My wife and I left that group in 1970, studied the Bible and obeyed the gospel that same year, and were added to the church of Christ by the Lord Himself.

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Why I Left...

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SEVEN REASONS WHY I LEFT "THE CHURCH OF GOD" DENOMINATION

#1, THE CHURCH OF GOD HAS THE WRONG FOUNDER:

In 1886, a group began meeting in a school house in Cherokee County, NC, under the direction of Richard G. Spurling. They called themselves, "The Christian Union." They later moved to Cleveland, TN, and changed their name to "The Holiness Church." Fanaticism almost destroyed them in the years 1900-1902. In 1907, A. J. Tomlinson became their "pastor" following another name change in 1906 to "The Church of God." Then in 1909, the new denomination elected Mr. Tomlinson as their "General Overseer." He held this office until 1923, when questions of financial impropriety came up. He was impeached and started "The Church of God of Prophecy," which he and his sons controlled for many years.

Contrast the founder of this denomination to the Lord Jesus Christ, who promised, "...I will build MY church..." (Matt. 16:18-19). Isaiah had foretold that the Lord's house would be built in the last days (Isa. 2:2-5), that it would begin in Jerusalem, and that "...all nations would flow unto it...." Daniel prophesied that Messiah's kingdom would begin in the days of the Roman kings (Dan. 2:44). The Psalmist declared: "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it..." (Psalm 127:1). What Biblical right does any mere human have to begin a church different in origin and teaching from Christ's own church?

#2, THE CHURCH OF GOD HAS THE WRONG BEGINNING DATE:

The modern "church of God" sects did not begin until the 20th Century. Jesus began His church on the first Pentecost Sunday after His ascension back to heaven (cf; Acts 1,2). He promised it would begin during the lifetime of His disciples. He said, "...there be some of them standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the king-

dom of God come with power..." (Mark 9:1). Those whom Jesus bought with His own precious blood are His kingdom or His church (cf; Rev. 1:6,9; 5:9,10; Acts 20:28). Some try to deny that we have the Pattern by which we can restore that original church in all its pristine purity. The "good seed" of the kingdom/church is the "WORD OF GOD" (Luke 8:11). So long as we follow the Word of God without the opinions and creeds of men, we can restore and have restored the church. When we cease to follow the Word of God and give credence to those who promote a "new hermeneutic" we leave the Divine Pattern for the opinions of mere men (cf; Heb. 8:5).

#3, THE CHURCH OF GOD BEGAN AT THE WRONG PLACE:

Various branches of "the church of God" have different geographical beginnings. Some in Anderson, IN, Cleveland, TN, Dalton, GA and the largest sect of Pentecostals, the Assemblies of God, began and maintain headquarters in Springfield, MO. But the church of Jesus, the Son of God, began at Jerusalem. Isaiah prophesied where the church of Christ would begin. Jesus told His apostles: "...Thus it is written, and thus it behooved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47).

In Jerusalem in A.D. 33, "...repentance and remission of sins..." truly began to be preached, "...in His name..." (cf; Acts 2:36-47). His church could not begin without the proclamation of His gospel (cf; Rom. 1:16; I Cor. 15:1-4; Rom. 6:17-18). On that momentous day, "...the Lord added...to the church, those who were being saved" (Acts 2:41,47).

#4, THE CHURCH OF GOD HAS THE WRONG ORGANIZA- TION:

The "church of God" denominations have an "international or national headquarters" or "general offices" at different locations. Then, there are "district" or "state offices." From there, directions are given to local congregations ruled over by "a

pastor," with an "assistant pastor," then "deacons" and members. At the very top of this pyramid-type of church government is the "General Overseer" with the "Assistant General Overseer," then usually a "Cabinet of Advisors" sometimes called the "Supreme Council" or "Board of Elders." These exalted positions of authority are usually political and consist of "yes" men/women to the top man.

Usually, within the local congregation, a very active "Ladies Willing Workers" group serves diligently to raise funds for the local church or the denomination. These too are organized regionally or nationally.

Even a casual reading of the New Testament is sufficient to inform us that such an "Ecclesiastic Conglomerate" cannot be found within the pages of God's Word. "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" is the reading of Philippians 1:1. "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you" (Titus 1:5). "The elders who are among you, I exhort...Shepherd the flock of God which is among you..." (I Peter 5:1-2).

The New Testament pattern shows no church organization larger than the local congregation with the "oversight" or spiritual care of her elders (also called: bishops, shepherds, pastors, and overseers). Deacons are "servants" of the local church whose work assists the elders in providing both spiritual care and/or physical needs of the congregation. Teachers and evangelists serve under the direction or "oversight" of the local elders. While it is true that the New Testament pattern for the church knows no organization larger than the local congregation, it is also true that the pattern shown in the New Testament knows no organization smaller than the whole of the local congregation. Thus "cell groups," "house churches," or any other sub-division of the local assembly are a dangerous trend. They are copied after denominations fostered by mere men and not the New Testament. The Lord's church, church of Christ, was founded by Jesus Christ and guided by Holy Spirit filled apostles,

prophets, and elders, as their examples and words are given in the New Testament.

#5, THE CHURCH OF GOD TEACHES THE WRONG DOCTRINE:

"Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God..." (2 John 9). *"Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth"* (2 Tim. 3:15).

As other denominations, "Church of God" sects fail to "rightly divide" the Old and New Testament. Some things from the Old Testament law, including tithing and instrumental music, are carried over and incorporated into their teaching and practice, while other things from the Old Testament are rejected. It all boils down to using whatever pleases their leaders without serious concern whether or not it pleases God.

They also try to claim that the promises Jesus made to His apostles concerning miraculous gifts and signs (that were to accompany the apostles' ministry) is for church members today. However, the New Testament clearly shows that miracles and signs were for the purpose of revealing and confirming all the Truth (cf; Mark 16:15-20; Heb. 2:3-4; I Cor. 2:9-13; 13:9-10; James 1:25; 2 Cor. 12:12). Confusion, frustration, and a sense of failure often cause the more honest people among Pentecostals to grieve because they cannot seem to "get all that the Lord promised." They are often not discerning enough to detect the fakery of their peers in their "victorious jubilation."

While not all Pentecostal groups are "premillennial" in their theology, most of them are steeped in the erroneous teaching of the "rapture" and a literal one-thousand year reign of Christ on earth.

Most of them are very liberal in their use of women in places of authority in their organization. Many of them have women evangelists, "pastors", etc. They have for years set aside New Testament restrictions on women as teachers of men and/or public proclaimers in their worship assemblies.

Believe it or not, we now have

feminists among us in churches of Christ who have an agenda, which if followed, we also will have women elders, preachers, and deacons (cf; I Cor. 14:34,37; I Tim. 2:8-12). A recent "brotherhood" teen teacher's manual taught that we may have "deaconesses" in churches of Christ.

#6, THE CHURCH OF GOD PRACTICES WRONG WORSHIP:

Much of the worship activities of the "church of God" denominations are clearly for entertainment and self gratification. Musical instruments of many varieties are part and parcel of their emotionally charged worship. "Special" choruses, quartets, trios, duets, and solo musical entertainment are included in nearly every assembly. Applauding with the hands, cheering, and standing ovations are an acceptable way to express appreciation and approval of musical performances. While I admit they do put on a pretty good show, is this what God wants by way of worship (cf; John 4:23-24; Eph. 5:19)?

Peter tells us: *"According to His (God, CH) divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him that hath called us to glory and virtue"* (2 Peter 1:3). If God wanted such aforementioned human originated worship, He failed to tell us of such a desire. We are commanded to do all things in Jesus' name, that is, by His authority (cf; Col. 3:17). Sadly enough, we have some among "churches of Christ" today who have little or no conviction concerning faithful adherence to the New Testament pattern for worship.

The frequency for partaking of the Lord's Supper and receiving the contribution of our monetary offerings is the same in the New Testament — *"upon the first day of the week"* (cf; Acts 20:7; I Cor 16:2). While I attended "church of God" worship services for part of three decades, collections were a part of nearly every gathering. I can only remember them celebrating the Lord's Supper less than a dozen times. They would literally go for years without any mention or practice of the communion. Some members of the Lord's church fail to appreciate the "Memorial Supper" of

Jesus' sacrifice as well. We know this by the way they forsake the assemblies of the church.

There is a distinct, clearly set forth pattern for acceptable Christian worship. We are taught by **command, approved example** and by things **implied** in the New Testament exactly what our God desires by way of worship. We are taught to assemble together on the first day of every week (cf; Heb. 10:25; I Cor. 11:18; Acts 20:7). This is for the purpose of: 1) Breaking bread (Acts 2:42; 20:7; I Cor. 11:23-30); 2) Brethren leading us in fervent prayers (I Tim. 2:8; Acts 2:42; I Cor. 14:15-17); 3) Preaching the gospel (Acts 20:7; I Cor. 15:1; I Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 4:2); 4) Giving our offerings (I Cor. 16:1-2; 2 Cor. 9:6-7); 5) Singing praises to God (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; I Cor. 14:15).

When we try to change or improve on God's Divine Pattern, we corrupt our worship and render it unacceptable to God.

#7, THE CHURCH OF GOD TEACHES THE WRONG PLAN OF SALVATION:

Penitent alien sinners are taught that salvation from sins comes when they "pray through" (at an altar of prayer) for God's forgiveness and acceptance. They teach that salvation comes at the point of faith, that repentance from sins precedes saving faith, and that the Holy Spirit baptizes saved individuals into the spiritual body of Christ. They use for a proof text First Corinthians 12:13. They also teach that saved ones should "join the church," be "voted on" if accepted, and must receive "water baptism" to be identified with the literal earthly church. Pentecostals often differ on the "baptismal formula" said over the one being baptized. Some argue hard and long for "Jesus Only" while others argue just as firmly for the "Father, Son and Holy Ghost" formula. Jesus never commanded us *what to say*, but He did tell us *what to do* (Matt. 28:18-20; Acts 2:38). When we do what Jesus said, we will baptize "in His name" or "by His authority" (cf; Acts 4:7; Col. 3:17).

Some "church of God" groups teach that one must receive the baptism of the Holy Ghost and "speak in tongues" before one can be eternally

saved. No one today can duplicate the ability to speak in a language (tongue) without previous training in that language. The use of the miraculous gift to “speak in tongues” was for the profit of “unbelievers” (I Cor. 14:22). The ability to speak languages miraculously began with the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:4-11). These “tongues” were known languages (tongues, dialects) and were not the “gibberish” that is known neither to God, men, nor angels. If the Pentecostals have the ability to duplicate the “tongues” of the church in the first century, why then do they send their missionaries to foreign language classes or else use an interpreter when speaking to foreigners? Pentecostals teach “tongues” are a sure evidence that one has received the “baptism of the Holy Ghost.” They teach it is a sign for the “believer” while the New Testament shows it was a sign for “unbelievers.” The sign/gift of tongues ceased when the “perfect” (complete) revelation of the New Testament was completed (I Cor. 13:8-10; Jude 3; James 1:25). We can only drift into confusion and frustration when we try to claim for ourselves things promised to inspired men in the first century church.

CONCLUSION

Many honest truth seekers are still in the spiritual confusion caused by religious error. Many members of the Lord’s church today have studied themselves out of denominations. Others were led out by faithful gospel preachers who had the courage to “...earnestly contend for the faith...” (Jude 3) by debating with false teachers. Some have the idea that it is “unloving” to point out religious error. I am so thankful that true Christians loved my soul enough to point out my errors, and to “...speak the truth in love...” to me. That they did not let my ugly and abrasive attitude discourage them from praying for me and teaching me the truth, I am grateful. I traveled far and wide quoting: “You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). All the while, I was in bondage to a false religion, and to Satan who promotes religious division and doctrinal error. It was not

sion and doctrinal error. It was not until I obeyed from the heart the truth, the gospel, that I was set free from sin and error (cf; Rom. 6:17-18).

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(NOTE: Dear reader, you, too, can come out of denominationalism

and obey the gospel. If you believe, won’t you repent of sins (Luke 13:3; Acts 2:38), confess faith in Christ (Matt. 10:32; Acts 8:37) and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; I Peter 3:21)? Our earnest prayer is that you will!)

Elders **COLUMN** The Responsibility of the Elders to the Congregation #1

James W. Boyd

The elders have responsibilities to the members of the congregation: as fellow members, as a part of the eldership toward each member individually, toward one another, and toward the congregation as a whole. This lesson deals with some of these duties as revealed in Scripture.

OUR TWO PRIMARY TEXTS

Let us first read two passages. First Peter 5:1-4, “*The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed; feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lord’s over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.*”

Acts 20:28-32, “*Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. For this I know, 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 everyone night and day with tears. And now*

brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.”

WILLINGLY AND WITH PROPER MOTIVE

Those who serve as elders are to serve willingly, not by constraint. They should desire to work for the good that can be done (I Tim. 3:1). None ought assume that duty if he is not willing to perform the work required. Few things are worse than having the wrong man in the right place. A man in leadership, and elders must be men, who is reluctant to discharge the duties of that leadership, who seeks the position of an elder for other motives, will become a hindrance rather than a help to the cause of Christ. How difficult it is for brethren to do the work God has assigned to His church when those in the lead, who have the task, will not perform.

An elder must have a noble, pure, and godly motive for being one. He should not seek it for filthy lucre — personal gain materially. This implies that there were “paid elders,” better termed, elders who were materially supported by the church in the days of the early church. We learn in First Timothy 5:17,18 of duties of the congregation to elders. We support those who preach. If it is deemed expedient and needful, we can support those who oversee the flock. We might wonder

why preachers are sometimes erroneously called and considered to be "pastors" of the congregation. Probably this is due in part because few think anyone but a preacher should be supported in order that God's work be done. While some have gone off the deep end with a clerical staff not unlike the foolishness of denominational clergymen, there is Biblical authority to support elders who do the work. A good case could be argued that it might be better to support elders so elders' work can be done if it requires supporting them than to provide support for preachers. We do not have to choose between them, but we should know both are authorized. Even so, the motive for being an elder ought not be such support, anymore than money ought be the reason preachers preach.

Neither ought the motive for being an elder be to acquire some honor or glory to oneself. This seems to be a shortcoming of too many who become elders. It should not be in order to discharge power or possess control. You might be surprised how many times this proves to be the case. Let the congregation begin seeking men to serve as elders, or to be added to the existing eldership, and some begin campaigning for the place as if they were running for some kind of political office or seeking some honorary degree. The motive for being an elder is to serve, love, help promote the cause of Christ, assist every member of the congregation to get to heaven regardless of personal cost or sacrifice that work demands from him.

NOT LORDS

Elders are prohibited from being lords over God's heritage. While they have authority, it is a delegated and limited authority. They do not become the executive officers of a business firm. They should not act like spiritual directors expecting everyone to jump whenever they shout "Frog." They are not bosses over their personal employees. They ought not be like Diotrephes who loved to have the preeminence among brethren (3 John 9). They are not taskmasters with the members as their servants. How many times we have seen men who are called

elders act in just such fashion. I once served under a man who called himself an elder who expressed his concept of an elder toward the preacher this way, "When the boss tells the employee to, "Move that box," the employee must move that box. Possibly this is true in an employee-employer relationship. But I left no doubt in his mind that I was not his employee and he was not my boss. We were brethren in the Lord serving in different capacities with the eldership having the oversight of the church. I was not his peon to be "bossed." What an attitude! He did not know the difference between the use of authority and the abuse of authority. Elders do not have the power nor right to dictate, command, and lord it over others in the church. Just who some of them seem to think they are, we wonder? Do they think they have been elected some kind of mini-god?

Some elders treat the people in the church, and the physical properties of the church, as if it was their personal asset. They save money like they would their own rather than using it for the work intended. They seek to "lay by in store" for what might someday happen in some far distant time. After many years of being in debt for a building, and the final payment was in sight, suggestions were being made how the money being used for the payment might later be used. One elder suggested we provide a savings account, build up a reserve. When asked why, he said you cannot tell what might happen. He recalled the depression of the 1930's and fifty years later still had a depression mentality. He was asked why we should accumulate a savings account since we did not even have one during the years of indebtedness. Souls are dying for lack of the gospel and he, like too many others, thought it best to prepare for "retirement" and save all that could be saved. What a mistake! Elders need to learn that the church does not retire when they do. The church is ongoing and growing. Some would allow generations to come and go before they would turn loose of funds to do the work of the Lord just because they had hard times a half century ago. This is lording it over God's heritage when that is allowed.

LEAD VERSUS DRIVE

Shepherds do not drive their flock but lead it. Elders are shepherds. Shepherds are considerate of every sheep, seeking what is best for each sheep and the entire flock as a whole. Just here is it worth reminding us that, as sure as the congregation ought practice the "golden rule" toward elders, the elders should have the same attitude toward the flock and every member of it. We have witnessed some elders treat members with such discourtesy as if it did not matter what was said and done to the member. We have seen, and even experienced, from some elders, treatment toward preachers that they would be aghast if they received similar treatment from anybody. Real love for one another will not allow mistreatment of anybody. We should try to put ourselves in the place of the other and work for his or her good. Good sisters have been brushed aside, and needy brethren have been denied and humiliated by elders who just lack understanding. But how they want others to hold them in esteem! Elders must want to go to heaven, and want the families under their oversight to go to heaven, and work to that end at all times. While all of us may not totally agree on matters of opinion as to how to reach the assigned goals, we most assuredly should treat one another with brotherliness.

*Part 1 of 2
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