

What Is The Work Of God Now? (Part One)

Is God's Work Just Preaching the Gospel?

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I know that as I begin this sermon that I am not going to get finished with the material I have put together, so it is very likely that there will be another sermon after this one in order to complete it.

One of the things that gives me a small measure of frustration during the scattering of the church is peoples' insistent claim that the only thing that identifies the true church is that it is preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God to the world.

I have heard this so many times that I have lost count on it. It may not be said in exactly those words, but that is what it amounts to. I understand that this claim is a hangover from our days in the Worldwide Church of God under Herbert Armstrong, when he was pressing so hard to accomplish the work that God gave him to do.

As I begin this sermon I want to assure you, categorically, at the very beginning of this message—I am not against preaching the gospel of the Kingdom of God to the world. It is the intensity of the focus on it, at this very critical time in the history of the church—to the detriment of other things that need to be done—about which I am concerned.

Matthew 28:19-20 Go you therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.

I do not know whether your Bible is divided up into paragraphs, but mine is, and the heading on this paragraph is: "The Great Commission." This indeed

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was Herbert Armstrong's work under God. I have no doubts and no regrets about Herbert Armstrong's role. But I do think that it is needful to point out a couple of things in regard to this verse.

In Matthew 24 is another perhaps equally well-known scripture.

Matthew 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come.

This is not a commission to anybody in particular—not to the first-century apostles, nor to Herbert W. Armstrong. It is simply a statement of fact by Jesus Christ, prophesying that the gospel will be preached in all the world as a witness, and then will the end come.

What I am saying here is that Matthew 24:14 and Matthew 28:19-20 are not synonymous. In Matthew 28:19-20, though preaching as a witness is included within the scope of the commission, it is actually placing more emphasis upon the entire *process* of conversion, feeding, growing, and the overcoming functions than merely witnessing as in Matthew 24:14. The key word here is "process."

The word *teach* in verse 19 is the key to this understanding. My Bible again has a marginal reference beside the word *teach*, and *teach* is more correctly translated, "make disciples." "Go you therefore into all the world and *make* disciples."

It is not that *teach* is wrong as long as you understand that *teach* means a *process*. All the teaching required to make a disciple does not take place merely in making a witness. There are major differences between the two. At best, preaching the gospel to the world *begins* the process of teaching. Disciples are created through steady feeding, a believing response in those who hear, combined with overcoming.

The second factor is in verse 20, where it says: "Teaching them [the disciples that had been made] to observe *all* things whatsoever I have commanded

you." The key here is the words "all things." That cannot be done merely through a witness. As we are learning, that is a life-long project requiring the structure of a church. This, brethren, is the reason why the church exists.

What is being emphasized in verses 19 and 20—though witnessing is included in it—is the feeding of the flock because it is the called, the elect—God's children—who are God's greatest concern. These are the ones who are being prepared for the Kingdom of God. It takes a lot of feeding and experiences with God for Christ to be formed in us.

Let us consider something that Paul wrote to these people in Romans 1.

Romans 1:15 So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also.

All of Paul's letters, with the exception of the pastoral epistles and Philemon, were written to congregations of already established converted people. Rome was no exception. The church was already formed there. They had a congregation—a group of Christians who were being *made* disciples already—and Paul wanted to go to them.

Why did Paul want to go to them? For them to be converted? No. To continue the process of conversion. And how was he going to do this? By preaching the gospel to them. He was going to preach the gospel to already converted people.

Romans 1:8 First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world.

This congregation was already so well-established that other people in the world—and I am assuming here that what Paul meant was the world around the Mediterranean Sea—had already heard of the faith of the converted people in Rome. It must have been outstanding for him to make a statement like that. But nonetheless he wanted to go there and preach the gospel to them.

A question: Does that not show us that it is the responsibility of the ministry—the pastors of the church, including the apostles and evangelists and local

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elders—to continually preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God to the church? Because that, brethren, is the source of our spiritual strength—our faith.

Romans 1:11 For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end you may be established.

Do not be misled by that word *established*, because it can give you the idea that they were not already established. Yes, they were already established. The next verse though explains what he means.

Romans 1:12 That is, that I may be comforted [encouraged] together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.

The apostle Paul is talking here about "feeding the flock." He is talking here about preaching "all of the counsel of God" in infinite detail. The words of God—the gospel—when we understand it in its broadest sense, includes the entirety of the Bible. It is not confined to things that are just about making a witness so that people might have this held against them in a legal matter by God; "I gave you My word, but you didn't respond to it," sort of thing.

God's real concern, His primary concern, is for the preparation for His children so that He might share a relationship in fellowship with them for all eternity—everybody living exactly the same way. So we are talking about something here that requires an infinite expansion on the bare basics that bring us to conversion so that we can see the application of God's way of life in every situation possible in our lives.

What I have just said in no way means that Herbert Armstrong neglected the "feeding of the flock" aspect, only that the "preaching of the gospel to the world" was so emphasized in his announcements, his letters, his sermons, and his articles. The ministry's announcements and holy day offering sermonettes gradually and subtly, over a period of many years, gave the appearance that the preaching of the gospel to the world was all that mattered.

Having thought about this in preparation for this sermon, I have come to see that there is a distinct tie in this that has occurred to us that is a hangover from this world's approach. Their emphasis is on getting a person "saved,"

and it is thought by a large majority of them that once the person professes Jesus Christ that the salvation process is over.

Understand that I am generalizing here, but at the same time what I am saying to you is generally true. And from that point on, little emphasis is placed on "going on to perfection" (Hebrews 6:1). It is just, "Get the person saved. Get him professing Jesus Christ." The person is justified, and then he is kind of left to hang out to dry. But there is a long way to go between being converted and being prepared to be in God's Kingdom. It takes an awful lot of preparation to get us to that point.

Let me show you contrasting scriptures, both involving the apostle Paul.

I Corinthians 9:16 For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!

I think that Herbert Armstrong had this same feeling in him that necessity was laid upon him and there was within him a constant sense of urgency—he had to get out there and he had to do it.

In II Corinthians 11, Paul is telling us of the great number of sacrifices, difficulties, trials, and pains that he had to go through.

II Corinthians 11:27-28 In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which comes upon me daily, the care of all the churches.

"Woe unto me if I preach not the gospel." But on the other hand, "the care of the churches" was on him also—constantly.

My personal thought is that Herbert Armstrong did a fine job in providing for the feeding of the flock, but his public persona was always focused on and emphasizing the *one* responsibility (preaching the gospel to the world) to the detriment of the other (feeding the flock), as though it was an afterthought. Please understand, I am not saying it *was* an afterthought to him, because he did provide for us very well. But when he was in public,

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preaching a sermon, or when he was at a Feast of Tabernacles, or whatever, he almost invariably talked about his trips and about the money-needs for the preaching of the gospel to the world.

When I look at what Paul stated in these two contrasting scriptures, and start to think about how much time he must have spent preaching the gospel compared to how much time and energy and so forth that was given over to the feeding of the flock—the daily care of the churches, I think that I would decide that the great preponderance of time and energy that the apostle Paul spent was on "feeding the flock," not on preaching the gospel to the world.

I say that from a pastor's point of view, because I know how demanding the pastoring of a congregation is in terms of time and energy and effort. When I compare what I have to do with what the apostle Paul had to do, who had a Mediterranean-wide area to cover, and he had to do it on foot and on boat and those kind of things—he had to spend easily the great preponderance of his time on the congregations, not on the world.

Thinking on these things, I asked myself a question: In the long run, what kind of picture does the overt emphasis on preaching to the world give one of God and His purpose? Is God one-dimensional? Is God so limited in creativity that He can only think of one thing for His children to do? Are family's lives and relationships so stable that nothing ever arises that creates a necessity for something different to be done?

Have you ever lived in a human family where things were so stable, the pattern of life never changed, there were never both good times and bad? There were never things like diseases that impacted on your family, that you had to contend with and focus your attention on? Never tensions in the neighborhood? Never any circumstances that the family had to deal with because of war, social unrest, economic upturns and downturns, or violent weather?

Did your father or mother never assign you, as a child in your family, any more than one responsibility? Was the only thing that you ever had to do was to wash the dishes, or to take out the garbage, from the time that the responsibility was assigned until you left the family to marry and to begin your own family? Was there only one subject in school? Is there only one

thing that we have to be trained for, so we just keep doing the same thing over and over and over again?

Is there nothing else in God's mind for us that requires analysis, strategy, concern, and the effort of sacrifice and living by faith, to produce growth, create solutions, and to overcome? Is our Father in heaven so one-dimensional that all He thinks about in regard to us—His children—and His purpose is that we preach the gospel to the world?

Brethren, I know that you know the answers to these questions. But if you begin to think on this mantra that I hear so frequently, one is drawn to make or to ask questions of this nature.

Today we are going to once again take a look at this subject but hopefully we are going to look at it from some different angles than in the past. At the same time we are going to go over some familiar territory, along with the new, so that we can have a broader picture of this concern.

Why do we need this subject as a sermon topic during the Days of Unleavened Bread? Because brethren, to be reminded once again of the current state of our lives—things that are happening right now.

I Peter 2:11 Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul.

Now we, like the Israelites of old, are in the wilderness, journeying toward the Promised Land. We are on a pilgrimage. That is why he can address us as pilgrims and strangers. But in our case, our pilgrimage is a spiritual one. Still, there are many similarities between what we are doing and what they did. That is why their story is in the Bible—so that we can understand what we are going through.

Brethren, they faced many hardships during their walk corporately, as a body of people, as a nation. They did not face the same circumstances day after day without end for forty years.

We are going to go back and lay a foundation for this in the book of Numbers where a principle is stated for our understanding.

Numbers 9:15-17 And on the day that the tabernacle was reared up the cloud covered the tabernacle, namely, the tent of the testimony: and at even there was upon the tabernacle as it were the appearance of fire, until the morning. So it was always: the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. And when the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, then after that the children of Israel journeyed: and in the place where the cloud abode, there the children of Israel pitched their tents.

This principle is very clearly stated in verse 18.

Numbers 9:18 At the commandment of the LORD the children of Israel journeyed.

The situation changed. The circumstance changed. Who changed it? God did. They were no longer camped. Now they were on the move. God was leading and guiding them through their journey.

Numbers 9:18-21 And at the commandment of the LORD, they pitched: as long as the cloud abode upon the tabernacle they rested in their tents. And when the cloud tarried long upon the tabernacle many days, then the children of Israel kept the charge of the LORD, and journeyed not. And so it was, when the cloud was a few days upon the tabernacle; according to the commandment of the LORD they abode in their tents, and according to the commandment of the LORD they journeyed. And so it was, when the cloud abode from even unto the morning, and that the cloud was taken up in the morning, then they journeyed: whether it was by day or by night that the cloud was taken up, they journeyed.

Are you getting the picture? God changed circumstances. Sometimes they were camped a long time. Sometimes they were camped a short time. Sometimes God made them move and journey at night. At other times they journeyed in the daytime. God, brethren, kept shifting gears on them. He kept varying their life. They were not facing the same things all the time.

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Numbers 9:22-23 Or whether it were two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud tarried upon the tabernacle, remaining thereon, the children of Israel abode in their tents, and journeyed not: but when it was taken up, they journeyed. At the commandment of the LORD they rested in the tents, and at the commandment of the LORD they journeyed: they kept the charge of the LORD, at the commandment of the LORD by the hand of Moses.

I submit to you that the church of God—those who have made the New Covenant with God—has the same God at the helm as was at the helm of these people who made the Old Covenant with Him, and He is going to follow the same patterns. He is not going to have us facing the same things all the time. Things are going to vary so that we receive a well-rounded education in facing the difficulties of life in preparation for His Kingdom.

He is going to shift gears on us. We are going to go a long time maybe in the same gear, but then He is suddenly going to shift gears. Stop. Put us back in reverse for a little while. Then we are going to go forward. He is going to keep us on the ball that way. We have to receive a well-rounded education.

Now during all these times that took place in between these startings and stoppings, sometimes they lacked food or water. Sometimes they were under military attack. One time they faced what they thought was a prolonged absence of their leader, and so the Calf incident arose. Another time it was the allurements of foreign women. Another time they had to construct a tabernacle and organize a priesthood. Another time they had to face the fruits of their own rejection of God's command to go up and take the land. Another time they had to cross a swollen river. They had to face the rejection of other people, civil unrest of their own, and finally they faced taking the land.

Are you getting the picture? God did not have Israel doing only one thing on their pilgrimage. They faced a multitude of different problems that God either provided or that He permitted, because He wanted them to face these difficulties.

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I read in a book recently that God majors in suffering. Think about that awhile. Look at the suffering that He put His own Son through so that He would be prepared to be our High Priest and to lead us in the Kingdom of God. Are we any better than His Son?

God is going to shift gears on us often. This last shifting of gears was awfully drastic. He wanted them to face the fruits that their choices produced in order that it be written for our instruction "on whom the end of the ages is come."

Let us look at another familiar scripture in Romans 15. This needs to be really pounded in our heads, that all these things that the people went through, were written down for us so that we, the church, would understand what we are going through.

Romans 15:4 For whatsoever things were written aforetime [meaning the Old Testament] were written for our [the church's] learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.

I wonder how many people who formerly were part of the fellowship in the Worldwide Church of God have given up—lost their hope—because they have been unable to shift gears with God. They are confused because the condition the church is in right now is not conforming to their ideal. There is a principle that we have to battle against that appears in Jesus' teaching in Luke 5.

Luke 5:37-39 And no man puts new wine into old bottles; else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles: and both are preserved. No man also having drunk old wine straightway desires new: for he says, The old is better.

What are we talking about here? We are talking actually about one of those laws of physics that you probably learned in school. It is called "the principle, or law of inertia." Inertia is *the tendency to remain in a fixed position or condition*. If matter is in motion, its tendency is to remain in

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motion. It is moving in the direction it presently is in, unless some external force impels it in another direction. If matter is motionless, its tendency is to remain motionless unless some external forces impel it into motion.

Jesus is saying that the same tendency exists and is in play regarding the things of God—the acceptance of truth, and the acting upon it. There is a very strong tendency to hold fast to what one feels secure with. This is what is driving peoples' opinions as to what the church as a whole needs to be doing, even in face of all this splitting—i.e., "Since we preached the gospel to the world in the past, we therefore have to continue to do it, even though God has forcibly jerked the church in a different direction, and different circumstances now exist."

There are very many people who are unwilling to see that the church has been *caused* by a benign external force—God—to move in another direction. They want it to continue in the same familiar path—*inertia*. But things have changed, and the church must adapt, or perhaps virtually be destroyed. We know that "the gates of hell will not prevail against the church," so it is not going to be destroyed. It will not be destroyed because God is on His throne, and He is merciful, and He will get us turned around.

Brethren, look how unwilling the church, as a whole, is to accept the fact that *we are the problem*. People cannot shift gears to meet the demands of a different situation, and so it has the whole body virtually milling in confusion, with divisive arguments over technicalities, and still dividing.

Are you aware that Israel did the same thing in the wilderness? They had a very difficult time adjusting to new situations. It was as though their momentum, picked up from their past experiences, propelled them forward in the same direction, when they should have repented. Instead of opening their minds to a different perspective and going in a different direction, they just kept wanting to go back to what they were familiar with and had learned in Egypt. They could not let it go.

This is what I am talking about. We should be able to adjust to a new situation. I am talking about the church as a whole—the greater church of

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God. We should be able to recognize the patterns that are given in God's Word about where the cause of the problem is, and look there for what God has recorded for our admonition, learning, and instruction—and then adjust.

Let us take off in a little bit different direction. It is still part of this same inertia that we have going. Through the years, we have heard the mantra so frequently, that the term "work of God" is automatically thought of as "preaching the gospel to the world." It is just a reaction that has been ingrained within us. But, brethren, that is not what the Bible presents as "the work of God." In Genesis 1 we see an overview of what God's work is.

Genesis 1:26 And God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness."

Brethren, that is "the work of God"—making man in His image. God is reproducing Himself, and He is assisted by Jesus Christ in doing that, and by us to a lesser degree through our submission to the purpose that He is working out. God is Creator. He is making man in His image. God is creating children in His image. He is reproducing Himself.

Let us look at another scripture that defines a little bit more specifically what the work of God is.

John 6:29 Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that you believe on Him whom He has sent.

God works to create faith in Jesus Christ in His children, because He has decreed salvation is by grace through faith. Faith is absolutely essential, and so He works to create it in us, trusting His Son. Brethren, this is done through feeding the flock. Only a small portion of it is done in the initial conversion. We have to *live* by faith, not merely profess Jesus Christ. It is necessary that faith be built in us, because our choices are to be made on the basis of faith.

In our past history in the Worldwide Church of God, the feeding greatly diminished through the '80s and the '90s. Brethren, it was the weakening of our faith that brought on the crisis in the church. That is where we have failed. It was greatly aided by the rapid growth of Laodiceanism.

Laodiceanism is nothing more than a virulent form of worldliness in which devotion to Christ deteriorates, while attention to the world—its ways, attitudes, and conduct—intensifies. Somehow we have—maybe not as a real strong thought, but it is part of our thinking—been deceived into thinking that a Laodicean is lazy, or that a Laodicean is irreligious. Well, look back at Revelation 3. God never accuses them of being lazy.

I want you to understand, as I think you well know, that worldly people can be very religious. A Laodicean can appear to be very religious. God never accuses them of being lazy or irreligious. The condition is a matter of insipid devotion to the true God, His Christ, and His truth.

Christ's strong reaction to this is because the indifference of Laodiceanism cannot be trusted. Christ does not know whether to believe their professions—because there is a great deal of insincerity and hypocrisy, considered essentially mean-spirited to Him who is the object of their profession of faith because it is not backed by performance in their attitudes and works. The works are worldly even though they may appear religious.

Their high opinion of themselves—"I am rich and increased with goods, and have need of nothing"—gives a good indication of whom they are really devoted to, and so they profess to be what they are not. That is insincerity. That is hypocrisy, which is brought on by their indifference to Christ. They have a lack of devotion to Christ. So what Christ feels so strongly about is that the honesty and the relationship with Him is very sadly lacking because their faith is so weak.

"Preaching the gospel to the world," and "feeding the flock," are more appropriately called "the work of the church." They are responsibilities that God assigns to those He has called.

Let us go to Jesus' prayer in John 17. He says to His Father:

John 17:4 I have glorified you on the earth: I have finished the work which you gave me to do.

It was an assignment, and He followed through with it, and He completed it. God certainly is involved with us in these things that He assigns us to do. In that sense, they can rightly be called "the work of God" because He works in us. But they are more similar to duties that He assigns, just like you assign your children duties to carry out which will help their development and make family life go smoother.

This concept that I have been talking about here is potentially damaging because it presents God, life, and worship of Him as being very narrow. It is an activity that very few in the Body of Christ are directly involved in. Who was always directly doing the work? Herbert Armstrong was. And maybe there were others besides, but we were out on the periphery at best. This is what I mean by saying that "the preaching of the gospel to the world" responsibility is something that very few of us are directly involved in. All of us are indirectly involved in it as part of the Body, but we are not directly involved in it in the way that we are something else. This has the subtle power to greatly detach us from much of God's creative activity.

Turn to Matthew 15 to continue this thought about worship. The "preaching of the gospel" has the power to detach us from the creative activity of God.

Matthew 15:7-9 You hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draws near unto me with their mouth, and honors me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

"In vain they do worship Me." Do you know what worship means? Worship means *to hold in high regard*. It means *to venerate*. It means *to honor*. Worship has become so restricted in peoples' minds, at least out in the public, it is generally limited to something one does for an hour or two once a week. And during that period of time one might have a strong feeling of reverence. However, worship in the biblical sense, is very practical and broad in application—involving all of the activities of every day of one's life.

Jesus jumped on these people because they had made the worship of God so narrow. God was being excluded from peoples' everyday lives—every

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minute, every activity of every day—by the commandments that they were teaching them.

The worship of God involves *everything* we do, *every* day. We are to honor Him, to glorify Him, to venerate Him in all things. Worship has very broad applications, and that is why the word "commandments" is part of this context, because the commandments of God involve all of our life every day.

What we were told was that all we had to do was have our hearts in the preaching of the gospel to the world—i.e., in "God's work"—and somehow we would automatically grow. But now think on this. Responding to the "feeding of the flock" directly involves every member in God's creative work every day. The "preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom of God to the world" is an activity, an assignment from God that only directly involves a very small portion of the body. The closest that we are attached to it is in tithing and praying, and thus the mantra: "Pray and pay."

But the "feeding of the flock" [the care of the church] is each individual's responsibility toward God—in his worship of God. In our response to the "feeding of the flock"—*is* the worship of God. It involves every person directly every moment of every day. In doing that, we are truly involved in "the work of God," which is the creation of Himself in us. I mean actively, directly, personally participating with Him in it.

One of the areas of church life that the concentration on this issue tends to affect, is to ignore *the cause* of the present condition of the church. If the cause is ignored, will we ever arrive at the solution?

I have found that there are four ideas that people are holding in their minds regarding the splitting. I do not mean that every person holds all four in his mind. It is just that I have heard all four of them from a variety of sources. The first one is the one most frequently mentioned.

1. It is unthinkable that God would scatter the church because He is a God of unity.
2. If we just get out there and preach the gospel, unity is bound to occur.
3. Satan has split the church. (This is the second most frequently-used.)
4. The ministry is entirely responsible.

All four of these allow people to escape the responsibility for the church's condition, and to justify what they do. Many of them—self-righteously sitting in their living rooms, not fellowshiping with anybody—have somehow convinced themselves that they are doing God's will.

Do you know what *Pharisee* means? Pharisee means *separatists*. The Pharisees of the first century were "holier than thou" types who separated themselves, both physically and spiritually from the main body of Jewish worshippers in their day. They strained over technical points, and they missed the loving intent of far larger issues. Jesus blasted them. Brethren, the church is an assembly. It is intended for fellowship, despite all its flaws. It is very clear from Paul's epistles that they were all addressed to church assemblies, and that God intends that His people *assemble* for worship. Meanwhile the church continues to split. I think that some are making some narrow and dangerous assumptions.

I am going to look at Point 4 first, because I think that it can be dealt with rather quickly. I will state right here that the ministry is *not* entirely responsible for the church splitting. More responsible than other parts of the body? Yes. "To whom much is given, much more is also required." The ministry has been given much. But there is a big difference between being more responsible and *entirely* responsible.

Matthew 25:1-5 Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps. While the bridegroom tarried, they all slumbered and slept.

When we compare this to the analogy that Paul gives in I Corinthians 12 describing the church in terms of a human body—the ministry is only *one part* of a whole. Just one portion of the entire Body. The whole is made up of many parts, many of which are in no way part of the ministry. But here in this parable, the ten virgins represent the *entire* sleeping church. I want you

to think of that in relation to what the church is going through right now. The *whole church* went to sleep. The whole church is guilty—some more, some less—but God's own prophecy says that "they all slumbered and slept."

Like the rest of the Body, the ministry had never been through anything like this. And like everybody else, we had to have time to figure out what we were to do. I can, in no way, say that we all did it right. I can, in no way, say that anybody did it right, including myself. We all did it in varying degrees of wrongness. In addition to that, just like everybody else in the Body, there are good ministers, and there are bad ministers, and there are even false ministers. There are some ministers who seem to be hirelings.

I want you to notice in Jeremiah 6 this description of Judah just before God scattered them.

Jeremiah 6:8 Be you instructed, O Jerusalem [Remember that Jerusalem is one of the most frequently used symbols of the church.] lest my soul depart from you; lest I make you desolate, a land not inhabited.

Jeremiah 6:13 For from the least of them even unto the greatest of them everyone is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even unto the priest every one deals falsely.

This description of Judah is given just before God drove them into captivity to Babylon. God's pattern that He shows beginning all the way back in the book of Genesis in chapter 15, is to scatter, to destroy when the iniquity is full. God determines what "full" is, and it might be different for the Amorites than it is for those who have made a covenant with God. But nonetheless, when God judges that they have reached a certain point, He scatters. This description shows that they were filled with iniquity from top to bottom.

Jeremiah 5:1-5 Run you to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and see now, and know, and seek in the broad places thereof, if you can find a man, if there be any that executes judgment, that seeks the truth; and I will pardon it. And though they say, The LORD lives; surely they swear falsely. O LORD, are

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not your eyes upon the truth? You have stricken them, but they have not grieved; you have consumed them, but they have refused to receive correction: they have made their faces harder than a rock; they have refused to return. Therefore I said, Surely these are poor; they are foolish: for they know not the way of the LORD, nor the judgment of their God. I will get me unto the great men, and will speak unto them: for they have known the way of the LORD, and the judgment of their God: but these have altogether broken the yoke, and burst the bonds.

A different metaphor, but the same description. Jeremiah could not find anybody that was seeking to really worship God. There is no escaping the overall condemnation that God gives in His Word.

Isaiah 1:4 Ah sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a seed of evildoers, children that are corrupters: they have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked the Holy One of Israel unto anger, they are gone away backward.

Isaiah 1:6 From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrifying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment.

SICK! Diseased from top to bottom. You might say, "Yes, this was the unconverted nation; not the converted children of God." But do not forget Romans 15:4 and I Corinthians 10:11—"All these things are written for *our* learning, for *our* admonition." They were written for the church, and these verses in relation to Israel show you and me the pattern that God will act according to. When the iniquity reaches a certain point, in order to save us, He will scatter us. We cannot escape His condemnation. The church was sick from top to bottom—the lay membership and the ministry as well.

Let us look at the notion that Satan split the church. This is one that looks good on the surface, because we all know that "Satan goes about as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour." He is an adversary who incites to division. All these things are true, and about these things there can be no disagreement.

But there is another side to this coin, and that is, "Where is God in all of this?" Is Satan stronger than God? Is God sitting on His throne, helplessly wringing His hands because of what Satan has done to His church? The issue in this argument that Satan has split the church is not really Satan creating confusion and dividing, but God's sovereignty, God's providence, and God's will.

Let us look in Isaiah about some things I will not expound very much on because you know them all. Notice the principle that arises.

Isaiah 14:12-15 How are you fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How are you cut down to the ground, which did weaken the nations! For you have said in your heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High. Yet you shall be brought down to hell [the pit], to the sides of the pit.

Pretty confident, is it not, that God would control him and bring him down.

Luke 10:18 And He said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven.

Satan was cast out. Who was strong enough to cast Satan out? God, of course.

John 12:31 Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out.

Who is stronger—God or Satan? Could Satan pull something like this over on God—the splitting of the church?

Jude 6 And the angels which kept not their first estate, but left their own habitation, he has reserved in everlasting chains under darkness unto the judgment of the great day.

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God not only has Satan contained, He has all of his demons contained. He is strong enough to overpower all of them, let alone Satan on his own.

Revelation 12:7-9 And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. and the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceives the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.

Revelation 20:1-3 And I saw an angel come down from heaven, having the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain in his hand. And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, And cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed a little season.

Not only is God able to control Satan, but even other angels are able to control Satan, and Satan is bound or loosed as they determine. He is not free to do whatever he wants.

Turn with me now to Job and we will see the classic example.

Job 1:12 And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself put not forth your hand. So Satan went forth from the presence of the LORD.

Job 2:6 And the LORD said unto Satan, Behold, he is in your hand; but save his life.

Brethren, for church members to even consider that Satan did this without God's cooperation is so shallow, that it is entirely wrong. Satan is totally under God's control, and even though he would undoubtedly like to rip us to shreds, he can only do what God directly wills or permits. Our Creator never sleeps. He is never weary. We are the apple of His eye. He loves us with a love that we cannot even begin to describe or imagine. Nobody is going to

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hurt His kids unless He wills it, and He is going to set limits. "You can go this far, Satan, and not one millimeter further."

Undoubtedly Satan was used, but it was God, our Sovereign Creator, who willed it to occur.

Hebrews 5:7-9 Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him.

Our problem is to open our mind to what is clearly shown in Scripture, and that is that God is much more deeply involved in what we might consider the sufferings of our lives than we would like to admit. They do not necessarily arise because we have sinned. Sometimes they do; sometimes they do not. Jesus was not guilty of one sin, and yet He suffered. Why? Because God *willed* His sufferings. Job was not guilty of any gross sins either. Neither was Abraham, nor Joseph, and yet they faced very great calamities which they came through quite well.

Regardless of why these calamities come, they are exercises—tests—that need to be overcome. Every teacher gives his students exercises, and tests his students in order to discover how well they are learning the lessons and what areas need more emphasis. Satan is nothing but a dupe in God's hands. He is very cunning. He is destructive. He is angry. He is hate-filled. But you can be sure that he can only go as far as God wills to use him. He could *never* scatter the church without God willing it so.