

Accepted In The Beloved

Living at Peace with God's People

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As recorded in John 14:27, Christ told His disciples that He would leave them His peace, He said, "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you." That peace was not only for His disciples then; it is for all God's people, through the years. In John 14, verses 15 and 25, Christ connects His gift of peace with His gift of the Holy Spirit. God gives His Spirit of peace to all of us, brethren. Through His Spirit, He empowers us to live at peace. Peace among us, brethren, is possible.

In I Peter 3, we will see that the pursuit of peace is not an option, but a requirement for those who seek to live God's way of life.

I Peter 3:11 Peter admonishes: Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it.

God commands us to seek peace. When He commands, He also empowers. He does not ask us to do something we cannot do. He has commanded us to seek peace, and He has given us His peace. Peace among us is possible.

But, if you look around the church in general, peace does not seem to be oozing out the edges. Peel them away, and you are likely to be confronted by—well just about everything except peace. You find backbiting and name-calling, schisms about doctrine and church government, disagreements over the role of the ministry. Is this situation a manifestation of Christ's peace, the peace that He said that He would give us?

This afternoon, I want to talk about this apparent paradox: Christ's promise of peace and the reality of strife today.

Let us start by briefly reviewing the state of today's Church of God in general. I think that you understand that I am not speaking of any specific congregation. I am looking across church organizations with somewhat of a wide-angled lens. I am not mentioning any names. I do not need to. You have been there. You have done that. You know the names, and you know the places. And in some cases, brethren, you have even known the people.

What we see through this wide angled lens is a lack of unity. That appraisal is so

general that it has become hackneyed. So, I want to focus that lens a little more finely, to see if we can make out some of the components of this division. I am going to discuss three.

First, a spirit of abandonment is a major part of this lack of unity. I do not mean that God's people in general are living lives of abandonment, that is, that they have taken up moral recklessness. I mean, rather, that a number of God's people have abandoned the fellowship, apparently persuaded that a community orientation is not an essential part of God's church. It is! Yet, on the fringes, individuals have gone way off somewhere and created their own private little church, in a more or less remote wilderness. That is on the fringe, brethren.

More common are those who settle down in their warm, urban or suburban living rooms, comfortable with the shopping-cart of doctrines, which they have plucked off the shelf. To an amazing degree, God's religion to these people, many of whom I read as asocial, is not fellowship, and it is not community, and it is not relationships. Rather, to them it is only an idiosyncratically held group of tenets or beliefs. What they say is: "It is my religion, the way I see it." In other words, they have complacently settled down into their own designer religion, more of a cloak for the conscience sometimes than anything else.

As you might expect, many of this ilk are loathe to accept the rightful role of the ministry to edify the saints (as Paul mentions in II Corinthians 10:8), and they are fairly satisfied that they have—at least basically—all the knowledge that they need. So, generally, they are not taught; consequently, they may not be overcoming. It is very sad when we see this happening, brethren, but we see it.

The most hurtful manifestation of this abandonment has been those pathetic ministers who over the years have forsaken their flocks. For whatever reason, they have just left the ministry, often without preparing others to assume their place, thereby leaving the members of their congregations to wander as a derelict, as a deserted ship.

That leads us to the second component of this disunity, akin to the first: A lack of direction. An unmoored vessel tends to drift, and, before you know it, it is far out at sea, or it is beached, or dashed against rocks, its hull ruined. Certainly, brethren, we have all witnessed a large number of wanderers—like derelicts, individuals who seem rootless, dazed or shell-shocked—whatever metaphor we wish to use. These are without a church home, like tubercular hobos, roaming along the religious railroad line, from one coal-pile to another, drifting from one living room to the next. Some finally drift far, far away, until, looking at them, it becomes hard to recognize even a vestige of true doctrine or Godly living. They seem to have turned away from the Truth once delivered.

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Now brethren, that is the extreme. And, I do not mean to suggest that the extreme is the normal. It is not, at least not right now.

Yes, many of God's people have not roved that far—at least maybe not yet. But, as we watch individuals wander, we wonder how they will stand up when times get really rough. Because you see, they are alone! God has not left them, but they are alone because they have placed themselves in their own solitary confinement. They have intentionally distanced themselves from the God-inspired, God-ruled community of the church! Will they be able to withstand the fiery darts of Satan? This is truly of concern to all of us.

Now, not everyone is a drifter, as we know. Many, to their credit, remain coupled with larger organizations. We recognize the third component of our present disunity in the drifters, and we see it as well in the larger groups. That third component is the evident spirit of competition. In my view, this is the most insidious and dangerous of all three components. Some groups (and many wandering individuals) have substituted patience and collaboration for the deadly poison of exclusivism. Their rhetoric apes cheap radio commercials: "Bill's Diner has the only good steak in town." We hear it more and more: "We are the only group that preaches the Truth once delivered," they pretentiously announce. "Only by belonging to this group will you go to the place of safety." "We alone know who the two witnesses are."

Exclusivist thinking like this leads to segregation, to rejection, and to bad feelings. It is the antithesis of agape. And, of course, it builds no foundation for unity whatsoever. Any number of God's people now seem to be unwilling to grant that those in other groups are members of God's church at all; some on the edges have gone as far as to label members of other groups as heretics.

Most frightening of all, is the fact that this spirit does not appear to be a flash-in-the-pan, a one-time occurrence, but rather a spirit that is not abating, but growing in intensity, becoming more the norm than the exception—maybe even becoming a zeitgeist. It is becoming a way of thinking among some.

This spirit, it seems to me, is driven by a number of ministers who are more interested in self-aggrandizement—in maintaining personal prestige and power—than they are in preaching the Truth of God, and in feeding their flock. So, ministers who call other ministers "heretics" have assaulted our ears. You understand that I am speaking of established, ordained ministers in the Church of God. This confrontational language only flames the fires of fragmentation. This inflammatory rhetoric provokes scattering, driving parties away from reconciliation. It is the language of fat street bullies who throw

their weight around to gain influence.

Brethren, turning our gaze away from the present situation and looking forward, we are forced to ask in trepidation, "How bad can it get? How bad will it get?" A few minutes ago, I spoke of some of the wanderers as "tubercular," and I used that word for a reason. Tuberculosis is a highly communicable disease. It spreads easily and quickly. That is why the authorities used to quarantine people, with tuberculosis, in sanitariums. The danger is that as these people wander around, as they come into contact—even casual contact—with some of God's people, they can spread this contagion of abandonment and this miasma of competition to others. The result can then only be more scattering, more disunity. So we ask: How bad will it get?

Any answer to that question must be firmly rooted in the understanding that things are not spinning out of control. That is the wrong image to use, and I do not want to give that impression at all. God has not lost control of His church.

In Amos 9:9, God says that He is about to give the command. Notice, God is controlling this; He is issuing the orders, "*and I will shake the house of Israel among all the nations, as one shakes a sieve, but not a pebble will fall to the ground.*"

The passage is most specifically about national Israel, but it certainly has application to God's governance of His church. God gives the orders; He shakes, but in the shaking, not a grain is lost. He knows where everyone is.

In Judges 7, God provides us with a good illustration of the intensity of His sifting; and, at the same time, of the level of control that He maintains in that whole process. We see this in the example of Gideon as he wars against the Midianites.

Judges 7:2-8 The LORD said to Gideon, "You have too many people for Me to hand the Midianites over to you, or else Israel might brag: 'I did it myself.' Now announce in the presence of the people: 'Whoever is fearful and trembling may turn back and leave Mount Gilead.' " So 22,000 of the people turned back, but 10,000 remained. Then the LORD said to Gideon, "There are still too many people. Take them down to the water, and I will test them for you there. If I say to you, 'This one can go with you,' he can go. But if I say about anyone, 'This one cannot go with you,' he cannot go." So he brought the people down to the water, and the LORD said to Gideon, "Separate everyone who laps water with his tongue like a dog. Do the same with everyone who kneels to drink." The number of those who lapped with their hands to their mouths was 300 men, and all the rest of the people knelt to

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drink water. The LORD said to Gideon, "I will deliver you with the 300 men who lapped and hand the Midianites over to you. But everyone else is to go home."

Now, some aspects of this account certainly do not pertain to my point here. But, I want you to notice two points.

First: God determines the selection criteria. He judges. He makes the decisions. He is in control. We are not. It is not our prerogative to judge how Christ runs His Father's church. We dare not call Him into account if things do not go our way.

Second and importantly: Gideon's team experienced more than one cut. There were two. Considering both cuts together, the army was reduced from its original thirty-two thousand men to only three hundred. That is a huge loss—99.06 percent. After the two cuts, less than one percent of Gideon's original army remained.

Now I am not suggesting in any way, that God will follow the percentages in the Gideon affair in regard to His church. In fact, I cannot find in the Scriptures a second witness to these particular numbers, so they are not confirmed in my mind as prophetically meaningful. However, there does seem to be a second witness to the pattern of a double cut, double sifting.

You may want to compare Numbers 1:49 with Deuteronomy 20:5-8. These passages deal with the multiple exemptions from military service. The concept of compound cuts, that is, of more than one round of sifting, does appear to be a pattern in the Scriptures, and is probably therefore prophetically significant.

Accordingly, we cannot wisely assume that God has completed His culling, His sifting in the church. I think that we can expect a second cut, and I think that we can expect it pretty soon. The older people in the church, who knew Mr. Armstrong, have had opportunity during the late 1980s and 1990s to show God where their hearts are. But, there are many younger people in the church, people who have come into the church after Mr. Armstrong's death—maybe they were just young children at that time—who yet may need to demonstrate to God that they are loyal to Him through thick and thin. He needs to see that.

Well, persuaded as we correctly are that God is in control, and persuaded as we might be that more sifting is to come, what should be our attitude? And, what action should we take? That is right: we dare not assume a do-nothing attitude. We dare not convince

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ourselves that we have no role to play. Yes, God is in control, but we have responsibilities as well.

Notice again, the Gideon example, in Judges 7. He did not just stand on the sidelines and watch. He had to obey God's instructions. For instance, he had to march those ten thousand guys to the water and ensure that they were reasonably thirsty when they got there. Now, consider this: his obedience required faith. Would most generals, facing a major battle, demobilize more than ninety nine percent of their army, leaving only three hundred soldiers? Gideon did not argue; he obeyed in faith, dismissing the bulk of his regulars. Obedience in faith was his responsibility. In watching today's church, in living in today's church, we too have a responsibility to obey.

Obey what?

Briefly, our responsibility is to accept from the hand of Christ, that gift of peace that He has given us. It is His peace—the same peace that He enjoys at the throne of His Father. How do we accept that gift of peace? That is where obedience enters the picture.

Romans 15:1-3, 5-6 (Holman translation) Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not to please ourselves. Each one of us must please his neighbor for his good, in order to build him up. For even the Messiah did not please Himself. On the contrary, as it is written, "The insults of those who insult You have fallen on Me." Now may the God of endurance and encouragement grant you agreement with one another, according to Christ Jesus, so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with a united mind and voice.

What does Paul conclude that we must do to live with each other in agreement?

Romans 15:7 Therefore accept one another, just as the Messiah also accepted you, to the glory of God.

Paul starts out by granting that some of God's children are strong, some weak. He of course is speaking relative to Christ; none of us even approach the strength of our Elder Brother. But, like children in any family, not every sibling enjoys a high level of maturity. I am not looking at this in terms of talents and gifts from God. We all have different gifts.

Rather, I mean that we, having different backgrounds, educations and ages, do not all possess:

- The same level of social skills,
- The same earning ability and capacity for work,
- The same physical strength and health.

By any number of issues, brethren, some are weaker than others. Paul asserts that the strong have an obligation to "bear the weaknesses" of the weak. In verse five, he indicates that God empowers us to live in agreement. Now, make no mistake about it: This does not mean accepting sin. Paul says that we are to live in agreement with one another, "according to Christ Jesus." There are limits, which we cannot detail in this time frame.

So, this bearing of these weaknesses does not mean compromising with sin, or tolerating it. But, it does mean adopting a "he's-not-heavy-he's-my-brother" attitude toward each other. This is not a suggestion, this is not an option, but Paul calls it an obligation. That is, it is a duty, a responsibility. Paul elaborates that duty is to build up; it is to edify our brothers, never to tear them down. We are never to denigrate God's people, to "put them down" in any way—much less as some people are doing, brethren, as to call them names, call them heretics even. That is horrible that that is going on.

In verse 7, Paul commands that we "accept" one another following the example set by Christ, who accepted us.

In John 10:29, Christ confirms that the Father gives those He calls to Christ, "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all." So, Christ receives us from the Father.

In John 6:37-39, Christ is plain, "Everyone the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My will, but the will of Him who sent Me."

Christ says that He does not cast out anyone that the Father has given Him, so long as that person "comes" to Him, that is, so long as the person does not refuse God's calling.

When God called us, He in effect gave us to Christ—handed us over to Him. Christ does not argue with the Father, and refuse to accept some of us. "Oh, no! Do I have to work with that guy for the next thirty years?" No, brethren that conversation does not take place before the crystal sea. Christ accepts us at the hand of the Father, and works assiduously with us toward our sanctification—and, indeed both the Father and the Son

works with us for our salvation.

Likewise, Paul says we are to accept one another, with the aim to edifying our brethren in Christ.

In I Corinthians 8, Paul is speaking of eating meats that have been offered to idols. He starts out by making an important distinction:

I Corinthians 8:1 About food offered to idols: We know that "we all have knowledge." Knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up.

The apostle distinguishes between love and knowledge on the basis of their usual effects on people. He says that knowledge puffs an individual up, while love, which is other-oriented, builds others up. Knowledge is filled with hot air, as it were, but love builds, as on a solid foundation. When you erect a building, you need that firm foundation. You cannot very well found a building on a croissant.

In verse 4, Paul further elaborates concerning what we know: we know that "an idol is nothing in the world" and we know "there is no God but one." This is what we know, brethren. But then, in verse 7, the apostle adds a very important qualification. However, not everyone has this knowledge. In fact, some have been so used to idolatry up until now, that when they eat food offered to an idol, their conscience, being weak, is defiled. You see Paul is speaking to Gentile Christians, who all their lives had been raised in a pagan world

So, here is an object lesson. The exact situation does not have much application to us today, since modern supermarkets do not sell meat that has been overtly dedicated to idols. But the principle remains the same. How do we to behave toward our brethren? Well, the driver of our actions must not be knowledge, in this particular case the knowledge that we have liberty to eat such meats. But rather, the driver must be love, that is, our consideration for others for whom Christ died, this is our burning desire to build them up. Paul continues in Verse 9, "*But be careful that this right...*"

Paul admits that this is a right. But, rights do not count. Our obligation to please our brothers in Christ must be paramount.

Be careful that this right of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak. For if somebody sees you—the one who has this knowledge—dining in an idol's temple, his weak conscience will be encouraged to eat food offered to idols. Then the weak person,

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the brother for whom Christ died, is ruined by your knowledge.

Those are extremely powerful words; the stakes are high. Notice, the weak brother is not ruined by his own weakness, but he is ruined by the strong's misuse of knowledge. The responsibility falls on the strong, those with knowledge. And, culpability for ruin falls right there also. Verse 12 notches up this matter a whole bunch. This is sin and it is sin against Christ. In verse 12, "*Now when you sin like this against the brothers and wound their weak conscience, you are sinning against Christ.*"

That is because, you see, the weak brother is also a part of Christ's body, so you are sinning against Christ. Paul continues in verse 13, "*Therefore, if food causes my brother to fall, I will never again eat meat, so that I will not cause my brother to fall.*"

Love is Paul's driving consideration. The burden placed on him of foregoing the enjoyment of meat was not heavy, because he was primarily concerned with his brethren. This is agape in action. That is why I referred to the 'he's-not-heavy-he's-my-brother' attitude a bit earlier. That attitude is really a description of agape in action.

In Romans 14, Paul is speaking about a different type of situation, but the controlling principle remains the same.

Romans 14:1-3 Accept anyone who is weak in the faith, but don't argue about doubtful issues. One person believes he may eat anything, but one who is weak eats only vegetables. One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat; and one who does not eat must not criticize one who does, because God has accepted him.

It works both ways. The strong have a proclivity to condescend to the weak, while the weak can fall into a pride-trap of judging the strong. The failure to accept on the part of either the strong or the weak is wrong. Why is it wrong?

Romans 14:4 Because God has accepted him. Who are you [Paul asks in verse 4] to criticize another's household slave? Before his own Lord he stands or falls. And stand he will! For the Lord is able to make him stand.

There is that concept of acceptance again, as we saw earlier in Romans 15:7. Same Greek verb: 'accept.' It is often rendered 'receive' in the King James Version. It is used about thirteen times in the New Testament, and it means to take to oneself, as to take

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food or to gather a band of men to yourself. In this context, it means to accept for fellowship. We are to accept one another because Christ has accepted us from the hand of God. You may want to jot down Ephesians 1:6, where Paul writes that God Himself has "made us accepted in the Beloved." That is, none other than God the Father in Christ accepts us, and He hands us to Christ, and Christ takes care of us. If only we could plumb the depths of that concept.

By refusing to accept a brother, I think really that we are calling God into account for accepting a person that we, in our pride, would naturally not accept. We are on very dangerous ground indeed when we do that! In Luke 17:1-2, Christ makes clear the cost of this sin, "Offenses will certainly come, but woe to the one they come through! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones."

Yes, there will probably be more sifting in the church. Do not expect stability soon. We do not want to be knocked out in round two. I think that the best way we can strengthen ourselves is to understand profoundly what the Psalmist means in Psalm 84:1: "How lovely is Your dwelling place, LORD of Hosts." Really, God's dwelling place is us, every single one of us, in whom resides God's Spirit of peace. God has accepted us in Christ. He and Christ are working hard to beautify us, these dwelling places. We are all lovely to God, and for our part, we need to come to recognize that loveliness in our brothers. We need to see past racism, we need to see past any bias whatsoever and recognize the loveliness that God sees.

Let us walk circumspectly, brethren, among one another, in love, accepting each other in the same spirit that God has accepted us, never judging, but intensely fearing lest we offend any of God's people. Following that course, we will come to enjoy the gift of peace, which God left us.