

# CHURCH OF GOD

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Dear Brethren and Coworkers,

The troubling events the Church has been facing recently have continued to upset some but to strengthen others. Our response to these challenges to faith is what makes the difference, so that even those who have been shaken are able to come out stronger in the end. It is to the great purpose and plan of God that we must look to find perspective when the adversary unleashes his fiery darts. Such trials require spiritual armor—in this case, the shield of faith (see Ephesians 6:16). We go to our knees in faith, knowing that God alone can rescue us in His time and to His glory. God will resolve the problems, not we. This is one of the great lessons of life.

Some have wondered how it can be that so many we have known as pillars, teachers, helpers and close friends—even family—could succumb to this tidal wave of error, false accusation and wrong spirit.

This is not the first time we have seen leading ministers depart; even Mr. Herbert Armstrong's own son started a competing church group, as did many others before and after. Two hundred fifty leading men of Israel challenged Moses and Aaron (see Numbers 16). Paul had to deal with contending ministers whom he referred to as “super-apostles” (2 Corinthians 12:11, New International Version), and Jude warned of ministers that followed the example of rebellious Korah (Jude 11).

Make no mistake, this is an ever more deceitful spiritual battle that is being waged.

We have long known that Satan is dedicated to the destruction of God's people. We have been warned countless times that he is a subtle enemy who pulls out all the stops to disrupt and destroy. Unless we stay focused on the great goal and the means by which we reach it, Satan's deceptions can overcome us.

Again, you and I are commanded to “resist him, steadfast in the faith” (1 Peter 5:9). Thankfully, God allows only so much before He opens a “way of escape,” before He delivers (1 Corinthians 10:13).

The purpose and plan of God teaches us that we are on a spiritual journey of faith. Faith in God and loyalty to Him are exemplified by the faithful. This is clear from Hebrews 11, where God's people of old are described as acting in faith and loyalty to Him despite very difficult circumstances.

That said, what are the practical steps of faith and loyalty to God that are required of us in the present distress?

The cause of much of the turmoil is the active spreading of doubt and suspicion, the ascribing of evil motives and actions to the leadership. When people do that, they in fact take the step of removing themselves from the community they have been part of. Some

have already said they have disassociated themselves and become active in efforts at reorganization—this in order to develop a different organization and way of governing. In effect, they have taken themselves out of fellowship with the brethren, left the community, or in other words, as one departing couple recently put it, they are disfellowshipping themselves.

In Romans, Paul writes: “I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them” (Romans 16:17). The Greek word for “avoid” is *ekklino*, “to turn aside [from].” The next verse goes on to say that it is “by smooth words and flattering speech [that they] deceive the hearts of the simple [or “innocent, unsuspecting”].”

The creation of division in the Church by seemingly persuasive arguments is dealt with by avoiding the perpetrators. This is how the sheep protect themselves. They do not need to be disturbed and disrupted by false accusations, negativity, evil suspicions and doubtful disputations.

Notice, it is not just for causing division but also for causing offenses that we are required to avoid some people. An example of both would be the sending of divisive letters that also offend brethren. This has happened again recently, when members and ministers received unsolicited critical e-mails from a field pastor. We are told to avoid or stay away from people who do such things. By their actions the guilty parties have already set themselves outside the fellowship. The Church must act to protect the flock by recognizing this.

The step of avoiding contact with them and their ideas is the responsibility of each member. We simply should not engage in contact with those who have disassociated themselves from us and act in ways that are harmful. When such individuals are members of our physical family, we need to make it clear that divisive words or actions on their part can only lead to alienation and further disunity.

What is the result of taking this protective action? Paul writes: “I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly” (Romans 16:19–20). In such situations, the removal of the ultimate adversary from the path of the faithful is assured.

The idea has been put out that *many* ministers in the Church met recently to achieve reconciliation, in response to an invitation sent out by four *former* ministers.

Here are the facts. Without approval, four ministers of the Church of God, an International Community, met in conference with these four former ministers, one of whom had been disfellowshipped a few weeks earlier. To meet in such a conference with individuals who are no longer recognized as ministers, and who have actively engaged in soliciting the support of members, is against Scripture and is not something the Church would ever approve. Such behavior links the attendees to division and offense, not reconciliation. That some of these ministers chose to attend this conference while still employed by the Church is an added serious concern.

It is also instructive that many faithful and loyal ministers were *not* invited, no doubt because their position is well known. I had actually been considering holding a meeting with the pastors and was asking the opinion of these uninvited ministers when the alternative conference was announced. So while it's claimed that I outright rejected the idea of a meeting to address issues brought up by a few, this is in fact not true. As it turned out, none of the pastors I asked thought it would be helpful or necessary; they are not critical about, for example, how the Church is preaching the gospel and how it should be governed.

The small dissident group started a website two weeks before the conference. The site contained links to a study by a minister still employed by the Church and to a sermon by the disfellowshipped former minister; that message ended by directing listeners on how to make donations to their new organization.

We have learned that his message was played unexpectedly in two of our congregations on December 28, before or after official services. Brethren were shocked and hurt by this offense, as well as by receiving a copy of a critical letter from their pastor.

On completion of the conference last week, a final statement was issued and included details about the new organization, with a clear invitation to participate in Internet church services. This letter, too, was sent to the membership—clearly an attempt to draw you away.

Yet similar things have happened before. In Paul's time, he had to address the Ephesian elders with a stunning warning: "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20:28–31). Paul knew from the start that such things would happen and spent three years saying so.

But appealing to brethren to join a new church is not how we as ministers conducted ourselves 15 years ago. We stayed clear of proselytizing. All of the recent turmoil seems to confirm that those who have now started a new group have removed themselves from fellowship with us.

Brethren, let's make no mistake; this did not happen overnight. A couple of years ago, I began to see the first signs of changed attitudes and tried to warn the Church of dangerous crosscurrents. Then a few months ago, I began to hear word of an impending split, then of "reorganization." The idea was spread that people should wait a little longer, then all would change. It seems that a private communications network has been sharing information for some time. Last week, in another attempt to dislodge brethren, a critical "private" letter to me from one of these ministers was sent to selected members very soon after I received it. There could be no other reason than to upset. Consider the fruits, brethren, and judge for yourselves (Matthew 7:15–20).

Is it truthful to speak of reconciliation while trying to draw away brethren as you do it? That is a hollow form of peacemaking.

The question of rightly understanding godly government lies at the heart of these problems. I have spoken about this in recent sermons. When this form of government is dismantled, the chaos and confusion we now see results. There is an aspect of the question that I have not covered, however. It concerns self-government. We cannot be in line with the way God has set government in the Church—knowing how we are to be appropriately submissive to others in our roles—unless we also practice self-government by allowing God's Spirit to work in us.

An aspect of the fruit of the Spirit is self-control (Galatians 5:23). It is accompanied by "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness" (verses 22–23). Without self-government, empowered by God's Spirit, there cannot be a right response to godly government. Yet with these spiritual characteristics in place, we have the assurance

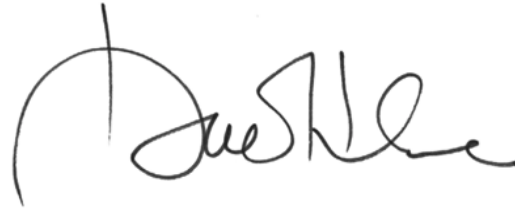
of godly cooperation as we serve each other in our respective roles in our families and in the Body of Christ, the Church.

Needless to say, it is a very sad time. We mourn that we have lost brethren and pray that God would restore them. Last week I had to inform three pastors that they could no longer be employed, based on their divisive actions. This puts an added burden on the Church now to provide immediate pastoral care in many areas of the United States and Canada. But we are committed to doing just that and have steps in place to provide for all who continue with the Church. You will be cared for, brethren. Those pastors with added responsibilities will be in contact with you and your local leadership very soon.

Many of you heard the sermon that followed my reading of this letter last Sabbath. It is available on the Church website if you wish to revisit it. It ended with the following scriptures and comments that seem appropriate now: “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma” (Ephesians 4:32–5:2).

This is our immediate goal. We have been attacked, but God has brought us through once more—to His glory, not our own. Let’s walk in godly love with each other and in the light that promotes godly fellowship with one another.

Sincerely, in Jesus Christ’s service,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David Hulme". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "D" and "H".

David Hulme