Born to Win

A Personal Testimony

by Ronald L. Dart

If I get a little bit choked up along the way, I hope you'll just be patient with me…because I am very *full* right now, having listened to that music. It's a singular honor for me to be on this platform. (Just bear with me; I'll be alright in just a minute or two.) It's a singular honor because the two gentlemen who spoke before me this morning (not to slight the third gentleman this morning, but we are of a different generation)...the two gentlemen who spoke before me this morning were both in the faith before me.

David Antion was the student body president when I was there as a freshman. Wayne [Cole] was already somewhere out in the wide, wide world, carrying out the work that God had put in his hands to do. And it is a singular honor, because…and there's an irony, also, in us being here today. Because from about the 19…oh, the early '80s on, our paths have diverged—gone *totally* different directions. We have not really been very much in touch. We have spoken only rarely. We have had very little contact. And yet in the last few months, and then on this weekend, we have been together again on a program—sharing a program together—and it's almost as though nothing had ever happened. *Not quite*, not quite. For we have been changed in ways that we would neither desire to have changed back…but we have been changed in ways that I don't think *we* even fully understand, or know entirely how to explain to you how we have been changed.

We have this one curious thing in common: We were a part of the "graduating class" of 1978 and '79 from the Worldwide Church of God. (I'll give you a minute for that soak in.) And for a very long time we have been wandering the wilderness, fighting our way through different battles, struggling with many things, and yet we have all stayed true to the faith. We have, to borrow the words of Paul if we may (and I hope he'll forgive me one of these days): We have kept the faith.

I think, in a lot of ways, we were kind of an early warning sign, which many people were simply not able to see. We were, in a way, like the canary the coal miners take down in the mine with them to be able to tell if the gas is there. They take the poor canary down there and they watch him. If the canary dies, it's time to get out.

Well, in a lot of ways, we were able…and *had to*, in fact (I think the other two gentlemen will agree with me). We really had no choice. This was not something you actually could sit down and think over: "I think I will do this." There really was no choice. We found ourselves thrust out into the cold, cruel world, as it were, with a lot of decisions to make. The question that I think comes to my mind at this time, today, under these circumstances, is: Why is it, in 1978, that we were able—yea, *compelled*—to make the decision that we made?

I can't speak for the other two gentlemen, but I have a feeling their story would not be that different from mine. And what I'm going to do today is to tell you mine. What I'm giving you today is my personal testimony (if I may use that word). It is not an agonizing story; it's not a sour grapes story; it's not a "mad about" anything story—because I most assuredly am not mad about anything. What I'm trying to do, and what I want to share with you today, is the experiences that I have had that may be of some value to you in the course of your life, your search

for Christ, your attempts to hang on to the faith—sometimes in the face of *terrible* opposition and troubles the likes of which none of us have even *begun* to imagine at this point.

I was born in 1934—in January the 7th, 1934. (Oddly enough, it was the day—the same day, to the day—that Herbert W. Armstrong went on the air with a broadcast for the first time up in Eugene, Oregon.) It was a *cold* night. There was a foot of snow on the ground that night. The doctor was unable to make it to the house. They never explained to me whether it was my grandmother, or my dad, or who cut the cord and finally put me to my mother's breast. But I was born up in there in the hills of Arkansas, grew up in the hills of Arkansas, and was a country boy at heart.

My family was poor. We didn't *know* we were poor, mind you, because nobody really had discussed the poverty levels back in those days. We didn't know we were poor; we thought we were just fine and got along just fine—but we were really very poor. We got along, though, and my dad worked as a little local policeman for a little while. He worked for a while on the farm. He worked various and sundry jobs. He also was, though, for a period of time in my childhood…the part of his past that probably impinges the most heavily on mine is that for a time (a significant time) my father was a singer in a gospel quartet—a Southern Gospel quartet. He sang bass. He did a number of solo numbers for those people. And he was *always* singing around the house, and I was *always* singing with my father. It took my sister to remind me one day of our religious roots—our common religious roots. She said, "Ronnie, we learned about God from music, from song." And she was right. All through my childhood, the songs that I sang were gospel songs.

Now, I would be the first to admit that, if we go back and rummage through some of those hymnals, we would find doctrinal problems in many of those hymnals. But we also found Jesus Christ; we found God; we found what God was doing, his might, his power. We found many of the things that were expressed to us in this marvelous musical program were expressed to us in different ways back then. I was no stranger to the tambourine. I was no stranger to the very *active* type of church music—the counterpoint that the Southern Gospel quartets went through. (For any of you who are particularly knowledgeable: Albert Brumley was the pianist for my father's quartet for some period of time. He was a songwriter, very well-known among Southern Gospel people.) And so I'm very much into the the lively type of music. I always was from the time that I was a boy.

I grew up with an awareness of God, with an awareness of Jesus Christ, and with an understanding of the most fundamental basics of what Jesus Christ and God were about. I can remember, in fact, as a teenage boy…you know, when you're a teenager, you've got a *lots* of problems. I mean, there are just lots of problems. The world weighs heavily on your shoulder, and there are struggles day in and day out. And I remember lying in bed at night, on occasion, praying and talking to God. And because I was so deeply troubled, I tried one night to just imagine Jesus with his arms around me. Now, I was just a teenager (Very young. I might have been 14 or 15 years old at this time.) but I took God very seriously. I *prayed*, I *hoped*, I *believed* in God through all those years of my life.

There came a point in time I joined the Navy. I went away to boot camp. And I remember once, when I was in a school away from home, and I was feeling very low, I went to the church services one Sunday morning. I decided to take Communion. It was a communion the type of which I had never taken before in my life. But I also, never before in my life, had been so *profoundly aware* of the blood of Jesus Christ for my sins. And, as I partook of this symbol as a part of the Navy communion service, I had tears running down my face; because of the awareness of my sins, the awareness that Christ died for me, the awareness that his blood was shed for me. All these things, of course, I had sung about for years. Every Baptist hymnal—all the old song books that you had in the singing conventions—*all* had the blood of Jesus Christ shed for our sins, the mercy of God, the forgiveness of God.

Time passed. I got married. We moved back to Abilene, Texas after my four years in the Navy, and Allie's brother—who was a member of the Radio Church of God (Some of you may have heard of that organization in years gone by.)—came up to visit us on a regular occasion. I was very concerned about his eternal life because he had left the Baptist church and gone to join this Radio Church of God. And I set out to win him back. He and I would talk until the small hours of the morning, and we would go over the scriptures, and we would page through the Bible, and he would bring new ideas. And we worked and we worked and we worked and, of course the story is a long one, but the end result stands before you right now. The fact of the matter is it was *I* who got converted, not him who got converted back.

During those weeks, I would listen to a radio program called *The World Tomorrow* with both Garner Ted Armstrong *and* Herbert Armstrong, in those days. (And I had a terrible time trying to tell the two of them apart as I first began to listen to them.) And I got mad at them. I remember once I nearly threw something across the room, I was so angry at Garner Ted Armstrong on the program one night, about something he had said. Problem was, he was right. And as I got down to digging into it, I *found out* that he was right.

We struggled with many of these things for quite some little time, and finally one night, at the table, we were working on the Ambassador College Bible Correspondence Course. And Allie…I think she was afraid to ask me the question. We were at Hardin Simmons University in Abilene, at the time. And I *had been* studying to be a Baptist preacher. But because of what I was learning, I began to realize that was a nonstarter. So, I was going to go switch over to become a teacher. One night, we were sitting at the table working on the Correspondence Course and she said, "Have you ever thought about going to Ambassador College?" And I put my pen down, and we looked at each other, and we talked. And after all the preliminaries—all the different things were done—we eventually loaded everything we owned in a 5′ by 12′ U-Haul trailer behind a '54 Chevrolet; and headed out to Pasadena, California, to Ambassador College in the autumn of 1958 (just to give you the perspective of what was it was like at that time.)

Now, I want to tell you something about that period of time which I think is very important and many people don't understand. I was not attracted to the Radio Church of God. I was, in fact, barely aware of it except of the fact that Allie's brother was a member of the Radio Church of God. And any of you who were listening to the radio program, or getting *The Plain Truth* magazine or the Correspondence Course in those years: You were hearing a radio program from Ambassador College, you were reading a magazine that was published by Ambassador College, and studying a correspondence course that was published by Ambassador College. You were not being attracted to, or looking to, or expecting to find at the end of this rainbow, *the Church*—the one, true Church.

What I was attracted to (and, I think, probably many of you were, too) was *the Faith*. Because what was happening to me—as I studied, as I went through the literature, as I listened to the radio programs, as I heard all these things, and as we argued into the small hours of the morning—what I was suddenly beginning to find was that the One that I had worshiped in the Bible for all these many years was *far more* than I had ever imagined; that there were things to know about him that I had never quite grasped. And because…down through all the years that I was a member of the Baptist church, we would go to Baptist Training Union on Sunday night and we had a little card we had to fill in. We had to tick off all those little things. And one of them was, "Did you read your daily Bible readings?" Well, I think from the time we got married, we *always* read our daily Bible readings, and I'd read them for many years before that—as Allie had, too. And so, consequently, we were fairly knowledgeable of the Scriptures. And what was happening to us was: As we would study the Correspondence Course, or as we would read an article, or read a booklet, or hear a program, suddenly problems that we had never addressed were being resolved. Sometimes problems were being resolved that we didn't even know were problems. And as we went along through this, the things that we were being told had what we would call "the ring of truth".

Well, I went to Ambassador College in that autumn (and I was baptized in November of that year) but I want you to understand something: I fought—not my way *into* the church—I fought *against* going into the Church at *every single hedgerow*. I fought every doctrine. I fought every idea. I fought every concept. I struggled with the thing all the way through. Why did I do that? Well, because this guy I was listening to kept saying, "Don't believe *me*; believe your Bible." I thought, "That's a good deal. I can live with that deal." And, in fact, that was the *deal* that I came into the Worldwide Church of God on. The deal was: I don't have to believe the teacher. I don't have to believe Herbert Armstrong. I don't have to believe any of these people unless it jives with the Bible. And so, like I say: Every hedgerow, every trench, every obstacle—I put up every one of them; I studied them all; I worked against them; I argued against them. I fought my way all the way down the line and, finally in the end of it all, I became persuaded that I had found a deeper faith in God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son, along with a great deal of knowledge about them that I just never had had before.

I will have to tell you the truth, though. And for some of you (I hope not) but it may be, for some of you, evidence that I was never converted. It is that I do not believe that the Jesus I came to know at Ambassador college and worshiped since that time was a different person from the Jesus I learned about from my father's songs. I believe he's *precisely* the same individual—the one who walked on the water, the one who healed the withered hand, the one who visited the synagogue, who went into the synagogue on the Sabbath and stood up to read, the one that finally suffered and died for my sins, the one that was put up on the stake on Calvary, and that died there with a spear through his side. That's the *same one* that I can remember from as long back as I can remember *anything*; I remember Jesus.

Now, this is important, I think. Because somehow or other in our culture…and it really derives from a throwaway line by the Apostle Paul. Writing to the Corinthians **[2 Corinthians 11:4]**, he slaps his forehead in the best Italian style (I don't think he *was* in Italy at the time), and he said, "You know, I really believe that you people would worship another Jesus!" And it's just an expression; it's just a figure of speech. And out of that figure of speech comes a *whole, giant structure* that there is a real Jesus and a false Jesus. And very early in my college career, someone struck a very false note in my ear. He and I were driving a college dump truck, because that was my earliest job (I think they felt I needed humbling, so they gave me the job of driving the college trash truck—garbage truck and I got various and sundry…you know, some of the best leaders in the United Church of God used to work for me on the dump truck in college.)

Anyway, this guy who was working with me on that morning…we were driving back. It was a Sunday morning. We'd taken a whole load of garbage out to the big dump out in San Gabriel, and we were driving back down… was it Rosemead we were driving down there? I don't remember too well. Came by a church and he said, "Look at those pagans going in there to worship Nimrod." Now, I want to tell you something. That draws a bright line in the sand right there. These people, with Bibles under their arms and little children by the hand, were going into a church on Sunday morning—he said—to worship Nimrod. Now, I knew something that he didn't know, because I had been in those churches lots and lots of times, and I had never seen Nimrod there. Hadn't seen his name on anything. I hadn't even seen his picture. (There are people who will talk about those pictures being Nimrod, but they're not. They're some model that the artist used back in the Middle Ages. That's all those pictures of Jesus in the churches are all about.)

But, no, they don't go in there for that. They go in there to worship Jesus Christ. I mean, after all, Jesus said **[Matthew 15:9, Mark 7:7]**, "In vain do you worship me." Somebody has got to be worshiping in vain, right? Well, that's what *I* was doing. I wasn't worshipping somebody else. I was worshiping *the real McCoy*. I was just wrong. I didn't understand. I didn't grasp it. So, finally, when I came to know him, it meant *so much* to me —more than I can ever tell you.

Now, why have I told you all this? I've told you all this to tell you one of the reasons why I have (and, I believe, these other two gentlemen have) came up against the crisis in our lives and made the decision that we made.

There's a scripture in 1 Timothy that I want to read to you. It's a short one; would just take a minute. Now, you're familiar with 1 Timothy 3, because it's got all the qualifications for ministers and deacons all laid out for you—all the stuff that *we're* supposed to measure up to that you don't have to. These are all here. Now, Paul—after he tells Timothy these things—he says in verse 14:

> **1 Timothy 3** *AKJV*
> 14 These things write I to you, hoping to come to you shortly:
> 15 But if I tarry long, that you may know how you ought to behave yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.

Man, that's powerful! And I would never ever want to do anything to cause someone to feel badly about, or look down upon, or to have a wrong attitude toward the Church. But what I want to tell you is this. We've faced one of the ultimate crises: where what we believe to be the church—the pillar and the ground of truth—was taking an axe to the roots of the truth. It's a problem that many more people faced in 1994 and 1995; we just saw it a little earlier. What we believed to be the Church had taken an axe to the roots of the truth when it was supposed to be the pillar and the ground of truth. What do you do when what you thought was the Church takes an axe to the truth and your faith? That's the question.

Now, for me, when I faced these questions—initially in a relatively smaller way than many had to face them later on, you know, in a relatively smaller way in my own case—it was just a singular, little thing that came up. It was not some giant thing, but it was just the *whiff* of the gas—the coal gas down the mine—that I got, that I *knew* at that moment in time something was wrong. Now, I believe that this is true for the simple reason that I had held to this one idea—in all my life—that whenever it comes down to a question of a difference between an authority figure and the Bible, *the Bible is always right*. Now, the problems that many people have…there is a thing called the "double bind". The double bind is supposed to be a conflict between the injunctions…or paradoxical injunction from an authority figure, I think is the definition. In my case, I've got two authorities—both of which I believe to be infallible—telling me things that are mutually exclusive. It's not real hard, if you can just get that thought through your mind.

The problem I had to deal with was: Is the Bible wrong? Is the Church wrong? And I use the term "Church" because, in those days and for a long time thereafter, the presumption was that Herbert W. Armstrong spoke for the Church—that he *wasn't* the Church, but for all intents and purposes was the Church. When he spoke, that was the Church speaking. So consequently, I have him saying one thing, and the Bible saying another. I have also him saying something that I know to be untrue, *and* (this is the difficult part) I knew he knew it to be untrue.

Now, at this point in time, because of what the old gentleman taught me…The old gentleman taught me, "Don't believe me; believe your Bible." And so, consequently, I was able at that time to simply say that, "I'm sorry, he's *wrong*. Not only is he wrong; *he lied*." Now, you really hate to say that. You really hate to say that about anybody, because it's a *serious* thing to say. But if you sit there and you continue to deny the truth as it's staring into face, pretty soon you're going to get to the place to where you don't know what the truth is anymore, and you won't recognize the truth. When you start allowing the lie to take root in your mind—and you support the lie, you accept the lie, you start making excuses for the lie—pretty soon you're not going to know where you are.

It was a very hard time for me. This was in 1978, and I sat in my study down in Austin, Texas. (I was getting ready to go to the University of Texas, working on a doctor's degree.) And I sat in my study for a long time thinking this through. And I made myself say, out loud, the words, "Herbert W. Armstrong is a liar." I know

there are people who would think that to say that was almost to invite lightning from heaven. For me, *not* to say it was to invite insanity.

And the reason why…many of you will not understand why I had to do this so strongly, with myself. It was private. There was nobody else there. The reason I had to do it was because of the many times that I had made excuses for things that I knew to be untrue, the many times I had pretended he was telling the truth when I knew he wasn't, the many times that I had made excuses for things that were untrue, that I finally had to come around to it. In order to maintain my own sanity, I had to come to that.

Now, for me in 1978 (and certainly later down through the years that followed and we came down to 1994–95, when some of *you* are the graduating class of 1994–5) when you come down to this to this place, and it comes down to the conflict between the authority figure and the Bible (which I, by and large, think is a is a relatively simple proposition for people to make) that it turns out not to be quite so simple—when it involves family and friends and loved ones and all these things. But it is really…the bottom line comes down again to: What was it that you believed *in* in the first place? Was it the Faith or was it the Church?

And there is a distinction, I think, that has to be drawn between these two things. I want to illustrate this with the old fractured scripture game. If you will turn back with me to Acts, the 13th chapter, I want to show you what I mean. Acts, chapter 13. This is right in the beginning of the mission of Paul.

> **Acts 13** *AKJV*
> 1 Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

Well, they got sent out on their missionary journey—out there doing all these things, preaching the gospel around the Middle East. Well, they came upon this island over here and they were talking and preaching to the deputy of this particular country…and I'm going to pass down to to verse six.

> **Acts 13** *AKJV*
> 6 And when they had gone through the isle to Paphos, they found a certain sorcerer, a false prophet, a Jew, whose name was Barjesus:
> 7 Which was with the deputy of the country, Sergius Paulus, a prudent man; who called for Barnabas and Saul, and desired to hear the word of God.
> 8 But Elymas the sorcerer (for so is his name by interpretation) withstood them, seeking to turn away the deputy from […]

The Church? No, of course not. He was trying to turn the deputy "away from *the Faith*." Why is this important? Well, because there wasn't any church around. Paul was *there*. Paul was an apostle. Paul knew the message. He got the message, not from a church, but he got it from Jesus Christ personally. And he's here; he's telling them all about the Word of God, and Jesus, and the resurrection from the dead, the sacrifice of Christ. All this stuff is going and this guy's getting in his way. He's trying to turn the deputy away from *the Faith*—not the Church. Is this an important distinction? Let's think about this for a moment, because I think it *is* an important distinction. Just a page over—Acts, chapter 14, and verse 21:

> **Acts 14** *AKJV*
> 21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch,

These are the Galatian churches, where Paul got stoned and left for dead, and still got up and went down the road and preached the gospel in the next town. He said they went back:

> **Acts** *AKJV*
> 22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the Faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.
> 23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church *[And I think that was plural: elders in each church.]*, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.

And they went on their way. Now, did they say that they "exhorted them to continue in the church"? No. They say, "exhorted them to continue in the Faith."

Now, let me ask you a simple question at this point. (It's a troubling question.) Is it possible to be *in* the Church and *out of* the Faith. I see lots of heads nodding. Is it possible to be *out of* the Church and *in* the Faith? A little tougher, isn't it. It depends on what you mean by "the Church". If by "the Church" you mean what Mr. Cole was talking about this morning—the Spiritual Body of Christ—no. No, it doesn't work that way. Because the Ethiopian eunuch whom Philip baptized on the way home…you know, he meets him going along the road, gets up in his chariot with him, and he's reading along in Isaiah. Well, Philip—hearing what he's saying in there—he says, "Well, now wait a minute. Let me tell you the story." Because the Jerusalem church had been sitting around Jerusalem for a long time there (about eight years, I think) getting their story right. They had got it all memorized. They had it down. Philip didn't have to flip open a Bible to John or Luke or Matthew (none of which had been written yet); he had that story *memorized*.

So he went through it with Ethiopian. And I think this is in the Bible for a very specific reason. This is an *important* encounter; it's not a throwaway. He's riding down the road with him and the guy says, "Wait a minute!" (Because they've gotten beyond the part of the story where you get baptized.)

> **Acts 8** *AKJV*
> 36 […] See, here is water; what does hinder me to be baptized?
> 37 And Philip said, If you believe with all your heart, you may. And he answered and said, I believe[….]

And they went down in the water, and he baptized him. Where'd he go? He went home. Where was home? Ethiopia. How many churches were there down there? None. How many Christians were there down there? One—him. That's all. You know, "him" doesn't make a church. It doesn't quite work that way.

Now, I think the reason for this—the choosing and the calling and the baptism of this man—was…if nothing else, it does underline the fact that it is the *Faith* of Jesus Christ that this man is being introduced to, not so much the Church. The Church is a *byproduct* of the Faith. As someone once said, "Our job is to go out and make disciples. Jesus' job is to turn those disciples into a church." Something that we really can't do. Now, mind you when we speak of "the Church", we've got this terrible problem (even among us here) that we oftentimes don't

know what we're talking about. We oftentimes don't mean the same thing. And this is a struggle (I suspect my colleagues have had the same struggle) that we go and speak to a group of people, and because we've been running down parallel tracks out here for some little time we have developed a different manner of speaking about things. And when I speak of "the church", I am usually talking about a local congregation—a community church. Usually, unless I specifically say I'm talking about the greater Church of God, the spiritual Church of God, the Body of Christ, of which all these people are. So that, unless we know what we are talking about, we've got a problem.

But I think I could probably make it a little clearer to you if I would go back to my original question and say: Was it possible to be in the *Worldwide Church of God* and be not in the Faith? Yeah. Yeah, sure it is. Is it possible to be *out* of the Worldwide Church of God and still be in the Faith? Well, you see, I have a sneaking suspicion that one of the reasons that God turned the Bunsen burner up under me and and Dave and Wayne, back some twenty-odd years ago, was to demonstrate that very point. Because, up until that time, there had been much "going out of the Church and staying in the Faith", had there? There just hadn't been very much.

And so, consequently, when that the episodes of those years came about, we came out of that church and we had a real choice to make. I sat in my study down in Austin for a long time (I prayed and fasted about this for quite some time) and my problem that I tried to resolve was: Did I have the *right* to resign from the ministry of the Worldwide Church of God? It sounds *stupid*, almost, to me looking back twenty years on it, but it wasn't then—it was a *deadly serious* question. Can I be *a Christian* and not be in the Worldwide Church of God? Can I be *a minister* and not be in the Worldwide Church of God? I *really* sweat bullets over these questions. But, you know, there was another question that came along in the middle of all this. And I don't know where it came from. (At least, I didn't *see* it come or *hear* it come, but it was there.) And the question was this: Am I a minister of Jesus Christ or of somebody else?

Well, that question was fairly easy to answer. Because I *knew* that I had received his Spirit whenever I was baptized. I *knew* that I had received gifts from *him* when I was appointed into the ministry and ordained of the ministry. I knew these things; I couldn't deny them. You know, this was one of the problems…this is a thing that mystifies me, occasionally, about people that I encounter today. Whenever you came into the Church of God, whenever you came into the *Faith* of Jesus Christ, did you or did you not "prove all things"? Did you get the Bible out? Did you hammer all these things out? Did you argue your way, did you pull up all the arguments? Did you work on this? Or did you just *buy* it? Which was it?

Now, let me tell you, for someone who had to *work* on all this stuff—for someone who had to fight his why into it—to deny it or to turn away from it, at this late date in my life, would not only be to deny Christ; it would be to deny myself. I have to say that I was a fool, that all that work I did wasn't done, that I didn't really prove those things. Now, I'm quite prepared to say that I was *wrong* about one or two of those things that are back in there, but not the whole package. I *worked too hard* on that, and I *know* what passed into my mind as *truth* and the faith of God and the faith of Jesus Christ, and what came into my mind as things that I said, "Ah, maybe. We'll see somewhere down the road." And I have, as time has gone by, had to make some adjustments on a lot of the "we'll see" types of things. But, you know, I have never had to make an adjustment on the things that I proved to the point that I was ready to go to the wall on them. And I did that.

Now, not long ago in the [CEM] Forum, I encountered a fellow who was being kind of obstreperous, and he said, "Well, you know, I *heard* all that stuff years ago." (He'd been in the Church, I think, for thirty years—up until about two or three years ago.) "And all that period time", he said, "I heard him say all along, you know, 'Don't believe me; believe your Bible. Look all these things up. Prove all these things', but I didn't do it until two or three years ago." And he's going on—thrashing around about various and sundry things—and my question back to him in this situation…I couldn't quite figure out where this guy's coming from. I mean, *where* has he been. What he did…and he never really had quite figured this out yet, let me just explain to you what he had

done. He had come into the Church and had basically believed what he was told by the Church. He had accepted the doctrine of church government. Whatever the Church said was right. Whatever the rulings were, that's what he was supposed to do. And he followed all this stuff down the line as far as he possibly could. Then, when the Church *told him* it was okay to look into these things, then and only then did he begin to look into them. And at that point in time he was *still* believing what the Church was telling him and not what the Bible said.

You know, you really wonder sometimes: What in the world did you make your commitment to? Did you make a commitment to God or to a church? Did you make a commitment to Jesus Christ or to an organization? Was it a set of doctrines that you committed your life to? Or was it Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the one who died for you on the stake? *Who owns you?!* If I read Paul correctly **[1 Corinthians 6–7]**, we're bought and paid for, folks; Jesus Christ *owns* us.

And when you look at that…I agree entirely that he doesn't call us servants; he calls us his children, his friends, even beyond that. I agree entirely. But that's because of the *relationship* that has been established between us of friends and children. There are those, I think, who still have the mindset of a servant. And unless something happens in their lives to change it, they probably always will. Verse four:

> **Acts 16** *AKJV*
> 4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem *[the Jerusalem Conference]*.
> 5 And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.

Notice the distinction between churches and faith. The churches were established *in* the faith. Now, I have to realize then, from that statement, that it is possible for a church to be more or less established—that a church could be well established or poorly established. As I was saying in a Feast sermon this year [*Building the Next Church*] how that it is possible to build *well* when you're building in a church. As Paul said **[1 Corinthians 3]**, we do build (He's talking about a local church at this point.) we do build in this way. And he said, "Be careful how you build—if you build with wood or hay or stubble or precious silver and precious stones. We've got to be careful how we build." And, you know, it's takes a peculiar moral build to look back over our past life and say, in *our* experiences in the Church, and say, "We built well." I've had a lot of people who have a hard time with me when I, basically, have said, "No, we did not." And I know one man who would agree with me, if he were alive. His name is Herbert Armstrong. Because he understood, as well as anybody would ever understand, it's not how you run that race; it's whether you've finish it or not. It's how it comes out at the end that makes a difference. And, in the end, his work didn't endure. When it came under stress, it came apart.

Now, let's page a little further back into Corinthians. 1 Corinthians, chapter 16. This is a really short, little quick scripture. Paul says in chapter 16, verse 13:

> **1 Corinthians 16** *AKJV*
> 13 Watch you, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.

This is a fundamental value, you know. Whenever you come up against a conflict between an organization on the one hand…and I probably really should speak of it in these terms, rather than calling it "the Church", because remember what I said earlier? I was talking about what we *thought* was the Church, but which must have been nothing but an organization—nothing more. Whenever we come up against a conflict between an organization and the Faith…and the Faith is hard sometimes; the Faith is a challenge sometimes; the Faith is not necessarily the easiest and most convenient way to live all the time; the Faith of Jesus Christ involves hard decisions; the

Faith of Jesus Christ involves not denying him whenever you're under pressure; the Faith of Jesus Christ means standing up for what's right if it costs you your job, on occasion. And there are people I know who lost jobs and got isolated from situations with their family, because of their firm belief in the Gospel of Jesus Christ who, later on, because somebody told him it's okay, tossed it all out the window.

"Watch. Look after yourself. Stand fast *in the faith*." I mean, what did you believe in? Jesus Christ? Or was it something else? Did you believe in God? Was it *his* Law you accepted, or was it something else? Or did you accept it because you *believed* it? Because this is what we're talking about—this expression "the Faith" (which I keep coming back to in this)—is shorthand in the New Testament. They used a kind of jargon much like we use jargon in the modern world. And, for them, the expression "the faith", "the faith", "the faith", "the faith" was a shorthand expression for something else. That something else was *the faith of Jesus Christ*. And the Greek word *pistis* [πίστις, Strong's G4102], which is translated "faith", and which has been so tossed around to where people don't even know what it is anymore—the strongest and simplest meaning of it is "persuasion".

You know, people oftentimes use this in the English language talking about, "Well, this person's of the Baptist persuasion" or the Catholic persuasion, or the Protestant persuasion. And, jokingly, we go on to say, "Well, she's a person of the female persuasion. Therefore, what can you expect?" And so on it goes with this. Well, in fact, the word basically means *persuasion*—that we're talking about the persuasion of Jesus Christ.

I want to tell you something. I want to tell you what I am *persuaded* of. (Again, I told you this would be a personal testimony.) I am *persuaded* that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. I am *persuaded* that he was born of the Virgin Mary in a little stable down in Bethlehem—that he was a baby, that he cried, that she suckled him at her breast, and that he was totally vulnerable in the world to whatever the devil might attempt to do to destroy him. I believe that; that's a part of my *persuasion* of Jesus Christ. I am *persuaded* that they fled into Egypt, and brought him back into the land according to what the scripture said would happen to him. I am *persuaded* that when that boy came of age—when he finally became twelve years old—he was able to stand in the Temple and discuss, with the doctors of the law, things that made them left them speechless with what the boy understood and what the boy knew. I'm *persuaded* that throughout his three-and-a-half-year ministry Jesus healed the sick, took cure of the lame, was compassionate toward the people who were weak and out of the way, and was a kind and a caring man—and he was as *tough as boiled owl* when it came to hypocrisy. I'm persuaded of all that.

I am persuaded that there came a time when Jesus Christ had to (in order to finally come to the place to where he could say he was tempted in all points like we are) be betrayed by one of his closest, closest friends whom he trusted. That he had to be humiliated, taken, arrested like he was a *common criminal* in the garden. That he had to pray that night, and to face the fear of death, and to have to *sweat blood* asking God, "Is there *any other* way that we can get out of this?" I'm persuaded that he went through that *for me*. I am persuaded that the humiliation was *for me*. I am persuaded that the beatings were *for me*. I'm persuaded that the crown of thorns was *for me*. I am persuaded that having all of his friends run off and leave him in the middle of the night was *for me*. Because that's what we people have to deal with in our lives. We have to deal with being forsaken by our friends. We have to deal with being betrayed by a husband or a wife. We have to deal with these things day-in and day-out of our lives. Jesus still had unfinished business on that last night, as he dealt with many of the same things that you and I have to face day-in, day-out in our life.

And then he heard the rooster crow, and lifted up his eyes and saw Peter standing over there with a stricken look on his face. Both of them knew what Peter had done—that Peter had denied him three times cursing and swearing. And poor Peter went out and wept bitterly. Oh, I identify with that man! I identify with that man. I don't, in any way, condemn Peter or criticize Peter. He was probably the most *courageous* of the lot, because he was willing to be the *closest* of the lot, and he put himself right in the line of fire. He put himself under more

stress than any of the rest of them did. And when he did it, he just *couldn't handle it*. And I'm sure I wouldn't have handled it, either. And I'd have been out in the boonies weeping bitter tears over it.

But I'm persuaded that Jesus suffered the denial of his friends. I'm persuaded that he was scourged—that that was for me, in my place. I am persuaded that he was finally taken out and nailed to a tree—in my place. I am persuaded he suffered all day long (didn't even take what might have been pain relievers). He did that for me. I am persuaded that he bled. I am persuaded that, all of a sudden, he found himself more alone than a man could ever find himself—because he suddenly realized that God the Father had left him also. Did that for me.

And when they stuck the sword in his side, and he died, I am persuaded that that was for me. This is what I am *persuaded* of. And when I talk about "the *Faith* of Jesus Christ", this is what I'm talking about. It's what Peter was talking about; it's what Paul was talking about—the Faith of Jesus Christ—which people, so sadly and so sorrowfully, down through the years have made shipwreck over because of trivia, *because of trivia*.

I don't know. God is the judge, and I would hate to be one to sit in judgment of why people have made shipwreck of the Faith, have abandoned the Faith, have played fast and loose with the Faith, and have turned away from the Faith. But of all the people I feel the sorriest for, it's the people who abandoned the Faith of Jesus Christ out of a mistaken loyalty to their organization. *That* is sad beyond belief.

You know, in the years after I resigned from the Worldwide Church of God, I had a few personal bridges I had to cross. I don't know…I didn't really know, I couldn't grasp, I couldn't quite deal with the simple concept of the *love* of God. Now, I knew I loved God because I kept his commandments. Okay, I had that clear. I had no particular problem with that. The intellectual love of God, the conceptual love of God—all these things I understood. But there were some things that I did not understand, and I came to understand. One day (and this was some time into my experience with the Church of God International) I was up on a balcony at the building that we had built out on the lake (which tells you how late it was). I stood up on the balcony and looked down at the people putting a potluck together down below, and I suddenly realized how much I *loved* those people.

Now, it's a shame—it's a *real shame*—and I am embarrassed, in a way, to admit it to you. But I have to, to be honest. I suddenly realized I *love* these people. This was an important transition for me, because these were people *in whom* the Spirit of Christ was. These were God's people. Christ was in them. And in loving them, I was loving Christ. And I found it possible to express a love for Christ, in his people, in a way that I had not done before. And I'm profoundly embarrassed and ashamed that it took me so very long.

And it was an important step. And then, a little later…there was something growing, I know, in me all along in this regard, but it took a little while before it really came home to me. And I don't know *exactly* where it came, but I know one of the places where it locked in for me was on my visit to Southern California some time ago, when our singing group sang. And you sang a song: *I Love You, Lord*. I'd heard it before, but there was something about the environment; something about that service; that I was able to sing with you and sing from the heart; and to (I know this sounds funny, in a way) but to *feel* that I love God instead of *knowing* that I love God because of this, that, or the other thing; and to be able to say: I *love* you, Lord—because you suffered for me; because you died for me; because, apart from that, you're sitting on the right hand of God *saving my bacon* every day of my life.

So it is on down through my life, day by day, there have been the moments when I have realized, and come face to face, with the *love of Jesus Christ*. And I tell you how critical this is because, somehow or other—in our background, in my background, and so forth—this got *squelched*, got papered over. It just wasn't dealt with properly to the place to where a person could really, honestly, from the heart say, "I *really* love God", and mean it in the way that we might mean it if we said to our wife or our husband, "I love you, dear."

That's, to me, one of the things that whenever you come back to do that little scripture back in Jude…I debated about using it at the beginning of the sermon today, but the problem with this scripture is that nearly every time you hear a preacher bring up this scripture it's because he's about to start a new church. It's that scripture that says:

> **Jude 1** *AKJV*
> 3 Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write to you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write to you, and exhort you that you should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered to the saints.

I don't believe that means we're supposed to go out and fight with the world. And I *know* it doesn't mean we're supposed to go fighting with one another. The contention, and the fight you've got for the Faith, is with yourself. It's making those hard choices. It's getting back to your roots. It's getting back to understand again: Why did you ever make the decision to obey God in the first place? And are you now, as you were then, willing to take a bayonet for Jesus Christ? Are you now, as you were then, willing to give up a job? Willing to give up family? Willing to give up whatever it has to take in order to demonstrate your love for Jesus Christ because of obedience to the Faith of Jesus Christ and all that that stands for?

It's a long road, and I have to tell you, it isn't over yet.

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