Church of God, The Eternal

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November 11, 2003

Dear Ministers, Deacons, and Local Leaders:

I am writing this special letter to all of you who carry unique responsibilities within this remnant body, and for reason. Some of you will remember that several years ago Mr. Raymond Cole began a *Leadership Letter*, which he intended as a personal means to communicate with those having delegated responsibilities in Church of God, The Eternal. The sudden restriction of his eyesight in January, 1997, made that project short-lived, and he was forced to cut back on many projects he would have liked to continue. I am not intending myself to begin a regular letter to all of you, but I do think it important at this particular time to write, especially since I intend to begin using several of you in a very expanded way in the near future.

In the December, 2003, *Announcement Letter* to the membership, I will be announcing my intention to use selected men in the United States to begin giving sermons at next year's Feast of Tabernacles, as well as other occasions during the coming year. Those men will be Mr. Leon Whitaker, Mr. John Byrd, Mr. Richard Litz, and Mr. Robert Litz. While I have managed the speaking responsibility single-handedly here in the U.S. since Mr. Cole died two years ago, I feel God is leading me now to begin to delegate and share some of those duties with other ordained men. I still want to be very sensitive to the fact most of you have full-time jobs or other family responsibilities, and so I do not want to overburden any. My plan is to make small steps in these assignments, and then we can see how God will lead us in the future.

In light of this plan, I think it important—not only for these four men, but for all of you—to record here in writing the fundamental tenets that define this ministry's approach to our responsibilities. We are all very aware of the failures of the past in our parent affiliation. Although there were many well-meaning ones in the ministry—aside from those we know now were only out for themselves—the end result was serious abuse of the flock, and the use of the very Gentile form of government which Jesus Christ condemned.

> But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:25–28).

It is amazing that in spite of this specific admonition of Christ, it was that very Gentile approach of "lording it over" the brethren that took root in the Worldwide Church of God even as far back as the late 1950s and early 1960s among certain men. Even though Mr. Herbert Armstrong did not use that kind of hardness in dealing with the brethren personally, it seems that from the time he began to delegate responsibilities to Ambassador College graduates, it did not take long for a very wrong orientation to set in among many. Ministers began to be encouraged to think of themselves as a "different class" than the brethren, and to keep their distance from the laity, lest the people fail to "respect" them. It became manifested in little ways, like a separate minister's dining room apart from the people, and Ambassador College students being indoctrinated with the idea they were the "elite" in the church. Is there any wonder we saw the ultimate abuses that took place? Young ministers—still wet behind the ears—were sent into the field with the notion they were "super-righteous." In spite of their lack of practical experience in life—as well as in serving the church—they were automatically "qualified" to tell the older and wiser men how things should be done. What folly. They did not really see themselves as servants to the people, but ones who had finally "arrived" and were ready to enjoy the fruits of their new political status. The result in many congregations across the U.S. and around the world was the very same class system which has always been so prevalent in human governments. And what was at the root of it? A lack of recognition that ordination and delegation was not given for personal status, but a tool for *service* to the sheep of God!

Mr. Raymond Cole understood that principle, and so even as the trend toward an elitist ministry set in, he refused to participate in that orientation. Mr. Cole practiced humility, compassion, and meekness in his dealings with God's children, and poured himself out in sacrifice for their benefit. He was not there to be served, but to serve. That was the example he maintained all those years in the Radio Church of God (later the Worldwide Church of God), and continued likewise in his service to Church of God, The Eternal. It was that example which made a huge impression on me from the time I first met him in person at age twenty.

Like all of you, I had many personal experiences with that elitist ministry over the years. In fact, those with such orientation seem to give off a certain aura when they come into a room. I saw it the whole time I was growing up in the church, including my time as

a student at Imperial Schools, my time at Ambassador College, and in weekly attendance at church services. Thanks to the training and influence of my own parents—who have been a great blessing to me—I knew that such arrogance was not the way that brought success in fulfilling a leadership responsibility. Then when I met Mr. Cole and began to learn from his example, I found a role model *in the ministry* who truly emulated those standards Jesus Christ commanded. Having no inclination to serve the church as a minister, I used those lessons from my parents and Mr. Raymond Cole to forge a successful career in the corporate world for eighteen years. I was promoted rapidly into higher and higher leadership positions, and I know that came because I was earnestly working to apply the right orientation to my work, and in dealing with people. I take no credit for that success. It was God's gift of training and opportunity that made those things come to pass. Through those experiences, I proved in my own life the value in being a true servant to those under my authority. When we view those offices as responsibilities and not badges of honor, then and only then are we in a position to fulfill God's law, no matter to which venue of life it may pertain.

With all of that being said, I want to lay out here in writing the standards which are required to be a successful ministering servant in this remnant body. I actually feel that all of you already know these things and have set an excellent example in practicing them. That is one reason we enjoy such peace and harmony as a whole at this time. But because I am now beginning to expand the roles of certain men through delegation, I want to be sure I do what is required of me before God to lay out specifically what is expected in the way we think about our work, and in the way we conduct ourselves as ambassadors of Jesus Christ. I do not want to be guilty of inadvertently allowing problems to foster in the future because I simply failed to communicate effectively our standard protocols for leadership. Therefore, the very principles I learned from Mr. Raymond Cole and have tried to practice are the very ones I want to emphasize here for all of you.

First, let me say that Mr. Cole set a very high standard in wisely handling problems and dealing with God's people. Mr. Jean Aviolat is now the most senior minister with us and continues to do just that in Switzerland, as he has since his affiliation with us in 1976. Mr. Aviolat is another, like Raymond Cole, who understands how to wisely deal with people. I do not remotely believe I have fully achieved that level. I continue to ask God to grant me the love, patience and wisdom needed to minister to His priceless children. But I do understand the difference in that which creates success, and that which undermines and stresses the body. Although I know I am "preaching to the choir," I want to be very clear in these expectations, so that we can all be assured of being on the same page in the future, and working collectively and harmoniously to represent Jesus Christ in this work of service.

Please keep in mind that we have seen many ministers in the U.S. come and go over the past thirty years through this remnant body. Mr. Cole was eager to accept them at face value when they said they truly loved God's Truth, and to use them as his assistants.

Unfortunately, every single one of them—sooner or later—proved that God's revelation was not truly paramount in their minds. And some of them were guilty of using that very same hard orientation toward the people which did so much damage in decades past. We believe God allowed these things specifically as tests for the people, to make us all prove what we really loved most. But as a shepherd responsible under Jesus Christ for His little ones, I intend to do everything in my power to set clear expectations for my helpers, so that we may continue to set a positive example overall. Given what many of our brethren have been through in the past, please keep in mind that some may be gun-shy at first about "new" men taking on greater responsibilities. That may have nothing to do at all with the men themselves, but the history and memories of those *past ones* who have come and gone, leaving a legacy of destruction in their wake. Yes, everyone should be evaluated only on the merits of their own fruits, but the reality is that those bad experiences from the past still linger and can easily come into play. Ignoring that fact and saying it should not be so does not change the reality. Those of you who recognize that past and are sensitive to it in the way you deal with the people will be wise indeed. Any who are oblivious to it will be asking for trouble. Remember, the Apostle Paul wisely adjusted his approach to the people based upon their backgrounds. He did not use a "one-size-fits-all" approach, like a bull in a china shop:

> For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more. And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. And this I do for the gospel's sake, that I might be partaker thereof with you (1 Corinthians 9:19–23).

Paul was not being a hypocrite by taking a different approach with different people. He was not playing politics or being two-faced. He was simply taking the peoples' past histories into consideration in how he approached them. By doing so, he was able to avoid hitting their "hot buttons," he was able to gain their trust, and he was then able to use that relationship to patiently guide them over time into greater spiritual maturity. There were even certain doctrines Paul chose not to emphasize at a particular time, lest it be more than they could bear for the moment:

> And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men (1 Corinthians 3:1–3)?

Raymond Cole wisely understood this same principle and worked to *time* his emphasis of instructions on certain principles, taking the spiritual level of the people into consideration. Please do not think this means Mr. Cole was one to shrink from telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I think all of you who knew him or have heard his sermons understand he was fearless in speaking the unadulterated Truth. His very actions in the wake of the apostasy of 1974 show he was more courageous than any other evangelist in the WCG at that time or any time since. He was not about to compromise God's Truth for anyone, and I mean *anyone*. Yet he was very astute to deal with individuals wisely to try and help them, based on where they were beginning. It is a lesson I learned from seeing him in action many times over the years. If I can impart one thing to all of you, it is to ask God for wisdom in knowing when and how to deal with different individuals under our charge.

Do not feel compelled to hit every individual with a laundry list of evident faults. In fact, specifically *resist* the urge to give unsolicited advice to *anyone* personally. The last thing we want is a state where the people try to hide when they see a minister coming because they expect a personal lecture or critique. Mr. Cole was very reluctant to point out specific faults to individuals. He thundered from the pulpit without reservation. That is how he fulfilled the charge to "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet, and show my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins" (Isaiah 58:1). All in our fellowship have received that powerful instruction, and those with ears to hear have heard. But Mr. Cole did not then walk around "trolling" for the chance to make mention of personal sins to individuals. Oh yes, he saw many things in personal behavior, appearance, or attitude in some that he did not condone at all. But he did not deem it necessary, helpful, or prudent to take people to task for such things. He was patient to give time for repentance, and to gently work with them over time to lead them to want to make the right choices out of personal conviction before God.

The ministry is absolutely accountable for putting blatant sin out of the church. We cannot allow wolves to devour the sheep. God will absolutely hold us accountable if we do so. That is why Mr. Cole *did* disfellowship a number of individuals over the years. I assure you he was not afraid to use his authority when it was appropriate. And he did so a number of times when humanly it seemed "politically dangerous." When we keep our eyes on God's Truth as the standard, then we can fulfill that charge without partiality. I too have had occasion (more than I would like) to disfellowship some from the Body. It never gives me pleasure to do so. I have even had to do so with three who were at the Feast with us this past year. (I have not made public announcements but have made sure all who might likely be contacted are aware to have nothing to do with them. If it becomes necessary to make a more broad, public announcement to protect the body, I will certainly do so.) I think those that know me well understand I am not one to be intimidated. But in keeping with Christ's teaching and Raymond Cole's wise example, I try to be very judicious in the exercise of that authority.

It was misguided for the ministry to think they could create a "perfect church" through aggressive drill-sergeant techniques and invasion into personal lives. The fruit of that orientation should now be obvious to all. It never created greater faith in the people, but merely generated anxiety among members and a defensive response to adopt facades to stay in good graces with the ministry. In their zeal to put out all vestige of sin, they did not really eradicate sin, but merely drove those human weaknesses underground. The sin was still there, because it had not been repented of or rooted out of the mind. It was only the outward appearance that might have improved, but for the wrong reason. God looks on the heart, so unless hearts and minds are changed, sin is still present. And the only way for sin to be truly put out is for each individual to *will* to overcome. Therefore, our role as ministering servants is not to create an atmosphere of fear, but to patiently encourage each one in the necessity of overcoming. If one truly becomes unruly and threatens our peace, then we will take action. But we will not be trigger-happy in that regard.

> Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine (2 Timothy 4:2).

As did Mr. Cole for over fifty years in the ministry, so will we. We will proclaim that Truth from the pulpit without reservation, but then we will be there as friends and benevolent counselors for each individual, dealing not harshly but lovingly with mercy and long-suffering.

Another key point to keep in mind is this: I can give all of you the *right* of authority in your local jurisdictions, which I have done. But you cannot truly *wield* that authority effectively unless the people accept you. Mr. Cole emphasized this point years ago in a sermon series he did on the subject of authority. God gives husbands the right of authority over wives. But if a wife refuses to submit to that authority, in effect, that husband has no authority at all, meaning he is powerless to use it as God intended. Oh yes, he still has the God-given *right* to it, but it becomes *useless* if the wife will not submit. Now it may not be the husband's fault at all. He may have done everything correct in loving his wife as Christ commanded. But regardless, the true *exercise* of authority requires all parties to fulfill their roles before God. Now I can tell the people to respect your offices as leaders in the church, and I have done so. But the reality is, in order for you to effectively serve the people, you must each earn their respect by judiciously using godly principles in your dealings with them. You may not have any alternative but to make someone upset, if he/she insists that you espouse a false doctrine to make him/her happy. If that is the case, do not worry about it. We are not for sale. But in most cases, the brethren in your jurisdictions are earnest, and they appreciate leaders who will continue to support and help them as advocates in Christ's service. Mr. Raymond Cole could not force the people to accept me. He told me from the beginning that my ability to be used in the future would depend upon how well the people responded. If they did so, Mr. Cole could delegate more to me. If the people did not

respond, he had no intention of cramming me down their throats. There is at least one minister I can think of years ago who Mr. Cole tried to use. He did everything he could to promote the man. But invariably, every time this man came back from a trip having visited brethren, there was animosity and hurt feelings to show for it. Mr. Cole was forced into a continual effort to do damage control behind him. This man became ineffective in really helping Mr. Cole and the church, because for whatever reason problems arose in his wake. In like manner, in order for me to truly be able to delegate more in the future, the fruits will have to be there in your successes in garnering respect and confidence. I am not advocating anyone pander for political support. Anyone who does so will go down in flames very quickly. Our brethren will spot a phony very quickly. They have seen many such in years past. I do not mean to make it seem that the challenge is daunting. I have confidence in the honesty and integrity of every one to whom I am addressing this letter. If you apply these principles from the heart, I know you will see the fruit of acceptance, and so will I see it

For the four "new" men who will begin to speak in the coming year, I offer this advice: I was an experienced public speaker in the business world for a number of years before Mr. Cole enlisted me to assist him in the ministry. But even so, he counseled me to move very slowly and judiciously in getting grounded in that new role as a teacher in this group. It has much less to do with age, experience, or past track record, as in recognizing that people require time to get accustomed to someone "new" in that role. Therefore, as Mr. Cole advised me, so I now advise you. In deciding what topics to cover in sermons and sermonettes, stick to the basics. Do not feel compelled to come up with something "new" that no one has ever covered. Repetition of the fundamentals is what we all need most anyway—those principles that are key to salvation. Also, avoid getting into anything that might be considered a "gray area." I have tackled a number of these things in recent months and years, but I never would have done so in 1996 or 1997 when I was first starting out as a teacher in this group. The people needed to first see that I was absolutely committed to the "trunk of the tree," as Mr. Armstrong called it. It was therefore important that I establish myself with credibility by proving I really did love the original doctrines, and would defend them no matter what. I had been a member of Church of God, The Eternal for fifteen years before I began to give sermons, therefore everyone should have known already I was solidly determined to defend the Truth, right? Wrong. The reality is, when one first stands to speak as a teacher, no matter how long he has been in the church, that man must prove—as from scratch—he is determined to teach only the real Truth. Remember, the people have seen many supposedly "strong" men come and go. There will be natural reservation and suspicion at first. Do not let that bother you. Accept it as a reality, and then use that understanding to invest in building your reputation by good fruits. Once enough time goes by to have built a strong foundation in people's minds, then one has more latitude—and credibility—to address things that might be more controversial. But in the meantime, defer any truly difficult issues to me, so that you men are not the ones playing the "point position." Mr. Cole did this for me, and allowed me time to get established. I think I am now in a position to do that for you.

I want to make some comments about the role of ministers' wives as well. Those of you with faithful wives know how critical they are to your ability to keep things in perspective. I can certainly tell you the support of my wife has been a real key to my ability to serve God's people effectively in the ministry. Not all of you have wives who are with you. Yet God has given you the strength you need to set a very marvelous example in the church in spite of that trial. I know He will continue to do so. But for those of you with wives in the church, let me give some advice on this topic.

Again, no matter how long you and your wife may have been in the church, once you step up to fill a significant leadership role in a particular congregation, your wives will fall under greater scrutiny as well. You will both be under the microscope, so to speak. I do not say that to make anyone paranoid. But it is a reality that we must think about, or else take the chance of making inadvertent mistakes by ignoring the reality. My wife did not want her "status" in the church to change after I was ordained. Kim did not want to be a minister's wife (and the truth is she still would prefer not to be). I think when she married me she felt absolutely safe because I did not appear in any way to be a "future minister type." Much to her chagrin, her life changed dramatically when I was drafted into service after nine years of marriage. Why? Some people automatically began to look at her more closely, either to see if something in her example was deficient, or alternatively to view her as a role model. She still is not truly comfortable with being looked at differently, either for good or for bad. But that is the reality. Mr. Cole encouraged Kim to use Mrs. Cole as a mentor to "learn the ropes." She did so, and I feel she has done a good job in avoiding certain natural pitfalls because of being conscious of certain specific principles. I would like to share some of those for the benefit of your wives as well.

Wives are helpers to their husbands, and key to helping them maintain peace of mind and focus to do their work. But ministers' wives are not "co-ministers." Because some in the church will naturally gravitate to seek counsel from the minister's wife—because she is an extension of her husband—we must all be very careful about allowing the wrong practice to creep in. Wives should avoid putting themselves in the position—or allowing someone else to put them in the position—of speaking for the ministry. They do not! If a question comes to a wife which is even *remotely* in the purview of the ministry, it should be referred to the ministry. Point that individual to the minister, even as any laymember of the church would be expected to do. We have seen more than one example in this remnant's history when a minister's wife seemed to relish the idea of exercising "influence" because of her husband's status. In fact, there are many in our group who got a very bad taste in their mouths because of this kind of thing. Knowing that is a historical fact with us, be very aware that those wives of "new ministers" will come under scrutiny as brethren attempt to discern if there are any political agendas. Because of this natural reality, our wives should go out of their way to avoid any interaction—verbal or written—that might possibly be interpreted as questionable. If in doubt on any issue, please feel free to consult with me. Mrs. Cole has done a wonderful

job of practicing these things over the years. I think my wife has learned how to do that as well. The brethren should see the silent strength and character of those wives behind their husbands. When they do, you will find your jobs as leaders in this body tremendously helped.

Next, Mrs. Cole learned in short order after becoming a minister's wife that she did not want to know details about people's problems in the church. The ministry must counsel people confidentially about very personal issues. Mr. Cole did not share most of those things with his wife, and neither do I share those things with Kim. On a number of occasions, people have approached my wife and begun to talk about very private matters, *assuming* that I share everything from my counseling with her. She has been quick to stop the conversation dead in its tracks and let them know she *does not* know those details and does not want to know them. I believe this is a very sound principle for all of us, and will not only preserve a sense of real confidentiality for those who come to the ministry for help, but also keep our wives from being in uncomfortable positions that could inadvertently create problems.

I know I could include additional points that might be helpful, but this letter is already very long indeed. Please know that I am so very grateful to God for preserving men like you who have a sincere love of God's Truth. It has been very key to our stability and strength in these past years, and especially since Mr. Cole's death. It is a pleasure to serve with each of you in this commission to care for the flock of God. Please let me know if there is anything I can answer for any of you as we move forward together.

Yours confidently in Christ Jesus,



Jon W. Brisby