

Fundamentals of Belief
#18A: What Is the Church?

Edited Sermon Transcript
Jon W. Brisby; 8-3-2002

This afternoon, brethren, we want to continue with this series on the Fundamentals of Belief of the Church of God, The Eternal. Having completed fundamental number seventeen, we are going to begin what I intend to be two sermons covering fundamental number eighteen. Let's read fundamental number eighteen, and see what material we're going to cover:

We believe the Church is merely that body of believers who have, and are being led by the Holy Spirit; that the true Church of God is not a denomination; that the inspired name for this spiritual organism is "THE CHURCH OF GOD;" that the Bible name for each local assembly is "THE CHURCH OF GOD," and, considered collectively, "The Churches of God;" that the mission of the Church in this time is to preach the Gospel (Good News) of the coming KINGDOM OF GOD . . . to reconcile to God, and to save, thru Christ, such people as are now called; and to minister to the Church of God, strengthening and edifying the brethren in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

That is fundamental number eighteen. So, we're actually going to cover that in two sections. This afternoon, I intend to cover the concept of what the Church really is; and then next time, we're going to cover this concept of the commission of the Church. I'm not going to go into greater detail on the commission aspect until next time, but just notice that this is the one fundamental that is different for Church of God, The Eternal than the way Mr. Armstrong originally wrote the fundamental for the Radio Church of God decades ago. How so? The original fundamental expanded this concept of the mission of the Church to preach the gospel, and included the phrase, "with special stress on the warning to America and Britain of the prophecies pertaining to them, into all nations as a witness, reaching the vast multitudes with power and conviction." This is the one element that Mr. Cole strongly felt had been

fulfilled by Mr. Armstrong and his personal ministry, which has already been completed—or else, if not completed, is yet to be completed through a commission given later in time before the return of Christ.

So, I'm not going to get into that because I am going to cover it in detail, but just to let you know that this is a fundamental in which we have a difference, a variation, from the original, by virtue of the fact that we, as a remnant body, have not presumed the authority of God to do a worldwide work. We believe that this was a mission that was given to Mr. Herbert Armstrong for the purpose of raising up the last-day Church, which is precisely what he accomplished. But having that mission accomplished, the Church, the firstfruits, having been raised up, then it is the mission of this remnant body to continue to hold fast and to be faithful to that original Way of Life that we were taught—to preach the gospel certainly enough, but to preach it in terms of helping those lost sheep find their home again.

Today, we want to focus on this concept of, "What Is the Church?" To begin with, the word that is translated as "church" in the New Testament is the Greek word *ekklesia*. It is a word that means: a popular meeting, especially a religious congregation, an assembly, a church. It means the called-out ones, and that is exactly what we're speaking of when we're talking about the Church. It is an assembly of those who have been called out, who have been made separate with a unique calling and a responsibility. So, "We believe the Church is merely that body of believers who have, and are being led by the Holy Spirit . . ." Now, what does that mean?

Well, let's begin and see it first in Romans chapter 8 and verse 9:

But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his.

What does this tell you about those who truly have a close, personal relationship with Jesus Christ? It is not just a matter of being part of a physical assembly of people who come together every Sabbath; no, the Church really is made up of those members who have the indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that makes us a member of the Church. ". . . if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." So, those who are really a part of the

Church are those who have the indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit. Being a physical member of a particular organization does not make one part of the Church, because that Church of God, the very Body of Jesus Christ, is a spiritual organism. It is a spiritual entity, not a physical entity at all. Now, certainly, because that Spirit lives and dwells within physical human beings, there is a physical aspect to it. We are all in the flesh, and those that have been called to be a part of the Church are flesh and blood human beings. We have assemblies, and we come together into an assembly, even as we are right now, and we see each other. We look around and see the faces of those that are sitting within this convocation. And so, we are members of the church; and yet, truly, the Church is limited to those who have that Holy Spirit dwelling within them. As I have explained it in times past, it's the difference between the Church with a capital "C" and the church with a little "c." What do I mean by that? The Church with a capital "C" is the Body of Christ.

Let's notice Colossians 1 and verse 18. Speaking of Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul says:

And he is the head of the body, the church [We see that the Body of Christ is defined as the Church.]: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence.

Yes, He is the head of the Body, and that Body is the Church. So, we are speaking of the very Body of Jesus Christ, defined as the Church. That, then, is the capital "C" Church because it is a part of Christ—it is led by and filled with His Holy Spirit. You will notice in our writings in the *Monthly Letter* and the *Announcement Letter*, there is a distinction in the way that we use that. When we are referring specifically to the Body of Christ, we will spell church with a capital "C." When, in contrast, we are referring more specifically to a physical assembly of those who come and meet, we will use a little "c." So, the capital "C" is restricted specifically to those in whom the Spirit of God dwells. Now, we come together in a church assembly every Sabbath; and so, we have many members who come and who are a part of the church, little "c." They come to the physical assembly of this body on the Sabbath Day in this hall where we meet. But it is only those who are baptized—who have actually accepted that Way of Life, who have, by the laying on of hands, received the down payment of the Holy Spirit dwelling within their minds and their hearts—that are actually a part of the Body of Christ, the capital "C" Church. That's the distinction.

1 Peter 2 and verse 4:

To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious [That's referring to Jesus Christ. And then, verse 5:], Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.

That Church, that assembly of those in whom dwells God's Holy Spirit, is a spiritual house. It is a spiritual temple. It is an assembly of those led by the Holy Spirit.

Notice, then, Ephesians 2 and verse 19:

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

So, it is a building. That Church is symbolically compared to a building, Christ being the cornerstone—the very foundation of that entire structure. Each one of you, then, as "lively stones," as we just saw in 1 Peter 2, are put together and built upon the foundation, which is Christ. Verse 21:

In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit which is that special ingredient that makes one a part of the very Church of God. The presence of the Holy Spirit, living and dwelling within your heart and mind, is that which makes you, if you want to call it, a card-carrying member of the Body of Christ. Without the Holy Spirit, there is no membership, there is no fellowship with Christ. It is only through the power of that Spirit, which tells us very significantly, brethren, how important it is that we not quench that Spirit in our lives. Just because we've been given the right, just

because we've committed ourselves in that vow of baptism, does not mean that we forever and ever have that Holy Spirit flowing and dwelling within us. We can quench that Spirit, as we have seen in other sermons. To be a continuing member of that Body, we must continue to work to stir up that Spirit within us so that the very mind of Christ lives and dwells in us and motivates our actions and our behaviors. And then, we are a part of that Body. So, the Church of God is that body of believers who have, and are being led by, the Holy Spirit, as we have seen.

Next, we find that the true Church of God is also not a denomination. It is not a denomination. We've already seen the difference between the Body of Christ as a spiritual organism versus a physical assembly of people who come together for a meeting. The true Church is not a denomination. You cannot look at any group of physical beings that are together and say that these are all necessarily a definition of the Church. In any group of human beings, you may have some who are, and some who are not, actually led by the Holy Spirit; and yet God said we are not to judge. We're going to talk about that a little bit later when we get into some of these other principles concerning the Church.

The Church is not a denomination. The Body of Christ cannot be defined by a physical organization. And so, that was the thing, brethren, that became very important to us at the time of the apostasy over a quarter of a century ago when that Truth began to be perverted by a physical organization—a ministry who had been entrusted with the responsibility to hold fast to the very truths of God and to preach Christ revealed, and none other. They did just that for forty years until they began to tamper with it and make changes and alterations, and yet we were told, "Whatever you do, don't ever leave the church." Isn't that what we heard? What lesson was it that we all had to learn in time, which God mercifully taught us? The Church is not synonymous with a physical organization. It was not then. We looked at it and most of us thought that the Church was synonymous with membership in the Worldwide Church of God. There is no question that the Worldwide Church of God was God's true Church. It was the physical body that was organized by the minister that God raised up and to whom He gave His priceless Way of Life. It began as the physical organization of those who contained the indwelling presence of God's Holy Spirit guiding them. The problem was, when the leadership of that body began to tamper with the revelation, they threw out the cornerstone—Jesus Christ. As a physical organization, then, they no longer possessed the guiding of God's Spirit, and God was no longer there.

The physical organization continued. It looked very much like it always had, with the majority of the people who had been there. The ministers whom we had heard before, were still getting up and preaching; and yet that physical organization ceased to be the true Church of God—the faithful Church of God. Oh, they were still God's people. They still are God's people. They still are His chosen—those whom He called out and to whom He gave that priceless opportunity. They still have a right to it. God separated them out. They accepted that Way of Life like you did, through baptism, but they have quenched that Spirit by embracing false doctrines regarding the Day of Pentecost and divorce and remarriage, rejecting divine healing, the proper concept of the nature of man, and all of the other myriad doctrines that were perverted and watered down. God ceased to be with them, and therefore, it was no longer possible for you to attend a meeting in that physical organization and to be coming into the very presence of Jesus Christ. He wasn't there. It was not an assembly of the Body of Christ any longer, because Christ had been rejected. Christ had been thrown out like garbage. In order to continue to meet and to come into God's presence in a physical body—to have God, to have Jesus Christ, actually be a part of and come and dwell in those assemblies—we had to find a place where the Truth was being taught in an uncorrupted manner. We had to find a faithful servant who was continuing to hold on to the very basis of the foundation that we had been taught from the beginning, without corrupting it. In that way, my dear brethren, we were able to continue in a fellowship of the very Body of Jesus Christ.

But the true Church of God is not a denomination. You cannot put a fence around a physical group of people and say, at any given time, that every human being within that configuration is necessarily a part of the Church. They might be a part of a physical body who comes and meets on a regular basis, but it does not mean that they are members of the Body of Christ. Only if they have the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit are they a part of that Body.

The other thing that Mr. Armstrong emphasized many times that we want to cover here: One cannot choose to join the Church. One cannot choose to join God's Church. No, God must put you into the Church. It's quite a different concept than what many people have learned from the churches of this world. The idea is, any time you want to, you can choose to embrace Christ. You can volunteer to be a Christian. Isn't that what you've been taught (for those of you who had that experience)? You can go to the church on the corner and volunteer

to become a member of that body, and most likely, you would be welcomed with open arms. You can join the church. You can decide, by picking up your Bible and reading it, that you are going to seek Christ, that you are going to be a member of the church, and that you are going to live your life after Jesus Christ; and so, you are going to join the church of Jesus Christ. That's what the world's concept is—that those who are members of the church are those who have volunteered and decided to commit themselves to that way of life. The problem is, as we understand it, one of the key fundamental teachings that we learned from Mr. Armstrong is that nobody chooses to join the Church; it only comes by a calling. It is God who places each individual, of His choice, within the Body of that assembly.

Acts 2, verse 47: "Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved." How was it that new members of that first-century Church came to be a part of that Body of assembly? It wasn't because, first and foremost, they were volunteers for Christ. No, it was because Jesus Christ called them. It was God, then, who ". . . added to the Church daily such as should be saved." It was Jesus Christ, as an agent of the Father, who placed every member within the Body.

God's chosen nation of Israel from antiquity was also called His church, and we understand it from a national standpoint that no one could volunteer to be a physical Israelite, could they? A physical Israelite was one who was born as a descendant of Jacob; so you couldn't decide, if you were born of a totally different family, that you were going to become an Israelite. You are what you are born in the flesh. We have the DNA that dictates precisely what we are and who our ancestors are. So, if we were not born as a physical descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then we were not Israelites by birth, and no amount of volunteering will ever make us a physical Israelite. As we're going to see, the same thing applies in the Spirit as well. But let's notice Acts 7, verse 37. God's chosen nation of Israel was also called His church. They were a physical body. It was not a spiritual organism at all, like the Church is today, but it certainly was a church.

Acts 7:37:

This is that Moses, which said unto the children of Israel, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear.

Of course, Moses was referring, in prophecy, to the very coming of Jesus Christ. Verse 38:

This is he, that was in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sina, and with our fathers: who received the lively oracles to give unto us.

So, that Being whom Moses worshiped, with whom Moses counseled on the mountain and from whom he received the Ten Commandments, was none other than the One who became Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was the first King of Israel. He was the direct King of that nation that He formed and brought up out of Egypt. He made them a nation. He brought them through the wilderness, and He made a covenant with them. They became His chosen people; they became a church. They became the "church in the wilderness." They were a physical people. By birth, He chose them—those who were the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No others qualified. They were a chosen nation, and in that way, no one else could ever volunteer to be a part of that physical nation. If you weren't there by birth, then you could never become an Israelite in the flesh. Now, there were many who attached themselves to the nation, and as we're going to see, God's Church has always existed in a mixed multitude. But I don't want to get ahead of myself. So, yes, there were those who attached themselves to that nation, who were not Israelites at all, but who gained blessings from being associated with God's people. If they adhered to the very code of conduct defined in those laws, then they also received blessings by their affiliation with that nation. But they could not make themselves Israelites. They were what they had been born.

So, in the flesh, when we're speaking of the history of God's church in the wilderness, we are speaking about a church whose membership was defined by birth. It is distinguished, now, very significantly from the Church of the New Testament, if you want to call it that—the Body of Christ—which is also Israel because the Church is spiritual Israel. But it is made up of not just the physical descendants of Jacob—not at all—but of those from all nationalities whom God has selected and chosen and put into that Body, whether Jew or Gentile. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit through baptism, dwelling within each one of those, that makes them a spiritual Israelite.

It is an incredible miracle when you compare the aspects of that spiritual Church, that organism which is the Body of Christ, to its physical counterpart in ancient Israel. But all of the same rules apply, and even as one could not volunteer to be a physical Israelite if they were not so born by birth, neither can one volunteer to be a member of the Church if God has not called and opened the mind and given that opportunity to them. No one volunteers to be a part of the Church. The only members of the Church are those who have first received a call—received the call from God, given that opportunity, had that veil lifted from their eyes so that they could understand the Truth. Then, yes, those individuals must use their personal volition to accept that call and to decide to walk in that way, to begin a life of personal self-crucifixion and overcoming. Then, through baptism, they receive, by the laying on of hands, the down payment of the Holy Spirit dwelling within them, and they become a member of Israel of the Spirit—a member of the very Church of God, the Body of Jesus Christ.

John 6:44—one of those you probably have memorized, the very basis of this fundamental teaching that we received so many years ago which made our doctrine stand out so distinctly from all of those other churches who claim to be Christian. "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him . . ." It is not the volition of a human being to become a Christian—never has been, never will be. No human being, no matter how well-meaning they are, no matter how zealous they are to want to do good and to obey God, if it is not the time that God has chosen to call that individual, they *cannot* become a Christian. It is by invitation only. When you think about it in terms of the population of six billion plus who live and breathe on this earth right now, only a very minute few at this time have been given that priceless opportunity to be invited into the Body of Christ. And then, it still takes our volition to accept that call, to begin to walk in that way. But "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him . . ." Those of you, brethren, that are here, who are members of that Body, it is because you were given that priceless invitation. You are a part of the very Body of Christ, the Church, because God singled you out even before the foundation of the world, knew you by name, and had determined to give you this opportunity. You have that opportunity to walk in that way, to be a member of that Church.

John 15 and verse 16:

Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain . . .

So, Christ is spelling it out very clearly, and as it applied to those disciples who became apostles, so it applies to everyone who is called and made a part of that Body.

Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.

What a priceless opportunity, if you've received that calling, to know that you are one of the few at this given time who has an opportunity to cry out to God in the very name of Jesus Christ, our Elder Brother and High Priest, and to have those prayers actually be accepted at the very throne of the Father—to be able to beseech the Father in the name of Jesus Christ and know that He will answer, that He is close by, and that He will hear. That is not a gift that has been given to very many human beings at this time. Yes, there is a day coming when all humanity is going to have that opportunity. After the return of Jesus Christ, the minds of all human beings are going to be opened, and they're going to have that chance to have what you have now—that calling, that priceless gift. But for right now, brethren, you are some of the very few beings on the face of the earth who have been given the call and the opportunity to become a part of that Church. Verse 17:

These things I command you, that ye love one another. If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but *I have chosen you out of the world*, therefore the world hateth you.

Yes, my dear brethren, you have been, in essence, plucked right out of the world. You have been singled out for a special calling. You have been derailed from the path of life that you would have taken by nature. God sidetracked you and said, "No, I want you for a special purpose. I determined it thousands of years before you were even born. I knew who you were and that I was going to give you this opportunity. You are special and unique, not because you are more worthy or

worth more than any other human being, but because I preordained it. And now, I'm selecting you and giving you this opportunity to be a part of the very Body of that Son." Those of you who have accepted that calling, you did receive, through the laying on of hands at baptism, the indwelling presence of the very mind of Jesus Christ, which made you a part of the Church.

As I alluded to earlier, the Church exists, and has always existed, within a mixed multitude.

Notice first Exodus 12 and verse 37:

And the children of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand on foot that were men, beside children. And a mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, even very much cattle.

So here, we have the story of the exodus from Egypt. After God had made of Israel a great nation, He miraculously brought them out with a high hand, and all of the peoples of Egypt had an opportunity to see the magnificent work of that God. Through the course of ten plagues upon Egypt, probably over at least the span of a year in duration, they saw the mighty hand of the intervention of a powerful God who was unlike any of the gods of wood and stone that they worshiped. This was a magnanimous God. This was an all-consuming Being who was to accomplish His will in whatever He chose to do, and He chose Israel. He chose to protect them, to bring them out, and to make a nation of them. Therefore, even the greatest nation on the earth at that time, which was Egypt, and the power, the might of that nation, its wealth and its armies, could not fight against God and His will. In spite of that which Pharaoh attempted to do in contending with that God and asserting his authority, God made an example of him. Through ten incredible, miraculous plagues, He humbled the Egyptians, and He brought Israel out with a high hand.

Now, you can bet that when others saw that kind of magnificent power manifested, they wanted to get close to it. Some of them wanted a piece of the action, if they could get it. They saw that those people were blessed. They saw that there was an incredible power supporting them, furthering their cause, helping them, and aiding them. And there were those who were saying, "Hey, that's the

place to be. They've got something no one else has. They have a powerful God who's greater than any god we've ever known, who has promised them incredible blessings in a Promised Land. Let's attach ourselves to them because only good things are happening to this people." That's exactly what happened, and that's precisely why the children of Israel came out of Egypt in a mixed multitude. There were non-Israelites. We don't know exactly how many, but it certainly appears that there was a significant number. A significant number of non-Israelites were swept up in the very power of God's work in those that He was working with. They wanted some benefits from that, and so they decided, "Here is this slave nation that's now coming to prominence through the supernatural power of a God that we've never seen before. We want to stay close by. We want some of the crumbs that are going to fall off our way." And so, you can bet that all of these other foreigners, non-Israelites, attached themselves to that nation and came out with Israel, expecting to share in the benefits that God was going to give them. "And a mixed multitude went up also with them; and flocks, and herds, even very much cattle."

What was the result, down the line, when they got into the wilderness? We all know the story, but turn quickly to Numbers chapter 11 and verse 4, and we find one example of the influence of that mixed multitude—Israelites and non-Israelites together in that convoy of nations.

And the mixt multitude that was among them fell a lusting: and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat?

So here's one example that seems to indicate that these non-Israelites who were among God's people began to complain first, at least in this particular instance, when everything didn't go as anticipated. They thought they were going to derive all of these immediate benefits and blessings from being with God's people, but God let all of them get hungry and thirsty in the wilderness. It just makes perfect sense that these others would say, "Now, wait a minute, I thought this was the God who was going to bless and take care of these people. Now we're all about to die. This isn't what we bargained for at all." And so, these foreigners, who were not really a part of Israel, started murmuring and complaining, but the physical Israelites were no different. They were spiritual Gentiles, just like all human beings are spiritual Gentiles without the very mind of Jesus Christ. Yes,

they were Israel of the flesh, but they were Gentiles of the Spirit. They did just like their foreign counterparts did—they took up the wailing, the complaining and the accusations against Moses, and the diatribes, in essence, against God.

And the mixt multitude that was among them fell a lusting: and the children of Israel also wept again, and said, Who shall give us flesh to eat?

It's an indication here, and so it has carried forward, brethren, that those who may not truly be a part of God's nation are always there. There are always those elements that are around because they are attracted to the benefits that come from the blessings that God has given to His chosen people. Very often, they may actually be a source of temptation and trial for God's people if we're not very careful.

Notice Matthew 13 and verse 24. As it was in ancient Israel, so it is in the times of today concerning spiritual Israel, the Church. Here we have the parable that Jesus Christ spoke concerning that mixed multitude.

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field.

What is this field? We're going to talk about this when we get down to it.

. . . is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? [Are we going to separate them out, pull the tares out?] But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. [Verse 30:] Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

So, there is the parable of the wheat and the tares, which was always defined in the Church, and confirmed by Mr. Raymond Cole, as a picture of the church, little "c"—not capital "C," not the Body of Christ, because the capital "C" Church is only those in whom dwell the Holy Spirit. But we're also talking about a physical assembly of the people of God, the assembly of those who come together in meeting, whether on the Sabbath Day or at the Feast of Tabernacles. And yet, you can bet, to a certain extent, there is always a mixed multitude of both those who have and those who do not truly possess the Holy Spirit. Now, we're not to judge. You can't know, brethren, and I can't know the difference between a wheat and a tare in its formative stage. That's why God said, "Judge not, that you be not judged," because you or I may very likely make a huge mistake in trying to assign someone as a tare because we think we know. No, you don't. You might just be dealing with a very weak piece of wheat. You might be dealing with one who absolutely is one of those priceless ones that God is working with, who just has serious problems which they are fighting at the time. If we're too quick to judge, we may likely be hanging a millstone around the neck of one of His priceless ones, which is why God said, "Judge not, that you be not judged." Don't condemn anyone, brethren, and say that they are not truly a member of the Church. You don't know it, and I don't know it. We don't know the difference between the wheat and the tares because they look exactly alike in the formative stage. God hasn't given us the ability to discern the difference. And so, within the church (little "c"), the body of physical beings who come into assembly together, we can expect that at any given time, we are a mixed multitude.

In verse 36, Jesus Christ gives the explanation for this parable.

Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field. He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world.

Now, there have been some who have legitimately asked the question, "How can it be that we say that this symbolic field that Jesus Christ pictured in this parable is the church, and that within the church there are wheat and tares together, when Christ Himself said in verse 38 that the field is the world?" That's a very legitimate question. Is it contradictory? How can it be a picture of that which we have heard and learned all of these years—that this parable is speaking about a mixed multitude within the physical body of the church—when Christ Himself said that the field is the world? Is there an explanation? There certainly is.

The very context of the parable shows us, brethren, the fact that Christ said that this parable was like unto a man who sowed good seed in his field. Now, stop and think about when you prepare a field for planting, do you have a whole field full of thorns and thistles, and then you drop your good seed in among them? Is that the way you plant a field? Or, do you turn under and prepare that soil so that you have a clean field, and then you plant precisely what you want in that field? Isn't that the way it works when you farm? We saw in the beginning of the parable, back in verse 24, ". . . The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field." Now, that field started with what? Good seed. How did the tares get there? Were they already there? Is this synonymous with the world of unconverted people who are all under the sway of Satan, and that good seed was dispersed all over the world within the tares? Is that what this parable is speaking of? Not at all. We are talking about a field that was segregated out—made separate, made special—for the purpose of growing a particular crop. It was prepared, and it was good seed that was planted in that crop. The parable also tells us that it was the tares that came in after the fact. We didn't start with a world full of unconverted heathens into which the good seed was planted. We started with a special, segregated field that began with only good seed, and then the tares were planted in among the good seed. They came in afterward.

That is precisely why the ministry interpreted this as a picture of the physical body of the church, and that within that assembly at any given time, you have a mixture of those that God placed in the Church, the Body of Christ, through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, with some who crept in and were there for a wrong reason. They were not truly members of the Church, but they were members of the church in a mixed multitude. But that still doesn't answer the question of why Jesus Christ said in verse 38 that the field is the world. Should He not have said that the field is the church, if that's what it meant? And really, what

you find is that Christ is referring here to the world of that physical body of human beings—the world, meaning the population of those who come together in assembly, the church. That's what He calls the "world." He's not referring to the Body of Christ. He says that the field is the world—the plot that was segregated out for that special purpose, in which the Church would be planted—and yet within that field, which is pictured by the world, He would allow others to creep in and have their part in that assembly.

So, here, Christ is not speaking of the globe with all humanity. He is speaking about the limited world of the physical church, the physical organization we call the church, in which abides, at any given time, those who are truly of the Body of Christ and those who are actually considered the tares. When you understand it in that context, brethren, it makes perfect sense. This is a parable that God gave us to understand that we would exist in a mixed multitude and that it would be allowed for a specific reason, which then helps us to understand the context of 1 Corinthians 11, verse 16. Let's turn there.

But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God. Now in this that I declare unto you I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse.

So, here, Paul is addressing problems that were going on in what? The world? No, he was addressing problems that were going on in the church, the physical assembly of those who claimed to be a part of the Body of Christ, who were coming together in convocation to worship.

. . . I praise you not, that ye come together not for the better, but for the worse. For first of all, when ye come together *in the church*, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it. For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you.

This tells you, brethren, that God intentionally allowed the Church to be influenced and affected in the environment of a mixed multitude for reason—for the trial and the purification of His chosen people. There's a reason that God allowed Satan to sow tares among the wheat. That field represents the physical assembly of

those who come and attend—the world, in that regard—the world of the church, but within that, only some of them are truly the Church, the Body of Christ, those in whom the Holy Spirit is working and producing fruit. The tares, then, are taking up space and are that negative element which is causing temptation and trouble. It's there for a reason, brethren. God allowed it as an express part of His will for the development of character in those with whom He is working in these last days.

"For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you." And so, we have seen that over time. We have seen those that have come and gone, and you know what? We still don't know the difference. A tare was never a piece of wheat, but we don't know the difference. God hasn't given us the capacity to know the difference between a tare and one of His called and chosen, represented by the wheat, who is just weak and has stumbled. We're not going to draw conclusions, and we're not going to make judgments. We're going to treat every single one who has come into affiliation with us as if they are one of those priceless ones that are there for the right reason. We're going to do everything that we can to help and to support them as long as they want it. We're not going to compromise the Truth. We're not going to bend and twist the very words of Jesus Christ, the doctrines, to make any human being happy. I'm not concerned at all, brethren, about supporting or furthering the individual causes of people who have come up with ideas on their own about prophetic interpretation, or what the church should be doing, or how we should be behaving. I'm going to stand fast to what I know that I've seen produce good fruit within the church and of those ministers who have faithfully held on. And then, I'm going to let God do the rest of the work in the way that He works in the lives of those whom He has called to be a part of us. But I'm going to treat every single one as if they are one of those priceless ones. I haven't been given the ability to tell the difference, and so everyone gets the benefit of the doubt.

And yet, we know that there are some who have been with us in the past, and there has been turmoil, problems, and difficulties that we have faced. That need not, brethren, dissuade us from believing that God is guiding, leading, and directing the activity of His Church. There are all too many who want to look at a physical organization and say, "Well, if I see any problems, then that can't be God's Church because God's Church is going to be pure; it's going to be totally without problem and difficulty." They totally lack the understanding of the fact that we are all in the process of growing and overcoming. The members of God's Church, the Body of

Christ, are all at different levels of spiritual development along that path. Yes, those who have been in the Church the longest should be manifesting the best fruits. Those that have been a member of the Body of Christ and who have had access to the Holy Spirit the longest, certainly should be the examples. It's not always the case. But certainly, at any given time, brethren, you're going to see a body that is made up of weak human beings who are all fighting the carnality of natural natures, and unfortunately, those things are going to be manifested. It should not discourage us or make us question whether or not it's God's operation, His Body, at all. We understand that God did say that He was going to allow certain things to exist for reason—to test us, to try us, and to purify us, to make us stand before Him and make that absolute commitment to the Truth and apply it in our lives, to put on that armor, that righteousness, the ability to act upon our beliefs. And so, those things are allowed within the Church for a reason.

God said that He was going to let the tares grow up, but to leave them alone. He's the One who's going to make the determination in the Judgment. He's the One, at the return of Jesus Christ, who's going to separate the wheat from the tares. That judgment, then, is going to be applied. All things are going to be known and revealed. We are not given the ability to know now, and we need not worry or fret about it. No matter what manifested weaknesses they have, as long as they are willing to be with us, pour yourselves out as a living sacrifice to help cover the sins of the weak. Make yourselves a living sacrifice as Jesus Christ did for each one of us.

So, that Church is a living organism, the very Body of Christ. The Body of Christ exists within a church, pictured by that field, that has always been within a mixed multitude.

Next, as a part of that fundamental, we believe ". . . that the inspired name for this spiritual organism is 'THE CHURCH OF GOD;' that the Bible name for each local assembly is 'THE CHURCH OF GOD,' and, considered collectively, 'The Churches of God . . .'" Let's just notice a few of those passages which show the name that was used most frequently to define that Body and assembly of those that Christ was working with. There are actually twelve uses in the New Testament of the term "churches of God." It is the most prevalent name that's given, but there are two others. We want to look at those first.

Romans 16:16: "Salute one another with an holy kiss. The churches of Christ salute you." So, someone could certainly point to this text as a justification for why they would name themselves "The Church of Christ," I suppose.

In like manner, the one other, Hebrews chapter 12 and verse 23:

To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect.

So, it's called the "church of the firstborn," which is another name for Christ, and I haven't looked, but I expect that there are some churches that probably call themselves "The Church of the Firstborn." We know that there's a whole lot that call themselves "The Church of Christ." But the thing that we learned is that, by far, the predominate name which is repeated over and over and over again to define the Body of those believers, is none other than "The Church of God." These two passages we just read are the only two exceptions where it's called something else.

Acts 20 and verse 28:

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.

Here, it is definitely called "The Church of God," and when we come to recognize, brethren, that we're talking about a God Family—a Father and a Son who are working in absolute harmony and collective unity in mind and in Spirit for this work—then it is most appropriate, when you really stop to think about it, that the Body of those believers carry the very name of the God Family. They carry the name of that collective Family—the Church of God. And so, here in Acts 20, we see a reference to the name "The Church of God" as it applies to the global organism of that Body. It's used in terms of the spiritual organism as a whole. Let's see some other examples.

1 Corinthians 15 and verse 9: "For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Here, Paul is rehearsing that which he regretted in his zeal before he was called, living that

which he thought was in righteous honor of God, and he didn't know God at all. And yet, God called him and showed him what he was and that he had persecuted the Church of God. That wasn't just a single local assembly that he persecuted. He wasn't just persecuting ones in Jerusalem. No, Saul, as he was called before God changed his name, went from city to city, rounding up those who had embraced this way of life called Christianity. When he's talking about persecuting the Church of God, he is talking about the collective spiritual organism of those believers that he was at war with in various cities all over the region. ". . . because I persecuted the church of God."

Now notice Galatians 1 and verse 13:

For ye have heard of my conversation in time past in the Jews' religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the church of God, and wasted it.

Here is another reference by Paul to that global spiritual organism of the Church, which he persecuted.

1 Timothy 3 and verse 15:

But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is *the church of the living God*, the pillar and ground of the truth.

Here, it's forcefully called "The Church of God," and it refers to that global organism of the Body of Christ.

Now, more specifically, as Mr. Armstrong said, every local assembly was also called "The Church of God"—not just the Church as a whole, all of those who were a part of the Body of Christ, no matter where they lived in the world—but even every local assembly, every congregation, even as the one that we are a part of right here, was also called individually "The Church of God."

Let's notice 1 Corinthians 1 and verse 1:

Paul called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, Unto the church of God which is at Corinth . . .

So, here we see the very name "Church of God" used with application to one particular congregation in a city called Corinth. It had the very same name as the global organism of the Church.

Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's.

Here, Paul refers first to the local assembly of those in Corinth, but then he expands to say that he's also taking into consideration all of those who have embraced Jesus Christ, become a part of His Body—members of the Church—both in that local congregation as well as the other congregations, wherever they were in the region.

Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with *all that in every place* call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's.

So, he's referring collectively to the entire Body, and specifically to the local congregation in Corinth, and calling them both "The Church of God."

What about the collective assemblies of these individual congregations?

Notice 1 Corinthians 11:16. Here we find one of the examples of the term the "Churches of God," even as Mr. Armstrong said that, considered collectively, they're called the "Churches of God." When you're referring to each individual congregation, but thinking of each of those congregations together, still with their respective jurisdictions—when you think of them individually, but collectively as a group—then it's used in the plural. "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God." In that regard, when he says "churches of God," he's referring to each individual assembly, wherever they might be, but he's saying there is "no such custom in any of the churches of God," meaning, in any of those local assemblies. But collectively they are called the "Churches of God."

1 Thessalonians 2 and verse 14:

For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews.

Here is another reference, as the Apostle was thinking in terms of a collective group of individual assemblies all worshiping in the name of God in their respective places, but speaking of them as a group and calling them the "Churches of God."

One more—notice 2 Thessalonians 1 and verse 4:

So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure.

Here, again, Paul is thinking about the individual assemblies where God had placed His name, which were scattered about that whole region, those who were worshiping and keeping the Sabbath and the Holy Days, and were led by the Holy Spirit in those congregations. As he thought of each one of them separately, yet collectively, he spoke of them in the plural as the "Churches of God." And so, it confirms precisely what Mr. Armstrong taught us, that the predominate name given in the New Testament for the assembly of God's faithful people was "The Church of God," as a spiritual organism. The title for each individual assembly is "The Church of God," wherever it may be, and collectively they are called the "Churches of God."

So, brethren, that does complete the first part of this analysis of the definition of God's Church. Next time, we want to look in detail at this concept of the commission of that Church—past, present and future. Next time.