

Starting Over

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Good morning everyone! I heard a sermon once, years ago, and I try to take this approach whenever I prepare and whenever I speak. It's kind of an outline for a prayer – not a written prayer, but more of an outline. It goes, “Help me to study and meditate without bias anger, and try not to express my own opinion, my own personal agenda.” That has happened far too often in the past. And the next bullet in that short list is, “Help me to drink in and be satisfied with God’s word, His pure word.” I try not to put a spin on it and make it say something it really doesn’t say to prove a point. And the next is, “Help me to follow wherever those words and instructions from God’s word will lead me, and help me to never, ever use God’s word or this position, the opportunity and privilege to speak to God’s people, to berate someone or disparage someone.”

To get into the sermon, I have a cartoon here, which I know unfortunately you can’t see, but this character is Ziggy. He’s a little rotund character, and he’s looking at a poster up on the wall, and it says “Things to do”. He’s looking at it and it has a 1,2,3 list. First says, “Pick yourself up”, second says “Dust yourself off”, and the third says, “Start all over again”. I’ve looked at that many times, since the first time that Worldwide was breaking up, I captured that cartoon. We were kind of in that position, we had to start all over again, and we find ourselves doing that same things again.

This is not necessarily a “how to” on starting over, but I’m going to go over some of the things that we’ve found and experienced along the way. The main point is, if we don’t learn the lessons, we’re going to repeat the same things over and over. We need to remember Christ’s words in Matthew 16:18, where He says, “I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” He meant of course, His church, His called out ones, His people, would sometimes struggle to hold together and history shows that that has happened more often than not. God gives the trials to us individually, and He certainly gives the trials to the organizations and the church. I don’t know about you, but that’s the main way that I’ve learned lessons through my life, and I’m approaching 70 pretty quickly here.

Some of the information I have today didn’t originate with me, and like most of you I’ve collected a lot of information of the years. The internet is loaded with information, it’s like a constant river. You can get any kind of positive or negative outlook towards the church or the brethren or any of the doctrine and beliefs that we have. You can get any kind of an approach you want. The approach that I look for is a balanced approach. Someone who doesn’t attack and is not vicious in their approach. There are people out there who have a lot of hate, and I try to avoid that. I don’t give that kind of information too much credibility. That’s kind of a disclaimer, and I know I’m preaching to the choir here!

I would like to start out with a few fundamental questions. I just have a few bullets, and I’m going to try to cover at least two of these throughout the message.

1. Why do people leave?
2. How to avoid repeating the same mistakes
3. What do we do now?

Some of the reasons that people leave, and again this information didn't originate with me and you may have heard it before:

- A. People leave for conscience's sake. It could be over doctrine – we can all relate to the fact that we've seen doctrinal changes throughout the years, and sometimes that upsets people and they leave. God says we need faith to continue what we're doing, and if that is damaged in some way, some may simply choose to follow that faith somewhere else. I remember one example from years ago, when Herbert Armstrong changed the divorce and remarriage doctrine. A lot of people took offence to that, and they thought that he did it primarily so that he himself could marry a divorcee, after his first wife had died. Not to get into that at all, but the point being, people took offense to that, and they have at other doctrines also throughout the years. Some people's conscience has been affected because they've seen sin in the church, some at leadership level, which has not been dealt with. So their conscience has stricken them to the point where they simply had to leave.

Some have seen dishonesty. This is simply my opinion, but we had a tithing system that was somewhat abusive. We went back years ago and I counted five tithes - first, second, third, tithe of a tithe, and excess second tithe. That was an abusive system and some people left over that. In some cases, it caused financial ruin – we saw a number of cases of that.

Other issues of the conscience might be corrupt leadership. I think we all saw that as Worldwide broke up. We were being lied to for a number of years there, until most of us reached our point where we couldn't tolerate that any longer and we simply got up and left. We couldn't vote, but you can vote with your feet! So we left.

- B. A lot of people left because they were disfellowshipped, and there were also a lot of reasons for that. It could have been over doctrine or disagreements, or it could have been over anything as simple as voicing an opinion.
- C. A lot of people left for personal conflicts. They couldn't get along with the leadership or maybe someone in the church that they had a problem with. We saw a number of cases of that as well.
- D. People felt they couldn't use their talents and abilities where they were, and unfortunately that happened in a lot of the larger congregations. In some cases, it became a stifling environment for them, and unfortunately, we still see that sometimes today, depending on how large or small a group is.

So a lot of people left, and that is an attempt at trying to answer that first question, why do people leave. They could have left for any of those reasons or a combination of any of those above. It all led to a certain amount of trauma. The church has even experienced a depression in some of the brethren, and there have been some suicides.

The common denominator of all these things is that these were usually people problems. And what I mean by that is that it had nothing to do with our relationship with God. It had to do with leadership and relationships with one another, and we shouldn't be surprised if we see that again no matter where we're at. As long as there are at least two of us, we will sometimes have a problem. Of course we have Satan there who constantly stirs the pot.

You might take exception to this comment also, but I personally believe that God caused the breakup of the church and continues to cause that. Again, we're going to have trials, and we can do things the easy way or the hard way as far as God is concerned. And if we don't learn the lesson, it's just like personal trials – sometimes we learn the reason for the trial and sometimes we don't see it for a long time. In a lot of cases, especially problems with the churches, it takes a long time to sort things out, and I think we've all experienced that.

The New Testament is full of lessons for us – why problems happen with the church, how they happen, etc. We have an excellent example over in I Corinthians. I'm not going to stray too far from Corinthians today. It's always fascinating to me that we can turn to God's word and we can fully agree that there is nothing new under the sun. Everything has a tendency to repeat itself. But there is a powerful lesson here. I'm using a NKJ translation here. In I Corinthians, in the very first chapter and verse.

I Corinthians 1:1-2 *Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,
2) To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:*

Any good commentary or bible dictionary talks about the journeys of Paul and how he traveled around from place to place, and he knew that God's people were scattered all over the place. We have a tendency to think that we need to be more or less concentrated in this particular day, because that has been our experience, but Paul dealt with churches all over that part of the world. Clear up into Great Britain evidently.

I'm not going to read the rest from verse 3-9, but I think it's kind of interesting that Paul, if you count down through there, how many times he mentions Jesus Christ, or makes a reference or an inference to Christ, it's about 13 or 14 times. What he's doing is setting him up. He's telling him that his authority comes from Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ is over all the churches. We have a lot of scriptures that repeat that.

There's a whole list of issues that Paul dealt with, with the Corinthians – that's why it's a very interesting church and a very interesting book as it relates to that church and the things that they went through. But he is telling them that they are forgetting who their head is.

If we go down to verse 10, we see that they are starting to look to individuals, to men, to personalities and all that. So let's read verse 10 of I Corinthians 1.

1 Corinthians 1:10 *Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*

Of course the same mind that he's referring to is mentioned over in Philippians 2:5 – "Let this mind be in you which is in Christ Jesus". And once again he's pointing them to Jesus Christ, and he's mentioning that the divisions that are going on are happening in His body and He is very much aware of it, and Paul is addressing these problems right here.

We know from the past that this was often used to keep people in control. We've heard many sermons about no splits, no divisions, over and over again. And psychologically I think we have those problems today whenever we have a split, it bothers a lot of people that we've broken up, no matter what the reason is. It was often preached to us that we must have unity no matter what. Even at the expense of truth in many cases. If you had a problem, you simply couldn't deal with it, or you kept it quiet. And if you DID leave, you certainly didn't talk to anyone else.

We can see in the following verse that factions were springing up, and it was more or less a cult-like polarization around personalities. If we really study this reference that we have here, there is no basis here for not being where you want to be in the church, as long as you're under Jesus Christ.

Let's go on into verse 11.

1 Corinthians 1:11 *For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you.*

And in the margin of my bible, I have a number of things that could be contentions: quarrels, disagreements, struggles, vying for position, competition. We see the same problems today – no matter where we look, in any group of God's people, we're going to see similar problems.

I think one thing the church never counted on was the internet and the free flow of information. That's when a lot of us started to understand things that we had been protected from in the past. But for a corporation, that wasn't such a good thing, to have that free flow of information.

Again, like I've mentioned, there are individuals out there who are competing for God's people, who are actively pursuing God's people. Sometimes leaders think that they have a claim on God's people, whether past or present, they think they have a claim on you and me, and that is unfortunate. Part of the idea is that you need to be dependent on them for your salvation, and that is simply unscriptural. I'm not saying that we don't need leadership or a ministry, and I will touch on that more later on.

In my opinion, I don't know what's worse – someone who is actively out there seeking God's people and trying to get a following, or someone that knows better and that is allowing people to follow them, rather than say "Don't do that.". John ran into the same

thing, that example in Revelation when he bent down to the angel, and the angel said "Don't do that to me". You need to look to Jesus Christ instead. Now, verse 12 of I Corinthians chapter 1.

I Corinthians 1:12-13 *Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ."*

13) Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

I kind of like the Moffatt translation of that, verses 10 through 13.

I Corinthians 1:10 *Brothers, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ...*

Once again, pointing to the real head of the church, pointing to what people should have been following.

I Corinthians 1:10-13 *...I beg of you all to drop these party-cries. There must be no cliques among you; you must regain your common temper and attitude.*

11) For Chloe's people inform me that you are quarrelling.

12) By 'quarrelling' I mean that each of you has his party-cry, "I belong to Paul," "And I to Apollos," "And I to Cephas," "And I to Christ."

13) Has Christ been parceled out? Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Was it in Paul's name that you were baptized?

You would think that the ones following Christ were in effect saying, "Well were the true branch, we're the true division!". If you really look into that closely that was based on pride, they weren't really following Christ at all. They were actually looking to men.

I think what we need to learn from this is that this is not really a shallow problem at all – this is a very deep-seated problem. It happened back then; it's happening today. The individuals, and I think I should point out that these individuals that it's talking about, Apollos, Peter and Paul, were obviously not involved in this. This was taking place inside the Corinthian church – it was amongst the brethren, and there is a lesson in that for us. This is a multi-faceted problem, as it happens repeatedly.

I heard someone say in a sermon recently that one of the curses of the Church of God is the authority or the misuse of authority in the church. That's an interesting take on that. I think what they meant by that is the way that we view authority in the church – we give it far too much credit than it should be, especially is there is a misuse of it. In the past we basically kept quiet about that.

Someone pointed out to me recently that we tend to drag our problems along with us. And again, we continue to do the same thing here. I can use myself as an example again, that one time that I know that I followed a man – I don't make any pretense about that. I followed Herbert Armstrong, and I was fully convinced that if I did not do that and if I did not stay in the church, then my salvation was in jeopardy. That's just the way that I believed at the time. But again, we can learn a lot by what's being taught to these brethren here.

It's been mentioned before and I think I mentioned it last time when I was up here at Pentecost – the similarities between the Corinthian church and our modern society. It kind of helps to understand a little bit of the culture at that time. I'm not going to go into that too deeply – this is kind of a brief cliff notes version of that.

Geographically, if we can look at the location of Corinth, they were a little tiny area at the end of the peninsula of Greece – is it a peninsula? The shipping would come through there – they wouldn't want to go around the tip because of the storms. Paul, on at least two occasions, was shipwrecked because of the storms. The point being that there was quite a metropolis built up there in Corinth. One commentary that I have said they had a population of around 600,000 and Athens was also very close, which was one of the principal university cities of that day and age. We remember the example of Paul there in Acts 17 – in fact we can see a lot of the history of the Corinthians in Acts 19. But primarily the influence they were under was the Stoicism and Epicureanism, with some Platonism thrown in. It's kind of interesting the way they looked at things. If you look at these things, and again this is kind of a brief version, but the Stoics basically looked at things like we would term as being Conservative. That was kind of their view of things. The people of Corinth were strongly influenced by these philosophies. They were taught at the Universities, a lot of people came through Athens into that part of the world just for the education, and this is what they were influenced by. The members of the church were not an exception to this – they were also influenced by these teachings. The Stoics were Conservative and somewhat moralistic. They had a somewhat strong sense of patriotism to them – does that sound familiar? The unfortunate part of that was that most of it was based on pride. The Epicurean philosophy was much more liberal – kind of a feel-good type of approach, and that also probably sounds familiar. Again, the church was affected by this.

Paul goes on to tell them, and this isn't intended to be a word for word bible study of Corinthians, but he was pointing out to them that what they were doing, and if you study chapter 2 where it talks about wisdom, that is what he is referring to - the wisdom and the influence of the world. He goes on to tell them in chapter 3, which we will touch on here in a minute, what happens is, they are strongly influenced by that wrong worldly wisdom that was so expansive in society around them. Either a Conservative or a Liberal – there was a mix of that in the church. And they were relating to these individuals that they thought would most represent their ideas. As I look around the church today, I see a lot of conservative people, probably a lot of people that are somewhat patriotic. What these people were doing, I think it's interesting to point out that they were not leaving the church. This was taking place inside of the church. And again, as I mentioned earlier, these leaders that they were rallying behind were not behind this, they were not involved in this.

And Paul goes on in chapter 3, he's trying to tell them that in their case and the way they're acting and what they're doing, trying to look to individuals and not looking to their true head, Jesus Christ, is getting them into trouble. He goes on to tell them that they have a lot of worldly wisdom and they haven't grown past that, but their spiritual wisdom is lacking. They're having a problem with that. And again, if you study down through these chapters, you will see that very clearly. Now, chapter 3 and verse 1.

I Corinthians 3:1-3 *And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ.*

2) I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able;

3) for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?

They were behaving exactly like the world around them. It was a highly intellectual and very sophisticated society, and they were carrying that over into the church. Rather than being spiritually minded, they were being worldly minded. Verse 4:

I Corinthians 3:4-5 *For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal?*

5) Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one?

Paul is telling them that they can't follow him. They shouldn't be looking to him, or to Apollos or Peter, or developing that party spirit. They should be looking to the Lord and Jesus Christ. Now verse 6 – he's pointing out what a minister should do and he's redirecting them. He's not letting them follow him, he's telling them the way it is. They didn't want it that way – they wanted their independence and wanted to do things the way they wanted to.

I Corinthians 3:6-8 *I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase.*

7) So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.

8) Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

And then he goes on and talks about the rewards of how a ministry conducts itself.

What they were doing was, they were not actually dividing and leaving the church, they were dividing inside the church because their focus was in the wrong place. It was on men, men that weren't even involved with what they were doing, but they were adopting these various philosophies and trying to adapt them to their spiritual life. Paul is telling them, that won't work.

You remember when Paul mentioned the Bereans in Acts 17, he says they investigated everything that he said, and he thought that was an admirable thing. But if you did that today, in a lot of cases, and certainly if you did that in the past, you might have gotten in a lot of trouble, especially if we asked any hard questions. I heard recently that the Pope does not answer a question. You can't write him or email him – you can't do anything to get questions answered.

Our spiritual priority and focus **must** be on God the Father and Jesus Christ. It has to be there. That's where our deepest and most loving relationship must be. It cannot be anywhere else. As Paul was pointing out to these folks, men in a ministry, and we do

need a ministry and a leadership, they need to be the helpers of that relationship. They need to help us in every way they can.

I remember a story years ago, we had some friends that left the Spokane church when Worldwide was starting to break up up there, and they started meeting at a Church of God Seventh Day. They had bible studies there, and one of the individuals there had been an elder in Worldwide, and he mentioned to the Church of God Seventh Day minister if he wasn't worried about that maybe some people would come over and start fellowshiping with them and all that. The minister's response was, and I think it's kind of an admirable attitude, something that we haven't seen all that much, was, "You know, people come and people go. I just try to help them in their walk with Christ." It's pretty simple, but it sure has a lot of meaning.

Sometime many years ago, I was indirectly accused of being anti-authority, and I never felt that way at that time, and don't feel that way now. I do think we need a correct ministry and leadership and organization. There's a whole lot of ministers that have certainly helped us in some way. Obviously, a lot of them make mistakes, just like the rest of us. One thing that we've learned, and I think we all need to learn, is found over in I Timothy chapter 2 verse 5. And you don't need to turn there, it's very short but very meaningful.

I Timothy 2:5 - *For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus*

If we never, ever lose sight of that we're not going to be looking to men. We're not going to be looking to a group or an organization. We're going to be looking to where our real salvation and our real hope lies, because it is only in one place. And I keep repeating that – I know I'm going to sound like a broken record pretty soon.

There are a few things that I am anti. I am very anti anyone that tries to get between me and Jesus Christ by using fear tactics. That happens to much. They try to intimidate people by saying that their salvation demands a group and organization or a man, and that you are dependent on them, and that simply isn't true. I'm kind of anti-someone that tries to accuse me of being too emotional, and getting carried away with my emotions, and using human reasoning. To me those are just transparent tactics to get me back "under control". I have God's Holy Spirit too. Paul pointed that out, even when he expressed some of his opinion, did he not? When it came to a divorce or that kind of thing. We can look over to chapter 7. For someone to stand there and tell us that, that is just a tactic to intimidate, that's all it is. That's one thing we've learned through the years. Actually, if you analyze some of the actions of folks that do that, a lot of times they're the ones that get emotional and they're the ones that use some human reasoning.

When I studied Paul, I didn't see Paul doing that at all. Like he pointed out to these folks here, he was just a servant and a helper for them. That's what his function was, and he was an apostle.

Another thing that gets to me a little bit, that I'm kind of anti, is when someone tells me to get over it. We've heard that on several occasions. Usually, the first thing that pops into my mind when someone tells that to me, especially from the pulpit, is what they want me

to really get over is some of the shenanigans that they have pulled. They'd really like me to forget about it, but I'm going to learn the lesson and I'm not going to forget about it. I'm going to hope that they repent and change from some of those things. We need to forgive and forget, but we need to do that God's way. Another thing that I am anti, is someone, a group, an individual, or an organization that thinks they are the focal point of God's work on earth. There's not an overabundance of humility out there unfortunately. I was actually told once that my sole purpose in life was to support someone doing a work, and I bought into that.

I would like to turn over to Ephesians chapter 2 and starting in verse 8. We're breaking into the thought here as Paul addresses the other churches.

Ephesians 2:8-9 *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God,
9) not of works, lest anyone should boast....*

God deserves the credit – that's the point of that verse.

Ephesians 2:10 *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.*

That's spiritual workmanship. The character that we build, in our minds in our hearts, the growth in our character, that's that workmanship. Those good works are the fruits of God's Spirit. We're trying to use those and practice those. Let's go back over to chapter 1 and verse 22.

Ephesians 1:22-23 *And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church,
23) which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.*

We've had folks who worry about starting another split, another splinter, and I don't have time to go into it now, but Paul uses the analogy of a body. He likens that to the way that Christ rules His church, Christ being the head. And that head, being spiritual, can be anywhere, and the body can still be under it.

So we worry about forming another split. There used to be kind of a pariah attached to anyone that would dare to do such a thing. Unfortunately, as has happened in the past and through the history that we've experienced, any time that we form a corporation or a group, somebody has to initiate that. Unfortunately, what happens is that they become the owner of that group. So if you have an issue or a problem, the only thing you can do is move, because that group doesn't belong to you. That's unfortunate, but a result. The downside to that is the estrangement between the brethren. That's one thing that really bothers us a great deal.

In any case, where you stand in your relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ, is much more important than where you sit in church. I don't mean that you can go sit down in a Protestant church down the road – you know what I mean. That relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ is much more important than the group you're in. You have

the freedom to be able to choose where you sit. God doesn't make slaves or androids or anything like that out of us. We have the freedom to do what we need to do. Again, God is not restricted where His head is.

How many choices do you have for your salvation? Only one. You may not choose to sit somewhere because you can't grow spiritually there. Again, either covertly or overtly, an individual or a group may try to insert themselves between you and God, that you need to be dependent on them. That's the mentality is, the mindset. If you think about the little bit that I've covered here in Corinthians, about what's been going on with the spiritual maturity and all that, if we really think it's important about who we're listening to or what group we're with, are we any different than these folks here in Corinthians? We would be spiritually immature if we didn't understand that our relationship with God is far more important than the particular geographic location of where we might be, or the group that we might be in.

Another thing to always remember, is that no matter what, and I've followed this philosophy in my corporate life as well, but I always reminded myself that everything, including this group, including what we've had in the past, is temporary. God has an eternal plan – that's what He wants us to focus on. We need to focus on the head, the one that's going to accomplish that for us.

Whenever we have some doubts, we can analyze it with a few simple questions, and I just made a simple list.

1. Can God lie to me? Well no.
2. Does God promise salvation to me, and more importantly, can He do it? Yes.
3. Can an individual, a group or an organization lie to me? Yes, and we've experienced that.
4. Can a group, an organization or an individual have their own agenda and come between me and God? Yes, we've seen that too.
5. Can a group, organization or an individual promise me salvation? Some try, but none can bring it about.

I think we all have some pretty strong feelings about the experiences that we've had. Hopefully we've hung on to the things that we need to hang on to and hopefully we are following who we need to be following, and we realize where our relationship should be at all times. That supersedes the relationships that we have with one another. Isn't that one of the agreements that we made when we were baptized? That everything else would become secondary.

I started out with the three points about why people leave and how not to repeat the same mistakes – I just reiterated some of those things. We need to have our spiritual focus in the right place. The last point was, what do we do now? That's the other side of this – we need to forgive and we need to forget, but we need to do that God's way.