

What is Your Greatest Contribution to the Work of God?

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By way of introduction, I would like to ask a question that I would like you all to think about and personalize. This will be our focus today in this sermon. The question is:

What do you think is your greatest contribution to the work of God?

When you think about your life as an individual—*you personally*—what do you think would be your greatest contribution to the work of God. If you want a title for this sermon, as you can see this is going to be our focus today, it's:

What is Your Greatest Contribution to the Work of God?

Obviously, when you think about that question, however you're going to answer it is going to be tied directly to what definition that you apply to the term "work of God". If you think about that, particularly if you've been around in the church of God since back in the days of Worldwide, you've probably heard that term used a lot. We talk about doing the "Work of God" and how things are going with "the work". We shortened it down to two words—*the work*—and we threw that term around quite a bit. If you lived through the transition after Worldwide busted apart and a number of organizations formed in the aftermath of that, you've probably heard brethren at times debating which group is really doing *the work*. Who is really doing the work? You hear people disputing, "I think it's this group" or "I think it's that group". They present their ideas to back up their particular argument but if you looked at how the whole subject got addressed, we typically tend to synonymize the phrase, *the work of God*, with "the media campaign to preach the gospel and warn the world about the coming end time events".

If you look back in the days of Worldwide and how we talked about that, we would have a film at the Feast every year called "Behind the Work". They would give you updates on the media efforts and what the corporation was doing and give you reports on the success of the television program and magazine subscriptions. Then after the breakup of Worldwide and other organizations formed out of that, you then had several major groups form out of that. You had several major groups that came about before all the splitting and busting started happening. Then you would hear brethren debating whether this group is doing the work or that group is doing the work. Then you looked at how people supported their argument for one group or another and the arguments focused around, this group has a TV program or they have a magazine and this is how big their subscription numbers are—things of that nature. If you think about that logic, what it synonymizes is that the *work of God* is basically a media campaign to preach the gospel and maybe warn the world about coming end time events.

If we look at how the Bible uses the term, that's not the definition that we're going to see. If you think about it, if you're defining the work of God in terms of a media

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campaign and then think about the question I asked when we started. As an average church member, what is your greatest contribution to that work. Your average church member is not a TV presenter or writing for a magazine. They aren't working for a headquarters organization or part of producing all of these efforts. They are just a regular person attending church services and trying to live their Christian life. So what is that person's contribution to this? If you're defining it as a media campaign, then following that logic, defining what the average church member's contribution is to that, it gets down to the phrase that has been used over the years—often stated in a derogatory fashion—of “Pay and Pray”. It's the idea that your contribution is your prayers and support of this effort and the tithe check you send into headquarters to fund this project. That logic reduces the average church member—to put it bluntly—to a cash cow. Someone who is to be milked to send in their financial funds to support this effort.

All of this logic is based upon a false definition of what the “work of God” is. To understand what your contribution to the work of God is, the first thing we have to do is see how the Bible defines the term. We have to use the Bible's definition and not our cultural definition of that term. How does the Bible define the term, “*work of God*”. If we see what that term is, to determine what your greatest contribution is you have to start with a proper definition of how the Bible defines the term *work of God*.

If you search the term, “the work of God”—those exact words—through a Bible search program, you'll see a few times in the Old Testament where it's used in different contexts of things God is doing. If you think of it in terms of how we look at it from a New Covenant church perspective, there are a couple of key verses in the New Testament that use that exact phrase and if we look at them, we get a totally different picture of how the Bible defines the *work of God*. Start off by turning to Romans 14 and we'll look at a time where Paul uses this exact phrase and it gives us more insight into a proper biblical definition of how this term is used. I'll start in verse 14 to set the context. The issue that Paul is addressing is that they were having new individuals coming into the church of God who had a personal belief that eating meat was somehow not a good thing to do. It wasn't just a dietary issue of preferring to be vegetarian for health reasons, to their conscience, they felt like it was wrong to eat meat. It's a very easy argument to win in terms of, is it biblically acceptable. Obviously, you just turn to Moses' writing in the Old Testament. He defines what is clean meat and what is not clean meat, so obviously eating meat is okay—that's an easy argument to win from a biblical perspective. But what Paul is trying to get people to see is that, what is technically correct wasn't really the issue.

What he had here was brethren who were being very zealous and behaving like aggressive telemarketers. If you've ever had an aggressive telemarketer on the phone, their purpose is to sell you their product or service and regardless how many times you try to tell them nicely that you're not really interested in that, they won't take no for an answer. They just keep pushing and pushing until you just hang the phone up on them. They aren't going to take no from an answer because from their perspective the only acceptable response is that you have to buy and accept their product or service and you have to agree with them. They are just going to keep pushing until you do. It results in a

very adversarial conversation. This is the kind of approach that some of the brethren were using and is what Paul is correcting them about. He's trying to get them to see beyond the issue that it's not just about who is technically correct, it's how you behave and the effect you're having on other people. What I want you to see as we read through this and he addresses this, he uses this phrase "the work of God" and gives us some insight about how the Bible defines this term.

Romans 14:14 *I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean.*

15) Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died. (NKJV)

His whole point was, you're creating division and offenses and stirring up issues with how you're handling this and that is a much bigger issue than who is technically right.

16) Therefore, do not let your good be spoken of as evil;

17) for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

18) For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men.

19) Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another. (NKJV)

His whole point was, it's not an issue of just proving that you're right and forcing that on someone else just to prove that you are right for the sake of being right. Just accept that they have a different point of view and make peace. Whether or not you are right is not the issue—it's that you are causing damage with how you're behaving.

20) Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. (NKJV)

Notice what he's talking about is *the work of God*. He's talking about the process of conversion, in a person's individual life.

20 continued) ... All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense.

21) It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak. (NKJV)

Think about how he is using the term, "*work of God*". Just to go back to this whole idea of defining the work of God as a media campaign. How do these disputes have any effect on a media campaign in your magazine subscription numbers and your television responses? Obviously, it has no effect at all. That wouldn't even be a relevant subject because that's not what he's talking about. He's not talking about a media campaign to teach the gospel; he's talking about the process of conversion in an individual person's life. He's saying you're destroying the *work of God* because you're stirring up contention

and offense and creating a stumbling block for this person who is coming in new to the church and they are a babe in Christ. They are just coming to understand the truth and haven't come to grasp yet that it's okay to eat meat. You're just creating an unnecessary controversy and creating a stumbling block for them. That is just totally destructive. That has nothing to do with arguing to be right. This is

“Think about how your actions are affecting other people.”

Another side note with this—during my years in the church of God I've seen a number of brethren do this on issues well outside just the issue of disputes over food. One example is, sometimes you'll see brethren that have their particular pet doctrine. A particular subject that they are just zealous about and sometimes they handle that subject kind of similar to how these folks were handling the issue of food. It's their pet subject and they want to bring it up every chance they get from a really divisive, argumentative standpoint. I've seen individuals who will do this with a pet subject which, if you looked at it from the standpoint of being scripturally correct, that is, is that something I could open the Bible and say “Yes, they are right on that.”

I have seen people do this on subjects where I would say yes, the point of view they are taking is correct—I would agree and teach it myself. I know that's what the Bible says, but they will take it as an issue of every time they get a chance to bring it up, they want to jam it down the throat of other people just to prove they are right. They do it in a way that causes offense and stirs up unnecessary controversy. It's an ungodly approach, where the Christian approach is just to agree to disagree. To realize we have a different point of view on that. Maybe their understanding is wrong, maybe my understanding is wrong. But we can both agree to disagree and be friends and get along with each other. We don't have to stir up unnecessary disputes and just argue to be right for the sake of being right. I think it's just the Christian approach of dealing with things like that.

To get back to our main subject, notice as I mentioned, Paul says:

Don't destroy the work of God because of food.

He's not talking about a media campaign; he's talking about a person's individual Christianity; their growth and the process of conversion. Don't damage that because of causing unnecessary offense. Christ makes similar comments, if you turn to John 6. Another time where the Bible gives directly a term, “*the work of God*” and Christ is going to give a definition out of His own mouth in John 6:26. But let me summarize the context so it makes sense. Earlier in this chapter is the account where Christ is at an event where there are 5000 people. It gets to the time of day where everybody is hungry but all they have are a few loaves of bread and a few fish—nothing to even remotely make a dent in feeding 5000 people. But Christ performs some miracles and enables this small amount of food to multiply and feed everybody and there are a ton of leftovers when everyone is done. I summarize this because He makes reference to this in the verses that we're going to read.

John 6:26 *Jesus answered them and said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. (NKJV)*

In other words, you just wanted a free meal. You weren't really paying attention to the spiritual issues and the miracles He was performing—the spiritual essence He was trying to teach—people just wanted a free meal.

27) Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him."

28) Then they said to Him, "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" (NKJV)

Notice they are asking Christ; *how do we do the work of God?* Tell us that. Notice His answer.

29) Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God [Christ is about to give a definition of the work of God], that you believe in Him whom He sent." (NKJV)

This is more than just an intellectual belief—believing that Christ is the Son of the Father and He died for the sins of mankind, there's more to it than that.

30) Therefore they said to Him, "What sign will You perform then, that we may see it and believe You? What work will You do?"

31) Our fathers ate the manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. " "

32) Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven.

33) For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

34) Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always."

35) And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.

36) But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe.

37) All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.

38) For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

39) This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.

40) And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day." (NKJV)

He's referring to the whole process of salvation. We're going to see throughout this sermon, if you want a simple definition for *the work of God*, it's the process of changing human-kind into God-kind. That's the reason God created mankind, that's the reason the whole physical universe exists and is the big picture of everything He is doing. It's the process of salvation of bringing many sons to glory. That's the big picture of *the work of God*. God may have various works that He is doing at various times. Just to give a typical example, in the time of Noah, God's focus was on Noah building a big boat. He had an important work for Him to do to build a big boat to preserve mankind and all the animals. That was the focus at His time, but that was a tree as part of the forest, it wasn't the whole forest. That was a focus at that particular time of what He was working on. If you look at the big picture of what is *the work of God*, it's the process of changing human-kind into God-kind. Notice Christ said *this is the work of God that you believe in Him*—that you believe in Christ.

We know that is a lot more than just, "I believe Christ died for our sins, He's the Savior and I accept Him into my heart and now everything is good". No, it's a lot more than that. We have to illustrate that faith through our behavior in our overcoming. Just to see a biblical definition of this, turn to James 2:14. In the Protestant world it's a common thing to think with faith, you just profess that Christ is the Savior and He died for our sins and you accept Him into your heart and everything is good. That's a good first step, but the real faith is illustrated through our actions and living a life of obedience and being willing to do that even when it's painful.

James 2:14 *What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?*

15) *If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food,*

16) *and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?*

17) *Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.*

18) *But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. (NKJV)*

In other words, if our actions don't follow up that faith or our intellectual verbal professions of it, it doesn't mean a whole lot. We have to show it in how we are willing to live.

19) *You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! (NKJV)*

The demons are not confused that Christ is the Son of God. That He came and died for our sins—they fully believe that, they just don't act accordingly. They don't follow that up with their actions and live a life of obedience. They intellectually know it's true. They've seen it with their own eyes. But we have to illustrate it in our actions.

20) *But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?*

- 21) *Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?*
- 22) *Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?*
- 23) *And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God.*
- 24) *You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.*
- 25) *Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out another way?*
- 26) *For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.*
(NKJV)

Notice again, the examples of Abraham and Rahab. It talks about Abraham having to sacrifice Isaac and Rahab protecting the spies who were checking out the land. Both of them were going through very painful experiences. For Abraham to be sacrificing his son, that was a gut-wrenching experience for him to have to do and Rahab was quite frankly putting her life on the line. She could have gotten herself killed for corroborating with the enemy—that's how the people in her country would have seen her actions. She was conspiring with the enemy and could have gotten herself killed for that. They were both willing to stand up for what they believed in—even when it was painful, even when it was unpopular. They could get turned on by other people and they were willing to follow up their profession of faith with their actions. This is how they were willing to live their lives. My point is, when we define *the work of God* as believing in Christ, it's a lot more than a profession of faith. It's how we live our lives. The bigger picture to look at here is, *the work of God* is the conversion process.

If you want to look at the big picture of what the work of God is, turn to 1 Corinthians 15. It's the process of changing human-kind into God-kind. As I mentioned, all throughout my lifetime, because I grew up in Worldwide from birth and experienced the church of God since then and oftentimes heard *the work of God* expressed in a concept of a media campaign. I'm not in any way disparaging efforts to preach the gospel and spread the word to other people. The majority of people—certainly in Worldwide—came into the church after seeing the World Tomorrow program or picked up a Plain Truth magazine and started getting booklets. That's how my parents came into the church. I grew up from birth but my father started hearing Mr. Armstrong on the radio and that's how they first came into contact with the truth. So, I'm not in any way disparaging it—that was an important thing. That's what brought a lot of us here—into the truth that we understand. But to silo that and basically take a tree and make it the entire forest, we miss the point. If you define it like that and ask what is your contribution to the work? If you define the work as a media campaign, the average church member is a "cash cow". We need to understand our role in the work is much more significant than that. A simple way to put it is, you're not just a "cash cow" to support the work, you are *the work of God*. As church members that God has called and is offering salvation to, we are the work He is doing. Your contribution is your own conversation process and seriously working on that. I'm getting ahead of myself. Look at 1 Corinthians 15:45. We're going to read a longer section of scripture here and this is going to culminate with what we are

referring to as *the work of the Lord*. It's going to have the word *Lord* instead of *God* but it's the same idea. We're going to see the whole context of what is being referred to as *the work of the Lord*.

1 Corinthians 15:45 *And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.*

46) *However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual.*

47) *The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven.*

48) *As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly.*

49) *And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.*

50) *Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption.*

51) *Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—*

52) *in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.*

53) *For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.*

54) *So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory."*

55) *O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?"*

56) *The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.*

57) *But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

58) *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. (NKJV)*

The work of the Lord—how was it defined through these scriptures? The conversion process that ultimately results successfully—if we endure to the end—in the resurrection to eternal life. It's receiving the Holy Spirit, changing our nature and character, to be molded, putting off the carnal man and our sinful nature, taking on the character of God, overcoming and ultimately being born into the Kingdom of God through the resurrection to eternal life. That's *the work of the Lord* or *the work of God*—whichever term you want to use. That's the big picture of what God is creating. If we just focus on the media efforts, as it was often done in our culture in the past to make others aware of the truth. I'm not disparaging that or putting it down in a derogatory sense to preach the gospel. To make others aware of the truth—I'm not putting that down by any means. I think there is an important function with that. But what I want you to see is that, if we take that and make it the whole picture, look at what we are missing. We are missing the forest for focusing on a single tree. If we look at the big picture, why did God create man? Why did He create all the physical universe and all that is around us. It wasn't just for a media campaign to warn people about the end time. Think about it,

when is he going to call the majority of mankind? After the majority of the end time events have already occurred. After Christ returns and the millennium and all that comes after that. That's when He really starts working with all of mankind. The work of God isn't finished when the end time events are over; it's just getting started. We have to realize the big picture. Why did God create all of this? For the purpose of changing humankind into God-kind. In Romans 8 is what all of creation is about.

Romans 8:18 *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.*

19) *For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God.*

20) *For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope;*

21) *because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.*

22) *For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.*

23) *Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. (NKJV)*

If we look at it again and just take a step back and look at the big picture; is the big picture of God's work just about getting a media campaign to warn people about the end time events? No. That's part of what He had the church do—I'm not putting that down or disparaging that. If we just focus on that and think it's all about a media campaign and growing a database and magazine subscriptions, then we really miss the big picture.

There's another big lesson to think about in all of this. I've seen over the years, especially since the breakup of Worldwide, a number of brethren getting disillusioned and discouraged seeing what has happened with the church of God over the years. If you lived in the time back in the days of Worldwide, probably the majority of people—I'm not saying we were the only organization God was working with—I think we were a little myopic in that regard—but we were certainly probably the biggest organization that God was working with and it was this big, huge, happy family you might say. We were all together. Then after Worldwide broke up you saw this busting and scattering and things have not been the same since. What has happened is because of that experience—because that was the experience that we all lived through—a lot of people looked at that as what I like to call the definition of normal. People looked at it as how this should be and they based their expectations around that. I totally plead guilty in the years after Worldwide broke up. I had this same mentality so I'm not picking on anybody—this was me too.

What happened after that all broke apart and other organizations started, we have the expectation that we would reorganize and start under different leadership and a different name but reproduce the same results. We'll get on TV, have magazines and other things of that nature and these would give us X number of years of preaching the

gospel. We'll have tons of people flooding in with big growth and a big organization like we had before. If you have been paying attention over the last couple of decades it hasn't worked out like that. I've seen people get discouraged over that and ask:

“What happened? Aren't we supposed to see the work being successful and lots of new people coming in? What happened? Why isn't God doing His work? What are we doing wrong?”

They tend to look at that like it was the norm. If you look back over church history—I don't mean in our lifetimes—I mean from the time of the first century when the apostles first established the New Covenant church, all the way up to our time today, what we experienced in the days of the Worldwide is not by any stretch of the imagination, the norm. It is absolutely the anomaly. If you look at what took place just from an organizational standpoint, at its highest, the Worldwide church of God probably had a Feast of Tabernacles attendance of 140 to 150 thousand. I don't know exact numbers but worldwide, look at all over the world, and it was probably 140 to 150 thousand. I'm sure those attending were not all converted and baptized, but that's what the attendance numbers tended to look like. We had a magazine subscription in the millions. We were the largest purchaser of religious television programming in the world. We had colleges with 3 different campuses on two continents. We had an international foundation that had projects all over the world. We were major on the world scene. When Herbert Armstrong died, almost 40 years ago, I remember I was a teenager and on the day that he died, I remember watching the national news and there was a short story on the news reporting his death.

Think about that today. If a major leader of any of the larger church of God organizations were to die today, do you think that there would be any national news station that would make an issue of reporting that? Would it even hit the radar screen with the world in general? I seriously doubt it. My point being, there was an impact and the world noticing it was unprecedented and it has not been the same since. If you compare that to all of church history, was that the norm? Not even close. The majority of the time, throughout church history, it's hard to find references to what was going on in history with the church of God during that time. The majority of that time it was small, scattered, people meeting in living rooms. The church always existed but to call that the norm is not even close to an accurate idea. I personally think that Revelation 3 gives a good indication of why this is the case.

To give the whole context here in Revelation 3:7-8—there are seven letters to seven churches. There are several ways to look at this. It's a historical fact that at the time John was recording this, there were seven churches in Asia-minor on a mail route that existed at the time he wrote this. So obviously that is one application you could put with this. Another way to look at these letters is that they have lessons for all of us of spiritual things we can learn, spiritual conditions that people can be in at any given time. But I think there is also another application to this as well and is referred to as “church eras”. If you look at this historically, there are statements made in some of these letters that just clearly indicate particular periods of time that they apply to. That is hard to argue

with. Otherwise, there is not an aspect to this. What I want you to notice is that there are seven eras referred to, but only one referred to as having *an open door*. That doesn't mean that God didn't call new people or the gospel wasn't preached in all the others, but notice there is something different mentioned to one of them that is not stated to the other six.

Revelation 3:7 *And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write, 'These things says He who is holy, He who is true, "He who has the key of David, He who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens": (NKJV)*

That's obviously a reference to Jesus Christ. He is the one who has the key of David and who opens and shuts.

8) *"I know your works. See, I have set before you an open door, and no one can shut it; for you have a little strength, have kept My word, and have not denied My name. (NKJV)*

That statement is made to Philadelphia, it's not made to the other six. You might debate about what that is referring to, but if you just look at this historically, as I mentioned there were seven churches that existed simultaneously, all in the area of Asia-minor at the time John was writing this and if you study into the history of the different areas, one of the things that the church in the city of Philadelphia was known for was spreading the gospel and bringing in new converts. They had an open door to do that and it was one of the things that made them unique and different from the others. If we just play off that parallel, that would indicate he is referring to that open door of making an impact on the world and spreading the gospel. If you look at just the basic facts and statistics, what we experienced in the days of Worldwide is off the charts when you compare it to any other time frame. It's an anomaly that is unlike anything else. If you look back at what happened after Mr. Armstrong died. He died in 1986 and in the late 80's and early 90's and in response to the television program and new people coming in, things peaked for a couple more years after that. Then in the early 90's all the stats started going in the other direction. When I was a student at Ambassador College, I worked at the telephone response department and I actually helped tabulate some of the statistics and I saw the reports, even historically, some of the data and I can verify that's what took place. The first couple of years after Mr. Armstrong died, the stats kept going up and then it plateaued and then everything basically nose-dived and started going in the other direction. Within a few years, the Worldwide Church of God busts apart and everything keeps fragmenting.

As I mentioned before, most of the organizations that formed after Worldwide, made predictions such as:

Once we get on some TV programs or get our media efforts going—just give us a few years and we'll produce these same results.

Everybody had the formula of how it worked in Worldwide and had the expectations of reproducing this:

Just give us a few more years and it will work the same way.

But it has not worked the same way. That's not just true of one particular origin, that is true for all of them. If you look at pretty much all of the organizations out there, even the larger organizations who have significant media efforts, they have their magazines and significant subscription numbers—regardless of those stats—when you look at how many people, from those efforts, wind up coming to church long enough to be baptized and stick around, those numbers are very, very small. I'm not claiming that there are not new people being called. I know new people in various organizations who have come into the church since the days of Worldwide and in the years after that, who have no prior connection to Worldwide or any family connections there. Who wound up being exposed to the truth in one way or another and have come in, been baptized and have been attending for years. I personally know a number of individuals like that. So, I'm not in any way claiming that God has not called new people since then. But if you compare the numbers, they are not even remotely close. If you look at the stats from most of the larger organizations and look at the number of baptisms they have and then dig into what those numbers really mean, what you are going to find is the overwhelming majority of baptisms which are occurring are children of members. They are kids like in my own story, who are born to parents in the church, grew up into adulthood and then decided to get baptized and continue on. That is the majority of new baptisms that are taking place and it's true of every organization out there, that I'm aware of.

There's a basic principle that we have to keep in mind here. In John 6:44—this is Christ speaking.

John 6:44 *No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day. (NKJV)*

In other words, Christ is saying unless the Father decides to call some people and to open their minds so the truth can penetrate and they can understand it, you can preach at them all you want to; you can give all the booklets and literature and try to beat them over the head with it but it won't make a difference. They will just brush you aside and think it's nonsense because if that mind is not open and God is not calling them, we can have all the media efforts in the world and it's not going to have the same result. My point is that we have to adjust our expectations in line with what God is doing.

The CEO of a company I worked for a number of years ago had a popular saying he used to say all the time and I latched onto it because I really liked it and I think it's a great lesson for everyone to know. He loved to say:

“Let's deal with reality the way it is and not as we would like it to be”.

So often in life, what results in frustration or disillusion with us is, we try *to deal with the reality we would like it to be rather than the way it really is*. I say that because I've noticed over the years in the church of God, people becoming discouraged or disillusioned because they're expecting one thing to come about. Their expectations and what God is actually doing are not in line with each other and it becomes very frustrating and difficult for them. They are trying to deal with reality as they would like it to be rather than how it is. If we're looking at the work of God, expecting just a couple more years—it's just going to get big and we're going to grow into this big organization, I think we are being unrealistic. God could prove me wrong and He could change it anytime and do what He wants to. I'm looking back at the last several years—it's been almost 40 years since Herbert Armstrong died and there is nothing to indicate that a trend of us recreating what took place in Worldwide. The exact opposite has happened. What's happened over time is organizations have busted and busted and things have gotten more scattered and leaner. If you look at the Church of God demographically, there aren't huge numbers of new people coming in. Look at your average Feast site. Even in your larger organizations, if you go to a typical Feast site and look at the crowd, you're going to see a lot of grey hair. It's not that there are not younger people, there certainly are, but if you look at the distribution of the group, you'll probably see a greater number towards the retirement age group—your Gen Xers and Boomers than you see your Millennials and Gen Z's. Carry that forward a few more years and what do you have? You kind of have a declining population. I'm not saying the Church of God is going to die out. I think the Bible tells us that is not the case. But I think we need to adjust our expectations accordingly and not be disillusioned if God's plan doesn't match our own expectations and how we want to see things go. That can lead to a lot of disillusionment and frustrations,

“If our expectations are not in line with reality and we are trying to deal with reality as we would like it to be rather than how it is.”

Let's look at a biblical example that illustrates this story. It's the story of Jonah. Turn to Jonah—the minor prophets. I know when you look for the minor prophets you have to look for them since we don't turn to them very often. You're probably familiar in general, with the story here, but let's start off in Jonah 1:1.

Jonah 1:1 *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying,*
2) *Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”*
3) *But Jonah arose to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. He went down to Joppa, and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid the fare, and went down into it, to go with them to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD. (NKJV)*

God comes to Jonah and says:

“I've got a job for you. I want you to go to Nineveh and preach a message to them.”

Jonah decides to be a bonehead and he doesn't want to cooperate. He wants to do it his own way. If you understand the back story, you can understand where Jonah is coming from. God is sending him to go preach to the Assyrians. They were known for making life miserable for the Israelites, so Jonah isn't very enthused about the idea of going to preach and get the Assyrians to repent. He would rather see them get destroyed. They are a thorn in the side of the Israelites. As we'll see later in some of Jonah's comments, he knew God was merciful and if the Assyrians were receptive to the message and repented, then God wasn't going to destroy them. Jonah wanted to see them get destroyed. He didn't like them, they made life miserable for the Israelites. What I want you to see is, part of what takes place is Jonah isn't in line with what God wants to do and that creates a lot of frustration and problems in his life and even disillusionment.

Jonah is rebellious here and we'll summarize some of the story because you're probably familiar with it. Instead of heading towards Nineveh to do what God asked him to do, Jonah heads in the opposite direction. He is heading off to Tarshish—I want no part of this—and goes in the opposite direction. God decides not to take “no” for an answer and He forces the subject and has Jonah thrown off the ship he's on and swallowed by a great fish. Jonah gets to spend a couple days hanging out in the belly of a fish and gets to reexamine his choices. He decides, maybe he should be a little less hard headed and decides to cooperate because the stubbornness is getting a little too painful—God has him inside the belly of a fish. So, God has him spat out on the beach and says “Let's try this again.” Jonah then decides to be a little more cooperative. Let's turn to chapter 3. Jonah decides it's too painful trying to do his own thing and decides to cooperate with what God tells him and reluctantly goes to Nineveh. Let's pick up the story in Jonah 3:1.

Jonah 3:1 *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying ...*
(NKJV)

Let's try this again Jonah and see if you can get it right this time.

2) *“Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you.”*

3) *So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent.*

4) *And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, “Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!”* (NKJV)

He did this for 40 days, so obviously he said more than just what we have recorded. What we have recorded gives us some insight as to Jonah's perspective. Notice what is recorded is just the bad news. Jonah's basically saying, 40 days and you're all dead. A friend of mine that I went to AC with—her name was Katherine—we were in the same class and studying the minor prophets and got to this. Katherine has a sense of humor like myself—kind of a dark sense of humor—she would joke about this verse (with glee in her voice) telling us that he was really saying, “You're all going to die!”. That was kind

of his approach to this. Notice there is nothing here about, “If you repent God is merciful—He’s nice—and if you straighten up your act, He may let you off. If you just turn things around, you have hope.” He wasn’t emphasizing that, he was just saying, “You’re all going to die!” because that’s what he wants to happen. He wants them all to die, he wants the Assyrians to be destroyed and leave Israel alone because he didn’t like the Assyrians. Unfortunately for Jonah, that’s not how the people responded. They actually pay attention and say:

“God is going to destroy us so maybe we should pay attention and clean up our act.”

They all decide to call a fast and even make the animals fast. They all decide we’re going to stop being such nasty people and clean up our act and start acting better. They responded well so God is merciful because His whole point was not to just claim destruction. The whole reason God sends prophets is to warn people and say:

“If you’ll turn around and act better, then I won’t destroy you.”

That’s what God wanted to accomplish and was His purpose. Jonah wants it to work out differently and is focused on seeing them destroyed. Notice how disillusioned Jonah gets when things are not working out according to his expectations and what He would like to see happen. Pick up in chapter 4:1.

Jonah 4:1 *But it displeased Jonah exceedingly, and he became angry. (NKJV)*

So he’s upset that the people repented. Think about that; people repented and responded to his message and he’s unhappy about it.

2) So he prayed to the LORD, and said, “Ah, LORD, was not this what I said when I was still in my country? Therefore I fled previously to Tarshish; for I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm. (NKJV)

In other words, I knew you were going to be a nice guy and not destroy them if they responded so I ran the other way because I didn’t want that to happen. That’s what he is saying.

3) Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for it is better for me to die than to live!”

4) Then the LORD said, “Is it right for you to be angry?”

5) So Jonah went out of the city and sat on the east side of the city. There he made himself a shelter and sat under it in the shade, till he might see what would become of the city.

6) And the LORD God prepared a plant and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be shade for his head to deliver him from his misery. So Jonah was very grateful for the plant.

7) But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered.

8) And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live."

9) Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!"

10) But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night.

11) And should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left—and much livestock?" (NKJV)

"What are you getting so worked up about Jonah? This was the purpose. I'm being merciful and good to them."

The lesson I want you to see from all of this is the reason Jonah is having all this distress and discouragement. He just wants to die and is disillusioned because his expectations of what he wants to see happen and what God has in mind, don't match. He's trying to deal with reality the way he wants it to be rather than what it is. He wants to see the people of Nineveh all destroyed because he doesn't like the Assyrians because they make life hard for the Israelites. So he would rather see them destroyed. God is playing this completely differently.

This is off the subject from where I started from, but what I want you to see is the disillusionment because of the misalignment of expectations. We can do something similar. As I have mentioned often, if we define our experience in the church of God by what happened in the days of Worldwide—this big organization with large Feast sites, magazine program, and a college and think that's normal—that isn't how it has turned out in the last several years. In the last several decades in fact. The church of God has gotten more busted up and more divided and more scattered. We don't have all the support. Oftentimes today, it's not unusual for a lot of folks to have church in their living rooms. Just to be meeting at their home, watching sermons on their TV or online. Maybe just a few people and they are by themselves. What happened to God? Why don't we have everything we had before? Realize, what we experienced in Worldwide was the anomaly, it was not the norm.

If we notice some of the references in the New Testament, what we are experiencing today and probably likely to experience more and more as time goes by and the demographics change and organizations bust, is that it becomes more common to have the "living room church". Where people are meeting in a house. If we don't focus in myopically on the Worldwide experience and think of that as the norm and we just notice what the New Testament says, there are multiple references where Paul addresses churches that meet in someone's house. It was not unusual in the first century—when the church started—for there to be congregations with a small handful of people that met in a living room. That was not unusual. Turn to Romans 16:3.

Romans 16:3 *Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, 4) who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. 5) Likewise greet the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ. (NKJV)*

He's pointing out Priscilla and Aquila, these people get great mention because of their faith, the action they took—they risked their own necks to help me out. He's holding them up as heroes and says, the congregation that *meets in their house*. In other words, it was a small handful of people meeting in a living room, having church. It wasn't a big organization with a big hall and lots of people and church activities and potlucks. It was a handful of folks meeting together in the living room and Paul called them a church. The reason I say it is because we think today if it's just a few people meeting in a living room, that's not really a church. A church is you have a big hall, everybody is together and it's organized, you have a lot of ordained leadership together, you have church activities, potlucks, and fun shows—that's a church. Not according to Paul. The biblical definition of the church is: *we are the church*. The church is not a corporation, it's not a building, it's not an organization, it's the people that God called to have His Holy Spirit. That is the biblical definition of the church. So, you can meet with a small handful of people that you can count on your fingers in a living room and that's a church. That's how the Bible defines it.

The same congregation is mentioned again in 1 Corinthians 16, Paul is going to make reference to the same individuals here.

1 Corinthians 16:19 *The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. (NKJV)*

Once again, a small handful of people meeting in someone's living room. There are a couple other references to different individuals. It wasn't just this one couple who had a church in their house. Look at Philemon 1:1.

Philemon 1:1 *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer, 2) to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: (NKJV)*

A handful of people meeting in the living room.

3) Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (NKJV)

In Colossians 4 there is another reference to what Paul calls a church and it's a handful of people meeting in a living room.

Colossians 4:15 *Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea, and Nymphas and the church that is in his house. (NKJV)*

Realize, that is a church. We shouldn't look at that in terms of disillusionment and think, what happened, did God desert us? Is He not doing His work anymore? He is doing His work—we are His work. We need to get our expectations in line with what He is doing. Do it with *the reality it is and not as we would like it to be*. Even if the church becomes very small and very scattered, we don't have all the structural niceties that we have been accustomed to over the years. God's still working with us, He still has His plan to change humankind into God-kind. He's still promising us the Kingdom. We just have to keep enduring and overcoming regardless of the circumstances we find ourselves in. The promises are still the same and the plan for us is still the same.

I started off this sermon asking, "What is your greatest contribution to the work of God?" The spring Holy Days are right around the corner for us and when you think about the meaning of the spring Holy Days, it's all about the plan of salvation for the Firstfruits. The spring Holy Days are focused on the Firstfruits and the fall Holy Days on the rest of mankind. But fulfilling the meaning of these days and focusing on our personal overcoming, that's our contribution to the work of God because we are that work of God. That's what we are doing. In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul is going to address Passover and Unleavened bread.

1 Corinthians 5:1 *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father's wife!*

2) And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you.

3) For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed.

4) In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ,

5) deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. (NKJV)

Notice the next couple of verses because this ties directly into Passover and Unleavened bread.

6) Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?

7) Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.

8) Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (NKJV)

He's saying here that our focusing on our overcoming—of putting out the sin in our lives and our repentance—that's what we need to focus on. That's the meaning of unleavened bread. It's the whole process of repentance and cleaning up our lives. James tells us that is the key to being a *doer of the work* and he directly states that in James 1:21. This is all about cleaning up our lives, putting off the carnal behavior and taking on a more converted, Godly behavior. Notice as we get through this, he is going to directly refer to this as one who does this is a *doer of the work*. That's how you do the work of God.

James 1:21 *Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.
22) But be doers of the **word**, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.
(NKJV)*

This “word” is referring to the *word of God*. The reason I say that, is because, in a couple of verses, we are going to see the word “work”. I point this out is because, for years in my life I would read over these verses and I never even noticed that distinction.

*23) For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror;
24) for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. (NKJV)*

Just living what we know, practicing the Christian life, overcoming our sinful behavior.

*25) But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the **work**, this one will be blessed in what he does.
26) If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless.
27) Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.
(NKJV)*

Notice he directly says, to be a *doer of the work*—to do the work of Go. What's that about? It's that you are overcoming and are taking on the nature of God. Putting off our carnal, sinful behavior and taking on the character of God. That's what part of the process of changing humankind to Godkind is. That's what all of this is about. So, what is your greatest contribution to the work of God? It's faithfully obeying God and being diligent in your overcoming so you can make it into His Kingdom. The work of God is changing humankind into Godkind.

Remember, as Firstfruits there is also another major aspect to this as well. The reason God is calling Firstfruits is so that we can have a role in helping the rest of mankind. The rest of mankind is not getting their chance of salvation right now, that's going to come later. Christ tells us about this in John 7. He makes an announcement on the 8th day,

proclaiming the time when the rest of mankind will have a chance to receive the Holy Spirit and have their chance to be born into the Kingdom of God. God's plan works out in stages. He's dealing with the Firstfruits now, the rest of mankind later.

John 7:37 *On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.*

38) He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." (NKJV)

Verse 39 tells us very explicitly what He's talking about here. We don't have to get confused or have any issues with interpreting it; we just read it right off the page.

39) But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. (NKJV)

He's announcing that everyone who has not had a chance to receive the Holy Spirit, now they'll have the opportunity to come to Him and receive the Holy Spirit. This salvation will be offered to all the rest of mankind. The reason we are called as Firstfruits is to assist Christ in the efforts of doing all of this. If we successfully complete that work in ourselves and do our part to make it into the Kingdom of God, then we get to be part of His major work of helping everyone else in this process. This is in Revelation 20:4.

Revelation 20:4 *And I saw thrones, and they sat on them, and judgment was committed to them. Then I saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their witness to Jesus and for the word of God, who had not worshiped the beast or his image, and had not received his mark on their foreheads or on their hands. And they lived and reigned with Christ for a thousand years.*

5) But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection.

6) Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with Him a thousand years. (NKJV)

In other words, the whole purpose—the big picture of why we are being called now—is to be Christ's assistants to work with Him in preparing the rest of mankind. To work with them to have their chance at receiving salvation, hopefully so they can make it into the Kingdom of God and become God beings as well. So, when you think about your contribution to the *work of God*, it's very important that we first define the *work of God* how the Bible defines it, not how we've defined it in our popular culture.

The work of God is the process of changing humankind into God-kind.

I started off this sermon asking what is your greatest contribution to *the work of God*? As an individual church member, your greatest contribution is not being a cash-cow, to

just write a tithe check to a church of God organization to support their media efforts. I'm not disparaging those efforts or your tithe and support of that, my point is it's much bigger than that. Your greatest contribution is faithfully obeying God and overcoming to take on His character so you can make it into the Kingdom of God and then be one of Christ's assistants to help Him with the work of helping everyone else receive their chance at being a part of the Kingdom of God. That is the work of God. So, let's be about our Father's work and be diligent in our own overcoming so we can complete that work in ourselves and be a part of that work for the rest of mankind.