

Forward!

Let's talk about the Feast of Tabernacles!

Yes, I know that this is the SPRING festival season. I realize that six months have gone by since we attended last year's Feast of Tabernacles and [*sigh!*] that we have to wait another six whole months until this year's Feast. But, like you, I look forward to each year's Feast *almost* as much as I look forward to God's Kingdom and this anticipation fits in with the point I would like to make in this article.

Most of us travel at least some of the distance to and from each year's festival site by car. As you drove to the Feast last year, did you drive the safe and easy way – looking in front of you with an occasional glance in the rear-view mirror? Or did you drive using the unsafe and difficult method? Did you spend most of the trip looking in the rear-view mirror at where you had just come from?

This sounds silly. No one in his right mind would ever drive a car in such an unsafe manner. But if we are not careful, there is a danger that we members of God's church will spend and waste too much of our time and effort in these precious days looking back to where we have come from!

The purpose of this article is to encourage you (and myself!) to put behind the things that are past and to look and move forward to the future.

War stories

Let me mention the Feast once again. The Feast of Tabernacles is a very special time for all of us. We meet and talk with people we haven't been with for a whole year and we see people attending whom we may not have seen for many years. Part of our conversation, of course, may naturally include the incredible things that have happened to God's church in recent years.

We all have our individual "war stories" to tell of the factors that came together to force us out of our previous hardship and into our present fellowship. We talk of events that are, apparently, happening at the present time in the church organization many of us have recently come out of. By the very unpleasant nature of our experiences of recent years, much of our conversation can be somewhat negative. But now that we have all (hopefully) talked those experiences out of our systems, it is time for us to put them behind us, and to move on.

God takes a serious view of His people spending too much time looking backwards. He punished the Israelites because they kept on looking back to their days in Egypt instead of looking forward and moving forward to the Promised Land (please read the thirteenth and fourteenth chapters of Numbers). It is true that their situation was different than ours in that they looked back with inaccurate and exaggerated memories of some positive aspects of their life and treatment in Egypt (Exodus 16:1-3; Numbers 14:1-4). They desired to return to their slavery in Egypt rather than face the unknowns and potential hardships of the journey which lay ahead of them – even with the promise of protection from the great God who had just brought them out of Egypt with mighty miracles.

In some respects, however, the people of the *New Testament Israel of God* have even less reason to dwell on the past than did the people of ancient Israel. At least the Old Testament Israelites were looking back to conditions that, at least in their defective memories, were positive. We know without a doubt that we were in a bad and spiritually dangerous situation. We know that God has brought us out from that situation and that He has promised to look after us on our journey forward; even though, like the Israelites, we cannot foresee all that might befall us on the road ahead. These are more reasons for us to put those days well behind us and to look forward and move forward toward the glorious future God has promised us.

As members of the spiritual body of God's church, we are now part of one of the many human organizations which have various corporate names. It is neither good for us, nor is it the policy nor the "purpose of existence" of most (if not all) Church of God groups to keep dragging up the negative events of the past. Here are four *don'ts* for you to consider:

i) Don't continually resurrect war stories

Note that I said "continually". Of course, these *war stories* might come up from time to time, more especially in the early days after our separation. Like the world wars of the past, which are remembered each year on Veterans' Day (Remembrance Day in the U.K., Canada and other Commonwealth countries), it would be wrong for us to completely forget the major conflict God's church has suffered in recent years. Forgetting completely could result in us repeating the former error.

Nevertheless, our previous bad experiences should not be the common factor that binds us together as a group now. The frequency of discussion of them must diminish with time. There are more positive and important things that need to be discussed. Jesus said:

We [not "I" as the King James Version translates it] must work the works of him who sent me, while it is day; night comes, when no one can work. (John 9:4 RSV)

Jesus is warning us here that we have a very limited amount of time to do our special part in God's work. Why waste it in looking back to negative events of the past? The apostle Paul said to his fellow-Christians in Philippi:

Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, (Philippians 3:13 RSV)

Paul had much reason to look back. He had fought the Christian fight on both sides: for and against God and His people! But he was here telling the Philippian brethren that he then strove for the future, and that he had put the past behind him.

ii) Don't share rumours

Refrain from sharing rumours, old or new, about what is happening or what has happened within our former church organization. You know many of these rumours as well as I do, so I won't take the time and space to repeat them here. Some of the stories may be true. But some, if not most, of these rumours may prove to be gross exaggerations or completely false! As Christians, we need to be dealing in truth, not falsehood!

The old saying that *there must be some truth behind every rumour* is incorrect. Charles Dickens wrote that "rumour, unlike the rolling stone of the proverb, is one which gathers a deal of moss in its wanderings up and down." Some rumours begin as "what if" scenarios, which may sound feasible to the person listening to them, but they can become mixed in with other, true statements of events. Please remember how Herbert W. Armstrong used to warn us so often about mixing error with truth!

If we are God's children, then we are to be peacemakers:

**Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.
(Matthew 5:9)**

Continual repetition of unfounded rumours concerning other people and other groups is not peacemaking. It is gossip! And, through the apostle Paul, God condemns gossip:

Besides that, they learn to be idlers, gadding about from house to house, and not only idlers but gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.

(I Timothy 5:13 RSV)

This leads into our third point, the subject of which, like the others, cannot be classed as peacemaking and is most certainly not the policy of any of the Church of God groups:

iii) Don't be a sheep stealer

Whatever you do, please do not attempt to infiltrate the ranks of other churches of God, attempting to persuade members to come out of "their error" and into "the truth" of your group or congregation. You may be surprised to learn that people would do such things, but please believe me, it does go on! There are individuals, even now, who attend services with other churches of God, not to praise God or to learn from Him, but to argue with ministers and members (sometimes openly disrupting the actual service) and to try to talk their victims into their way of looking at things.

Was it another human being that talked you out of your former church organization and into your present congregation? Hopefully not! Was it another human being that initially talked you out of the world and into God's church? No. It was, and still is, God's responsibility to do the calling, not ours! Jesus said:

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

As with our initial calling, so with this "second calling" out of error and back into God's truth, it is God the Father who must draw each one.

We should have learnt by now that the timing of one's decision and calling (whether it be the first, second or even third time around) is a very individual matter. It is a very important and personal decision that is to be made between the individual and God. It is not our responsibility to intervene as a third party to attempt to speed the process up for someone else.

iv) Don't judge

Please refrain from judging the leaders and members of other Church of God groups for what they may have or have not done. There is a right kind of judging and a wrong kind of judging. This is the wrong kind! Jesus commanded:

Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; (Luke 6:37 RSV)

The apostle Paul stated:

For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge His people." (Hebrews 10:30 RSV)

There are many other scriptures which prove that this kind of judging is God's responsibility, not ours! For a Christian, the right kind of judging is to see what another person or group is doing or teaching, to quietly compare it with the Word of God, and to choose the way of the Word of God if it differs from what that person or group is doing and teaching. Our living example of doing God's will – what we know to be right – is sufficient. God sets the standards and judges who is and who is not living by them.

Positive looking to the future

As the coming weeks and months go by, it is possible – even likely – that God will call people by ones and twos into our little congregations. As they come in, it would be a shame and a sin for our example, rather than being one of a positive looking to the future, to be one of negative war stories, gossip, rumours, judging, criticism and offensive comments and questions such as "what took you so long?" What would be more likely to cause them to walk out the door, never to come back again?

Some years ago at the Feast of Tabernacles, when my family and I attended our first service with the Church of the Great God, we were greeted with love, warmth, and tact. We must continue to do just that with every new person attending services with us.

Before we close, let us look at a very positive poem with a simple, clear message. Unfortunately, the identity of the author is not known.

Train of Life

Some folks ride the train of life
Looking out the rear,
Watching miles of life roll by,
And marking every year.

They sit in sad remembrance,
Of wasted days gone by,
And curse their life for what it was,
And hang their head and cry.

But I don't concern myself with that,
I took a different vent,
I look forward to what life holds,
And not what has been spent.

So strap me to the engine,
As securely as I can be,
I want to be out on the front,
To see what I can see.

I want to feel the winds of change,
Blowing in my face,
I want to see what life unfolds,
As I move from place to place.

I want to see what's coming up,
Not looking at the past,
Life's too short for yesterdays,
It moves along too fast.

So if the ride gets bumpy,
While you are looking back,
Go up front, and you may find,
Your life has jumped the track.

It's all right to remember,
That's part of history,
But up front's where it's happening,
There's so much mystery.

The enjoyment of living,
Is not where we have been,
It's looking ever forward,
To another year and ten.

It's searching all the byways,
Never should you refrain,
For if you want to live your life,
You've got to drive the train!

Let us move forward now with a positive attitude – with only the occasional glance behind for the purpose of keeping ourselves from going off track again. We all have work to do in the days ahead – lots of work! Let us all look forward – and concentrate on doing our part in that work – God's work!

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