

The Birds of the Air: Part Two

At the beginning of the first article under this heading, I mentioned the seeming miracle of flocks of birds in flight.

I wonder at the unity of these flocks of birds. One rarely or never sees a flock of birds flying together, then one loner decides that he wants to ignore the leader and go off on his own – that he no longer wants to go with the others, but prefers to fly off in his own preferred direction.

I am alluding here, of course, to individuals in God's church who, for some reason, become disenchanted, dissatisfied or unhappy with their particular "sub-flock" – their church group – their branch of "the greater church of God" – and they leave that sub-flock to go it alone as "Independent Christians."

Yes, it is true that all Christians are to some extent independent, in that we all report to Jesus Christ directly; but I think you know what I am referring to when I use the phrase "Independent Christian." An Independent Christian is one who leaves his church group, perhaps with the cry, "I've been let down too many times by too many church leaders; I'll never again trust another man!"

But becoming an Independent Christian can be very detrimental to one's spiritual health. There are very few members who can spiritually survive as Independent Christians. And God's Word tells us why:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the day approaching. (Hebrews 10: 23-25)

How can a truly Independent Christian effectively obey this scripture? If he has chosen to be independent from his brethren, how can he effectively consider them? How can he love them? How can he do good works for them? How can he assemble together with them? How can he exhort them?

Movement between sub-flocks

Let us return for a moment to our “bird flocks” analogy. Although we do not usually see a loner bird splitting off from his flock to go his own way, we sometimes *do* see a bird – or maybe two or three birds – for some reason unknown to most observers – splitting off from one “sub-flock” and moving over to another “sub-flock” that is flying in generally the same direction as the first. For example, we will often see such transfers between two sub-flocks of Canada Geese flying in the same direction as each other.

I think you will agree that the church symbolism here is quite obvious. The overall flock of birds represents the “greater church of God” – the scattered but undivided Body of Christ.

As I have mentioned before, there are differences between scattering and division! The Body of Christ cannot be divided, although it *can* be scattered; and certainly *is* scattered at this time, both organizationally and geographically.

In this analogy, the different sub-flocks of birds flying in generally the same direction represent the various Church of God groups which have basically the same core doctrines, teachings and goals.

When a few birds leave one sub-flock and move to another, this pictures a few members leaving one church group – for their own reasons – and moving over to another church group.

When someone leaves another church group and comes over to “our” church group, we all naturally look upon this move as a very positive thing. We are all very happy about the move and we assure the new arrival that he has done the right thing.

But what about when someone decides to leave “our” group – again, for his own good reasons (which may be unknown to us) – and moves to another Church of God group – hopefully a solid one? Why do we think of this as such a negative thing? Yes, of course, we will miss the leaver’s presence and his fellowship. But could it also be partially a vanity thing?

When someone moves into *our* group, we obviously think that they are doing the right thing, because they have come *our* way; they have done what *we* have done; they have made a similar decision as *we* have made; they are reinforcing that where *we* are is “the right place to be.”

But maybe our church group is *not* the right place for all of God’s children! For example, please consider church members who have young families and who live in an area – perhaps a geographically remote area – where there are no other members of their own age in our group; and perhaps no children of their own children’s ages, and no family activities. This can be a pretty lonely existence between Feasts!

Perhaps it might be more spiritually beneficial for them to attend with another Church of God group more suited to their family – either occasionally or even permanently in cases where the other group has a good, solid minister preaching the truth of God in good, solid messages.

Scriptural Approval?

Let us change metaphors for a moment as we ask and answer this question: Is there any scriptural approval of such moves within the “tribes” of the spiritual Israel of God (Galatians 6:16)?

Let us look first at ancient physical Israel to see if God gives us any examples through them as He so frequently does (I Corinthians 10:11)?

Was free movement between Israelite tribes permitted? Yes, it certainly was! A Zebulunite man could seek and marry a Naphtali girl if they were attracted, or if he was unable to find the right girl in his own tribe. He could move to the tribal lands of Naphtali if he wanted to, or his spouse could move to the tribal lands of Zebulun. There were no scriptural restrictions in moves between the tribes of ancient Israel, just as today there are virtually no restrictions for most legal citizens against free movement between the various states or provinces of the United States, Canada or the European Union

Intermarriage was permitted between Israelite tribes. Israelites were not restricted to marrying within their own tribe. Even the Aaronite priests could marry non-Aaronites or even non-Levites as long as the spouse was an Israelite.

Mary and Elizabeth were kinswomen (not necessarily cousins). They were evidently connected by marriage. John the Baptist and his parents were Aaronite Levites. The human Jesus, His mother Mary and step-father Joseph were all of the tribe of Judah; so the inter-tribal link between Mary and Elisabeth must have been through an inter-tribal marriage.

Here is another interesting example of moves between Israelite tribes:

Now the Spirit of God came upon Azariah... *{a prophet & messenger of God}*... the son of Oded. And he went out to meet Asa... *{who was the third king of Judah}*... and said to him: “Hear me, Asa, and all Judah and Benjamin. The LORD is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you. For a long time Israel has been without the true God, without a teaching priest, and without law; but when in their trouble they turned to the LORD God of Israel, and sought Him, He was found by them. And in those times there was no peace to the one who went out, nor to the one who came in, but great turmoil was on all the inhabitants of the lands. So nation was destroyed by nation, and city by city, for God troubled them with every adversity. But you, be strong and do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded!” And when Asa heard these words and the prophecy of Oded the prophet, he took courage, and removed the abominable idols from all the land of Judah and Benjamin and from the cities which he had taken in the mountains of Ephraim; and he restored the altar of the LORD that was before the vestibule of the LORD. Then he gathered all Judah and Benjamin, and those who dwelt with them from Ephraim, Manasseh, and Simeon, for they came over to him in great numbers from Israel when they saw that the LORD his God was with him. (II Chronicles 15:1-9)

Here we see large numbers of people from the tribes of Ephraim, Manasseh and Simeon “coming over” from their own tribal lands in the northern House of Israel to their brethren in the southern House of Judah.

Why did they make such an extreme move? Because they saw that the LORD God was with the repentant King Asa.

Two generations after the split between Israel and Judah during the reigns of Jeroboam and Rehoboam (I Kings 12), this move resulted in a certain level of reunification.

In modern physical Israel, this would be like large numbers of Americans, Brits, Canadians and other modern Israelites “coming over” to the modern day Jewish State of Israel because they could see that God was with them as a result of the sincere repentance of their people and their leaders, President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Unlikely? Yes. But it illustrates the point in modern terms.

In the modern *spiritual* Israel of God – the true church – this would be like large numbers of members from various Church of God groups “coming over” to another Church of God group – because they were inspired to see that God was with that group – as a result of the sincere repentance of its members and leaders.

A Modern-day Spiritual Judah?

We do not see such major migrations of members occurring in the Church of God today. Nor do we see any sign of re-unification between the many Church of God groups. In fact, we are seeing quite the opposite.

Why? God only knows. I do not claim to! But perhaps it is because God is not yet seeing the same sincere state of repentance in all or any of the church groups – neither in the leaders nor the members – as He saw in King Asa and the Jews of that time. Maybe their lesson is one that we all need to be learning.

I believe that, unless God starts to see such deep repentance, we will not see a major migration and reunification of brethren until God pulls us together when He empowers His two end-time witnesses and brings them onto the world scene (Revelation 11). There is one thing we can be absolutely sure of and that is that it will be *God* who will do the regathering, and not any human being (Jeremiah 31:10; Ezekiel 11:17; 28:25).

Many Church of God leaders at this time still seem to be claiming that “theirs” is “the only true church.” Perhaps these leaders justify such claims as a kind of protection of “their” turf. In conversation with the ministers and even some members of those groups, some give the underlying feeling or impression that “their” group is the only right one.

Thankfully, there are still some honest ministers and members with common sense who declare openly and publicly that the sheep belong to God, and not to any man; that theirs is *not* the only true Church of God; that other Church of God groups may also be spiritual homes for members; that it is acceptable for “their” members – especially the geographically scattered and lonely ones – to go to other, larger church groups for Sabbath or Feast fellowship; and that it is acceptable for “their” young people to seek friends or even potential spouses in other Church of God groups.

Now please don't get me wrong! I am not advocating a wholesale shift from any Church of God group to any one of the others. Why would I do such a thing when I do not see a perfect group anywhere? Do all of the church groups have their problems? Yes, as far as I know, they all do. Is there a Church of God group that is anywhere near perfect? No, not that I know of. If you know of one, please let me know!

What I *am* saying is this: If you hear of a member or family leaving your church group, especially to move to a spiritual home that is more suitable for them, please do not negatively judge them because of their move; please do not overstate their action by saying that they are "leaving God's church." And, if at all possible, considering your time constraints, please strive to maintain good connections and relations with them after they have moved. In addition, please make efforts to maintain good connections and relations with any or all members and ministers in other Church of God groups, and please encourage as much unity as possible with other groups.

In these ways, I believe that we – at our grass-roots level – can have a solid part in building unity within the true Church of God.

One day – and let us pray that it won't be long – God's tiny little flock *will* be totally re-unified!

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