

November 1995

Frank W. Nelte

DOES THE CHURCH OF GOD STILL HAVE 'A WORK' TO DO?

At the time when Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong died in January 1986 Church attendance and the Feast of Tabernacles attendance for the Worldwide Church of God were both well in excess of 100 000 people. The Plain Truth magazine had a circulation of around 7 million copies, the Church's radio and television program was on many, many stations and Mr. Armstrong had had personal contacts with very many world leaders. The Church, through its Foundation, was involved in many different projects around the world. Millions of booklets and magazines were being distributed free of charge to those who requested information from the Church. The Church's Correspondence Course had been studied by perhaps a million people over the years. Without question, during Mr. Armstrong's time the Worldwide Church of God had "a power" or "an impact" way beyond the size of its actual membership of around 100 000 members.

Mr. Joseph W. Tkach died on 23 September 1995, a few months short of ten years after Mr. Armstrong had died. What is the state of the Worldwide Church of God NOW?

Almost everything has been decimated!

The membership and the ministry are only a fraction of what they were ten years ago. The Plain Truth magazine is a pathetic effort, when compared to the impact the Church had ten years ago. The literature that the Church used to provide as a free service has been taken out of circulation!

It is very much like the description we have in the Book of Haggai. At that time a small number of people had returned to Jerusalem from the Babylonian captivity and a few of the older people had, as young people, still seen Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon before it had been destroyed by the Babylonians about 48 or so years earlier. So Haggai asked:

WHO [IS] LEFT AMONG YOU THAT SAW THIS HOUSE IN HER FIRST GLORY? AND HOW DO YE SEE IT NOW? [IS IT] NOT IN YOUR EYES IN COMPARISON OF IT AS NOTHING?
(Haggai 2:3)

Who saw and remembers "the work" that God did through His Church during Mr. Armstrong's time? And how do you see it NOW? Is it not as nothing by comparison?

THE POWER OF GOD'S PEOPLE HAS BEEN SCATTERED

About three or four months ago I wrote an article about Daniel 12:7. There is no question about the fact that THE POWER which God's Church had at Mr. Armstrong's time HAS INDEED BEEN SCATTERED! The way that "power" has been scattered is by scattering THE PEOPLE who are the truly converted members of God's Church.

THE POWER of the Church always resides with God! And God has always provided that power through His Holy Spirit, which is the power of God. But God has chosen to channel that power through the converted members of His Church. As Mr. Armstrong used to say:

"Brethren, if at least 51% of us are really converted, THEN God will bless the work we are doing!"

We of ourselves have only had "a very little strength". This is recorded in the message to Philadelphia.

I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: FOR THOU HAST A LITTLE STRENGTH, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. (Revelation 3:8)

Our strength was indeed "little" and God set before us numerous open doors. From the start of the first radio program and the first Plain Truth Magazines in 1934 God time and again set before Mr. Armstrong "open doors"! It is very clear to me that Revelation 3:8 applied to the time period when Mr. Armstrong was alive and leading the Church (under Jesus Christ's direction).

The "doors" that God opened for the Church during Mr. Armstrong's 50 years of ministry are too numerous to mention. Many are recorded in his Autobiography. Some of the major "doors" which were opened to the Church and with which most of us should be familiar include:

- the start and establishment of the radio broadcast
- opportunities to print the Church's magazines
- the purchase and establishment of the College campuses
- the establishment of the international offices
- the meetings with world leaders
- establishment of the TV program
- opportunities to advertise in leading magazines
- obtaining very favourable contracts for various services, etc..

THE REASON God withdrew His blessings during Mr. Tkach's time is because LESS THAN 50% OF US WERE CONVERTED! That is just a fact. We have counted Church members by the number of people on the membership file that are identified as having been baptized. But God has never counted members that way. The way GOD counts members is by the number of people who have His Spirit dwelling within them (Romans 8:9). And as Mr. Tkach's time in office continued, that number was constantly shrinking. We need to realistically understand that throughout Mr. Tkach's time in office (i.e. for just under ten years) there was a pressure on the righteous to either compromise or to leave the Worldwide Church of God.

Solomon explained the principles involved as follows:

When the wicked rise, men hide themselves: but when they perish, the righteous increase. (Proverbs 28:28)

When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice: but when the wicked beareth rule, the people mourn. (Proverbs 29:2)

For quite a number of years many of "the righteous" have been pressured out of the fellowship of the Worldwide Church of God. They are the people who rejected the heresies that were introduced under Mr. Tkach's leadership, and they felt it would be a compromise to stay in the WCG fellowship. Many of us "toughed it out" a lot longer. Most of us have probably only left the WCG fellowship during the last 12 months. It is only during the past 12 months that the exodus from the Worldwide Church of God has turned into a flood.

Now obviously, all along many of those who were not converted have ALSO left WCG. But many of the unconverted have also stayed. The leadership that now controls WCG is vividly described in several prophetic sections about "the shepherds" and "the pastors" of God's sheep. God's indictments of such "shepherds" are very strong and to the point.

A verse that sums it all up is found in the Book of Jeremiah.

MY PEOPLE HATH BEEN LOST SHEEP: THEIR SHEPHERDS HAVE CAUSED THEM TO GO ASTRAY, they have turned them away [on] the mountains: they have gone from mountain to hill, they have forgotten their resting place. (Jeremiah 50:6)

IS THERE STILL "A WORK" TO DO?

As we have been scattered, so we have tried to regroup. That is a natural desire. However, we have regrouped under different leaders, each with his own or with their own following.

That has in practice compounded our "scattering"!

Many people have built loyalties to the group or to the leader whom they have joined. In the process some have looked down on other groups, which may also include some of God's true sheep that were driven away by WCG. Some are competing for "the fall-out" from WCG; as members leave WCG, so they are hoping to pick them up.

BUT IS THERE STILL "A WORK" TO DO?

The answer depends to some degree on what we mean by "a work".

The fact that we are divided, separated and scattered should make clear to us that GOD DOES NOT HAVE THE SAME TYPE OF "WORK" FOR US AS HE DID DURING MR. ARMSTRONG'S TIME!

Look at Daniel 12:7 again.

And I heard the man clothed in linen, which [was] upon the waters of the river, when he held up his right hand and his left hand unto heaven, and swore by him that liveth for ever that [it shall be] for a time, times, and an half; AND WHEN HE SHALL HAVE ACCOMPLISHED TO SCATTER THE POWER OF THE HOLY PEOPLE, ALL THESE [THINGS] SHALL BE FINISHED. (Daniel 12:7)

The context is "the time of the end". So did God predict that the power of His people would be scattered or not? YES, God did predict this. What is "the conclusion of the matter"? God tells us that once the power of His people HAS been scattered, THEN "all these things shall be finished".

The Hebrew word translated "finished" is "kalah" and it is frequently translated as "consume" or "wasted"

or "destroyed", meanings that are substantiated in Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament. So in plain English this verse tells us:

"... when the power of God's people has been scattered, THEN all these things shall be consumed (or wasted or destroyed)".

What "things"?

Well, the "things" that have just been discussed in the previous verses. That is, "the time of trouble such as never was ..." (Daniel 12:1). That refers to the great tribulation yet ahead of us.

So it seems that when "the scattering" of God's people is complete, THEN God's people will at some point thereafter be taken to the place of safety, and then the great tribulation starts. Is it perhaps because God's people WILL be scattered that God allows the 45 days between the 1335 days and the 1290 days (Daniel 12:11-12) for His people to get to the place of safety? I obviously don't know.

But until then what about "a work"?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY "A WORK"?

We have traditionally looked at two Scriptures in regard to "doing the work". These Scriptures are Matthew 24:14 ...

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. (Matthew 24:14)

and Matthew 28:19-20 ...

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, [even] unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matthew 28:19-20)

To understand "the work", let's look at what was done under Mr. Armstrong. The following main things stand out from Mr. Armstrong's time:

- 1) The radio program was aired in many areas of the world.
- 2) Later the TV program was aired, primarily in North America, and to a lesser degree in other areas as well.
- 3) The Plain Truth circulation peaked at around 7 million copies.
- 4) Mr. Armstrong personally met scores of world leaders.
- 5) Through AICF the Church was involved in many countries on the level of rendering a service.
- 6) Over a 30-year period large numbers of people completed the Church's Bible Correspondence Course.

- 7) The Church had a large number of religious booklets available as a back-up for those who responded to the Church.
- 8) The Church maintained offices in many areas around the world.
- 9) Congregations were started in many countries.
- 10) For 35 years the income of the Church grew at about 30% p.a..

Now exactly what did all of this achieve? Did we really reach "the whole world" with God's message?

In the United States our TV program at its peak reached about 2 million households, or less than 5% of the total population! Add another 4 million households for receiving the Plain Truth.

The total impact in the rest of the world was probably far less than 5 million households. So at our peak we probably still reached less than 10 million households around the world. But there are about 6 BILLION people on earth today!

So here is what we should acknowledge to ourselves:

There is really only one thing that "all of the work" during Mr. Armstrong's time achieved in any major way. And that is that IT BUILT THE CHURCH OF GOD!

Oh yes, we would SAY that our desire was "to preach the gospel to the world as a witness". But our desire was REALLY to gain members for the Church of God. We wanted to see growth in membership! We evaluated our effectiveness in terms of growth! We wanted to see more congregations and larger incomes for the Church. We gauged our effectiveness by such things as the number of new visit requests.

As far as "preaching the gospel to the world" is concerned, we did no more than scratch the surface. Yes, our radio program was being aired around the world ... but how many people actually listened to it? Yes, our TV program could potentially be picked up by perhaps 95% of all US households ... but how many households actually DID tune in to it? A VERY SMALL PERCENTAGE!

So the fact is: even with all our literature and the radio and TV programs and with AICF involvement, etc. the Church of God still only reached a very small percentage of the people in the English-speaking countries, and an even smaller percentage in the rest of the world.

BUT IT DID BUILD THE CHURCH! And we did "make disciples" in many nations around the world.

So understand this:

What we FOCUSED ON during Mr. Armstrong's time was Matthew 24:14; but what was ACCOMPLISHED was Matthew 28:19-20 and NOT Matthew 24:14!

Yes, we can say that the gospel was being preached in all the world, but it was NOT "a witness unto all nations"! It was only a witness to the very small number of people who were exposed to it, a fraction of whom responded positively and were then baptized.

So what actually is "the work" of God's Church? Is it to make disciples or is it to preach the gospel to the world? In retrospect to Mr. Armstrong's time:

IF the work of the Church of God is "to make disciples", then that goal was certainly achieved. And then we should judge the Church as having been reasonably successful.

BUT IF the work of the Church of God is "to preach the gospel to all the world AS A WITNESS UNTO ALL NATIONS", then we never did achieve that goal! And then the Church under Mr. Armstrong must be judged to have failed in its commission.

EXAMINING "THE COMMISSIONS"

In Greek when a verb is intended to convey a command, then the imperative mood is used to express this, even as in English the imperative expresses a command. With this in mind let's look again at the two passages involved. First, here is Matthew 24:14.

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. (Matthew 24:14)

This verse does NOT contain a command of any kind. The Greek verb translated as "shall be preached" is the future passive indicative of the verb for "to preach". Now the indicative mood is A STATEMENT OF FACT! And that is precisely what Matthew 24:14 is ... it is a statement of fact and not a command! "Shall be preached" is the passive voice, not a command.

In this verse Jesus Christ did NOT give a command to His disciples. He neither explained HOW it would be preached, nor did He state WHO would do this preaching. He simply stated something that WOULD happen, without specifying how it would happen or who would be involved.

WE, the Church of God, WE have read into Christ's statement a command to us. We have INTERPRETED this verse to mean that Christ meant that WE ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR SEEING THAT THIS TAKES PLACE! We felt that it is our job to see that the gospel is preached in all the world as a witness to all nations.

BUT THAT IS NOT WHAT CHRIST SAID!

To make it very clear: the question is NOT whether the Church of God should be preaching the gospel in all the world. Yes, most emphatically, that is what the Church SHOULD be doing! That is the way to make disciples. The real question is whether or not this preaching of the gospel by the Church is supposed to be "the witness unto all nations" that Jesus Christ specifically referred to in Matthew 24:14 as the sign that would precede His return. THIS is the real question.

Now let's look at Matthew 28:19-20.

Go ye therefore, and TEACH ALL NATIONS, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, [even] unto the end of the world. Amen. (Matthew 28:19-20)

The only command in these two verses (i.e. the only verb that is used with the imperative mood!) is "TEACH (ALL NATIONS)". The verb translated "teach" in this instance is "matheteuo", and it is used in the aorist, active imperative. This verb means "to make disciples".

So in these two verses Jesus Christ has given His Church A COMMAND to make disciples. It should

read "go you therefore and make disciples in all nations ...".

THIS IS PRECISELY WHAT MR. ARMSTRONG'S MINISTRY ACHIEVED!

So the one job that Jesus Christ at the end of His ministry gave to His Church was clearly fulfilled during Mr. Armstrong's time ... we became "The WORLDWIDE Church of God".

But by no stretch of the imagination did we preach the gospel in all the world "FOR A WITNESS UNTO ALL NATIONS". It is unrealistic to say (for example):

"Well, the World Tomorrow program is being aired every Sunday on Radio Luxembourg which can be received all over Europe (that is the station through which I myself came into contact with God's Church in 1963). THEREFORE the gospel has now been preached as a witness to all the nations of Europe."

A claim like that is totally unjustified.

Making the Church's radio or TV broadcast "AVAILABLE" on one or more stations in every country is NOT what God means by providing "a witness unto all nations"! That is simply not what Christ meant in Matthew 24:14! That is only how WE have tried to INTERPRET this verse in order to find a commission for us in it.

Market research has shown time and again that only a very small fraction of the people in the reception area of any given station that has broadcast our program tune in to that station, or tune in to that station when our program is being aired.

And Matthew 24:14 is not speaking about a small, "representative" segment of society (i.e. those who tune in to our program) receiving "a witness". This verse is speaking about a witness ON A LARGE SCALE, something that cannot be overlooked, not something that has to compete with a dozen or more other stations which are airing more appealing programs. We have tried to fit this verse into our preconceived ideas, assuming that this is a commission to the Church of God.

There is NO COMMISSION in this verse! There is no verb in the imperative mood! This verse is just a statement of fact.

So the facts are as follows:

Matthew 28:19-20 is a clear command, with the imperative mood being used, to the Church to go and build the Church of God. It is a commission to the Church! This is a commission that was clearly fulfilled during Mr. Armstrong's time from 1934 till 1986, even though we did not focus on it directly. By the time Mr. Armstrong died, somewhere around 100 000 disciples had been made as a result of his ministry (though not all those "disciples" were converted).

Matthew 24:14 is NOT a commission of any kind! The verse does NOT contain any command. It is simply a statement of fact about something that WILL happen. It does not mention WHO will be involved in "making it happen", nor does it tell us HOW it will happen. THE REASON this is mentioned by Jesus Christ is NOT to instruct someone to "go and do it"; the reason is that the conclusion of this event ushers in "the end". This should tell us that this event (preaching the gospel in all the world as a witness to all nations) has a very specific and recognizable conclusion or ending.

SO WHAT DOES MATTHEW 24:14 MEAN?

Well, if this verse is NOT a commission to the Church of God, then what DOES it mean?

Let's backtrack a little bit to get things into focus. In Matthew 24:3 the disciples had asked Jesus Christ about His return and about "the end of the age". That is the question Jesus was answering in this chapter.

And as he sat upon the mount of Olives, the disciples came unto him privately, saying, Tell us, when shall these things be? and WHAT [SHALL BE] THE SIGN OF THY COMING, AND OF THE END OF THE WORLD? (Matthew 24:3)

Christ then proceeded to give a rundown of the events that would occur before "the end" which the disciples had asked about. In Matthew 24:6 He said ... "but the end is not yet", showing that He was still mindful of the original question. Then, in Matthew 24:13, Christ encouraged His followers to "endure unto the end". It seems clear that He had the same "end" in mind that the disciples had asked about.

In Matthew 24:14 Christ then answered the original question from verse 3. The statement is simply: something will happen AND THEN shall "the end" come.

This answers the question. So therefore the second coming of Christ and "the end" immediately follow on the heels of "this gospel being preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations". Is that what verse 14 tells you? That's what I get out of this verse.

So the way to understand this is to look at a description of events that immediately precede the return of Jesus Christ. We have such a description in the Book of Revelation. Specifically, this leads us to the two witnesses in chapter 11. Notice:

And I will give [power] unto MY TWO WITNESSES, and THEY SHALL PROPHECY a thousand two hundred [and] threescore days, clothed in sackcloth. (Revelation 11:3)

This tells us that the two witnesses "witness" for 1260 days (or 42 months, or three and one half years). It says that "they shall prophesy". But this is not in the context of preaching to a congregation of God's people. Rather, they give God's message to the world "AS A WITNESS". For three and one half years these two men will provide a witness unto all the nations of this world that God is about to intervene and send His Son Jesus Christ back to this earth as King of Kings and as Lord of Lords.

These two witnesses have a specific job. This is also conveyed to us in verse 7.

AND WHEN THEY SHALL HAVE FINISHED THEIR TESTIMONY, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them. (Revelation 11:7)

Let's notice some of the Greek words that are used in these passages.

In Matthew 24:14 the word for "witness" is MARTURION.

In Revelation 11:3 the word for "witnesses" is MARTUS.

In Revelation 11:7 the word for "testimony" is MARTURIA.

"Martus" is the root word, and both "marturion" and "marturia" are derived from this root word. The word translated as "testimony" really also means "witness".

It should not be too difficult to understand that those who give the "WITNESS" (Greek "marturion") to all nations in Matthew 24:14 would obviously be "WITNESSES" (Greek "martus"). In Revelation 11 we see that the two WITNESSES (Greek "martus") have a specified period of time in which to give their "WITNESS" (or testimony, Greek "marturia"). After that they are killed.

Now what happens after these two witnesses are killed?

Why, after three and one half days (each day for a year of their ministry!) they are resurrected and rise into the air to meet the returning Christ, together with all the other people who will be in the first resurrection.

And after three days and an half the Spirit of life from God entered into them, and they stood upon their feet; and great fear fell upon them which saw them. And they heard a great voice from heaven saying unto them, Come up hither. AND THEY ASCENDED UP TO HEAVEN IN A CLOUD; and their enemies beheld them. (Revelation 11:11-12)

So here is our answer!

Question: What happens just before the return of Jesus Christ and the time of God's intervention?

Answer: The two witnesses provide A WITNESS to this world that God is about to intervene. They will do this for three and one half years. Jesus Christ will return three and one half days after they are killed.

Question: What are the two witnesses doing when they "witness"?

Answer: They will be preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God! The gospel is all about the return of Jesus Christ to this earth to rule, and that is what they will repeatedly emphasize!

Question: So what is Matthew 24:14 telling us?

Answer: This verse tells us that AFTER the two witnesses have preached the gospel of the kingdom of God to this world for three and one half years, THEN Christ will return and that will be the end of the present age. And a new age will then start.

Question: What was the Church under Mr. Armstrong doing when we said that this verse is a statement of the commission for the Church of God?

Answer: The Church was trying to do the job that God has mapped out for the two witnesses. Anyone who presents "a witness to all nations" is obviously himself "A WITNESS".

WHAT ABOUT THE CHURCHES THAT ARE TRYING TO FULFILL MATT. 24:14?

Old prejudices die hard! After reading the above explanation many people will still say something like:

"YES BUT ... I still feel that Matthew 24:14 is a commission for us. Look, there must be

SOMEBODY who must do this. And OBVIOUSLY, it must be us, the true people of God, who will have to present this witness to the world. We are supposed to be found "so doing" when Christ returns, right?"

Right, in that case let's look at some of the facts.

FACT: Matthew 24:14 is NOT a commission of any kind! It is a simple statement of fact.

FACT: The preaching of the two witnesses DOES immediately precede the return of Jesus Christ.

FACT: The two witnesses will OBVIOUSLY be providing "a witness unto all nations". That is their specific calling.

FACT: The two witnesses will constantly expound "the gospel", always focusing attention on the imminent return of Jesus Christ.

FACT: While during Mr. Armstrong's time the gospel was preached more powerfully and in more areas than at any previous time in the past 1900 years, by no stretch of the imagination could it be said that the Church EVEN REMOTELY presented "A WITNESS UNTO ALL NATIONS"! Far less than 1% of all people on earth ever heard more than a passing comment, or a fleeting broadcast, and ever had the opportunity for more than a casual glance at some literature. Far more than 99% of all people have never yet had "the witness" of the gospel of the kingdom.

FACT: The "so doing" that some people may quote refers to the wise servant whom God has given the position of leader, i.e. "the ruler over the household (Greek therapeia, meaning 'healing!') of God" (see Matthew 24:46 and Luke 12:43). The "so doing" has reference to faithfully holding fast to all the true teachings. It really has no reference to Matthew 24:14 at all. Being faithful to the truth does NOT mean the same as feeling that you have a commission from God to preach the gospel as a witness to all nations.

FACT: Those who have tried to fulfill Matthew 24:14 will often freely admit that they don't really know what they are doing! They have NO IDEA of what parameters God has in mind for this "job". So they (including Mr. Armstrong in the past) will make statements like: "Well, we now have X number of Plain Truth magazines going into country Y. So therefore that country is now 'receiving the gospel' and they 'have a witness'. WE JUST DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH of a witness God wants them to have." Magazines going to a tiny number of people in a country is NOT what Christ meant in Matthew 24:14! This verse is not about magazines and booklets being sent to people.

So what about the new organizations amongst the churches of God that feel that THEY HAVE A WORK TO DO, that they must somehow fulfill Matthew 24:14? Well, by now we should understand that they are trying to do the job that God intends the two witnesses to do. So those organizations are not going to succeed in fulfilling Matthew 24:14.

THE BEST they can possibly achieve is to have some growth for their particular organizations, i.e. an increase in membership. That was the "only" thing that was ever achieved during Mr. Armstrong's time. I say "only" because that is precisely the command (imperative mood) Jesus Christ had given to His disciples in Matthew 28:19-20. So even though Mr. Armstrong looked to the wrong verse for a commission, God blessed his labour with abundant growth. "The POWER" which the Church had during Mr. Armstrong's time was directed at producing growth in membership. And that is what it achieved.

BUT SHOULD WE SIT BACK ON OUR LAURELS?

Is there still "a BIG work" ahead before we are taken to the place of safety? Is the work over and should we just wait for the end? What does God expect from us?

No, I don't believe that there is still "a BIG work" ahead for the Church, as far as preaching to this world is concerned. And no, I also don't believe that the work is "over". But people have simply been misled into applying the term "THE WORK" to the wrong thing! And no, we should not sit back on our laurels; we don't really have any yet to sit on anyway!

"The work" of the Church, from God's perspective, has always been "to make disciples" (Matthew 28:19-20). In this regard the "big work" was during Mr. Armstrong's time. Since we have been in the process of being scattered, "this work" has moved into a SMALLER phase, one of maintenance and consolidation, and of replacing those who don't endure unto the end. But "the work" is not yet over. God is in the process of testing those who have been called. God always has potential replacements waiting in the wings for those who drop out, just like God had 7000 men who had not bowed the knee to Baal in Elijah's time.

A major mistake we have made in the past was to look at Matthew 24:14 to tell us how close we are to the end of the age. We have looked at the number of magazines or broadcasts going into various nations, and then we tried to guess whether that sufficed to constitute "a witness unto all nations".

THAT WAS OUR MISTAKE!

Matthew 24:14 is a statement of fact, but Jesus Christ did NOT make this statement so that we could judge how close we are to the second coming of Christ. The statements for that purpose are contained in the Book of Revelation. There it is very clear that the return of Christ takes place three and one half days after the two witnesses have been killed, which in turn is after they have witnessed for three and one half years.

Realize that "... and then shall THE END come" in Matthew 24:14 basically means: "... and then shall THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST take place". "The end" in this verse is NOT a reference to events that occur three and one half years or more before the return of Christ. "The end" refers to when Christ returns, not to earlier events. Earlier events are not really "the end"! Matthew 24:3 makes quite clear that "the end" refers to the second coming of Christ.

If we can really understand this point, then we should also be able to see that it is totally IMPOSSIBLE for Matthew 24:14 to be a reference to the work of the Church of God, since that work of the Church must come to an end when the Church is taken to the place of safety. That will still be more than three years before "the end"! So Matthew 24:14 cannot be speaking about the work of the Church!

Lest you misunderstand what I mean: I am NOT saying that the Church of God has not preached the gospel! Yes, the Church certainly HAS preached the gospel, and it has done so in many different countries around the world. And yes, the gospel CAN be preached by radio, by the means of TV and by means of printed literature.

But that does not constitute a fulfillment of Matthew 24:14. The preaching that has been done has NOT been "a witness to all nations"; it has only been a witness to a small portion of the very small number of people we have been able to reach.

WHY DO WE LOOK AT MATTHEW 24:14 AS "OUR COMMISSION"?

Viewing this verse as our commission has important consequences. For one thing, it gives us a goal to aim for. It gives us a purpose. It fills us with zeal and enthusiasm.

It also gives us hope, hope that the end of our enduring is in sight. It meets our wishful thinking that if we somehow work harder at fulfilling this verse, THEN the end might come sooner than it otherwise will. Mr. Armstrong would sometimes make statements to this effect, when he would say:

"Brethren, God is HOLDING BACK the return of Jesus Christ BECAUSE we have not yet done our part in fulfilling Matthew 24:14."

But that was not correct!

What God expected His Church to do during Mr. Armstrong's time, and fulfilling Matthew 24:14 are two totally different and unrelated things.

Further, to take this view that it is the Church's responsibility to fulfill Matthew 24:14 is actually VERY FRUSTRATING! Deep-down we know that we can NEVER really fulfill this verse. And so we have to rationalize. There is no way we can give a clear witness to over ONE BILLION CHINESE! There is no way we can give a clear witness to another ONE BILLION INDIAN PEOPLE!

And so we rationalize. We say: "Well, God just expects us to reach a token number of people in those nations. But God really wants us to give a thorough witness to the nations of Israel; well, actually not to ALL the nations of Israel, but to THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING NATIONS OF ISRAEL, because THEY are the ones going into the tribulation, right?"

In so doing we have very conveniently CHANGED the meaning of Matthew 24:14. WE HAVE DECIDED that "a witness unto ALL nations" really means "a witness to THE ENGLISH-SPEAKING NATIONS OF ISRAEL"!

Whether we admit this or not depends on how honest we really are in regard to this question. Some will say: "Oh no, that's not what we say or teach. We believe that we need to preach to ALL nations AS GOD OPENS THE DOORS FOR US, but ESPECIALLY to our own beloved nations of Israel. If and when God opens the doors to other nations, we will certainly go through those doors. But BECAUSE our nations are the ones that will go into the captivity, THEREFORE they are the ones that need to be especially warned."

But Matthew 24:14 doesn't say anything about "warning Israel".

Again, let me make clear that I have no argument with bringing a warning to the nations of Israel. Yes, the nations of Israel SHOULD be warned of the impending tribulation. But that warning does not in any way constitute a fulfillment of Matthew 24:14. We cannot rightly interpret Matthew 24:14 to meet our own ideas. "A witness to all nations" does not mean "a greater and more in-depth witness to some nations, and a more shallow and superficial witness to other nations".

Claiming that Matthew 24:14 is a commission which God expects US to fulfill is a way of justifying the establishment of various outreach programs: a TV program, advertising campaigns, various magazines, etc.. However, we don't need Matthew 24:14 to justify these endeavours. They are equally justified when seen from the view of Matthew 28:19-20. Christ did give the clear instruction to make disciples in all nations. And these "doors" that God has opened for us can certainly be used in this regard. But then we are honestly admitting that our goal is to add members to the Church, in line with Christ's instructions in Matthew 28:19-20, rather than trying to provide "a witness".

THE WORD "WORLD"

In the New Testament there are three different Greek words which are at times translated as "world".

The most common of these words is "kosmos". This refers to human society, which is what the English word "world" also originally referred to. ("World" comes from the Old English "woruld", meaning "human existence", and from the Old High German "weralt", meaning "the age of man".)

Another Greek word is "aion", which really means "age". In Ephesians 2:2 these two words (aion and kosmos) are used together in the Greek expression "ton aiona tou kosmou", which is translated in the KJV as "the course of this world", but which literally means "the age of this world", or even more accurately "the age of human society".

The third word which is sometimes translated as "world" is "oikoumene". This is actually the present participle in the passive voice of the Greek verb "oikeo", which means "to dwell", "to inhabit". So this word really means "THE INHABITED EARTH".

It is this word "oikoumene" that is used in Matthew 24:14. So let's apply this understanding to this verse. It then reads:

And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached IN ALL THE INHABITED AREAS OF THE EARTH for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come. (Matthew 24:14)

There is no way that this statement ("in all the inhabited areas of the earth") can in any way be construed to focus especially on Israel! It has a global application! It doesn't just mean "preached in the area of Peking to cover all of the nation of China"; it means "preached in all the inhabited areas of China". It doesn't just mean "preached in one city in Japan or in Thailand or in Burma or in Iran or in Iraq"; it means "preached in all the inhabited areas of Japan and Thailand and Burma and Iran and Iraq". It means "preached in every inhabited area of this earth". And THAT preaching will constitute "a witness unto all nations".

A REALISTIC APPRAISAL OF "THE PRESENT DISTRESS"

During Mr. Armstrong's time the Church of God did have a certain "power", which we took note of above. That power has now been scattered. It seems clear to me that this scattering is with God's permission.

Today there are numerous churches of God, which go back to the Worldwide Church of God. A very few of these are, relatively speaking, larger; meaning that they have more than two or three thousand members each. (In a worldwide context any church with less than 100 000 members is still really very small.) But most of the church groups that have come out of Worldwide are very small indeed, with far less than 1000 members each.

I DON'T BELIEVE THAT ANY OF THESE CHURCHES WILL GROW TO THE SCOPE AND MAGNITUDE WHICH THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD HAD IN 1986!

This should tell us that NONE of them have the same "commission" from God that the Worldwide Church of God under Mr. Armstrong had. And if they DID have the commission to preach the gospel as a witness to all nations, then they would have to grow much larger than The Worldwide Church of God ever was at its peak! Because even at its peak WCG NEVER even remotely approached fulfilling Matthew 24:14! So they would have to be larger and more influential to attempt to do that job. But they will NOT become larger and more influential than WCG was under Mr. Armstrong. And God has not raised up any of them for the purpose of providing "A WITNESS unto all nations".

This is not to say or to imply that these churches of God do not serve a purpose. They certainly CAN serve a purpose. But that purpose is not tied to Matthew 24:14. The service that these new churches of God can provide is to be, as it were, places of refuge for those who are fleeing the doctrinal pressures emanating from the Worldwide Church of God. These new churches of God can be places of consolidation, encouraging the people of God to hold fast to the truths we were taught; places where God's people can worship God in peace and in truth. There is now a very great pressure on people to "let go". That is why the message to the Philadelphian era includes the admonition:

Behold, I come quickly: HOLD THAT FAST WHICH THOU HAST, THAT NO MAN TAKE THY CROWN. (Revelation 3:11)

It is the responsibility of each individual person who has left the Worldwide Church of God to make sure that the new church they join or associate with supports them in their efforts to "HOLD FAST" to the truth of God. Some have indeed "let go" of some of the things they had learned and proved in the past. But this is up to each individual person to prove for himself or for herself.

So understand that I have nothing against any of these new "churches of God". But it is a mistake for any of them to look upon Matthew 24:14 as a specific commission from God for them. The attitude in wanting to serve may be terrific. They can go and preach their hearts out, serving people in every way possible; but it is not God's intent for them to be the means of fulfilling Matthew 24:14. If they were really able to fulfill this verse, then there would be no need for the two witnesses to still come, if the witness to all nations is already being achieved by one or more of the churches of God that now exist.

Think about Matthew 24:14. Let's admit that we made a mistake in reading into this verse a commission for us to fulfill. There is no commission of any kind for the Church of God as a whole in this verse.

THE CORRECT PERSPECTIVE

This is a tough one to explain. The reason is that people have made up their minds that they "KNOW" what the Bible says, even when they have no proof for their ideas. It reminds me somewhat of Hebrews 5:11-14.

When people read their own interpretations INTO the Bible, it is almost impossible to get them to see the truth. You may have some experience with this yourself. To you it is clear that we don't go to heaven and that we don't have an immortal soul, but have you ever tried to explain this to someone whose mind is already made up, who is already convinced that he DOES have an immortal soul and that he WILL eventually go to heaven?

The people you try to reason with may even convince themselves that their minds are open to the truth, but YOU can see that their minds are closed. You know that they cannot do away with Scriptures like Ezekiel 18:4 ("the soul that sins it shall die"), etc., but they just refuse to acknowledge the objections you raise to their false ideas. Instead they try to look to other Scriptures for support, as if that could somehow do away with the clear biblical statements you confronted them with. No matter how many clear statements you present to them, they always squirm out of that situation and turn to some OTHER Scripture to try to validate their ideas.

In the last 25 years I have been on several thousand visits to members and to new people alike. During that time I have also written several thousand letters on behalf of the Church's Personal Correspondence Department. And I have come across this attitude on numerous occasions. The clear Scriptures I may present are never correctly explained by such people; instead OTHER SCRIPTURES are presented in an effort to negate the plain statements in the Scriptures which I have drawn attention to.

The above paragraphs are intended to provide some background for what I would now like to briefly explain. And that is this:

The correct perspective in looking for "a commission" for the Church of God is to understand that God has planned that there will be EXACTLY 144000 people in the first resurrection! Not one person more!

That is very clear and it is easy to prove, except to those people whose minds are made up, and who believe that they already "KNOW" that there are going to be more people in the first resurrection. People like that are in exactly the same position as those who think they already "KNOW" that after death we will go to heaven.

I have already explained this in other articles, but I will briefly comment on it here, because THIS UNDERSTANDING obviously influences a person's ideas about there still being "a BIG work" ahead.

Here is the clearest Scripture of all!

And I looked, and, lo, A LAMB STOOD ON THE MOUNT SION, AND WITH HIM AN HUNDRED FORTY [AND] FOUR THOUSAND, having his Father's name written in their foreheads.
(Revelation 14:1)

"Mount Zion" is where Jesus Christ will establish His government during the millennium. It is from there that the law of God will go out. This chapter presents a vision of the government of God for the millennium being established. The next three verses describe these 144000 individuals. Verse 4 is a plain statement. It says:

These are they which were not defiled with women; for they are virgins. These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth. THESE WERE REDEEMED FROM AMONG MEN, [being] THE FIRSTFRUITS UNTO GOD AND TO THE LAMB. (Revelation 14:4)

Here is the transliterated Greek text for the last part of this verse:

"... outoi egorasthesan apo ton anthropon aparche to theo kai to arnio"; literally: "... these were redeemed from among the men, FIRSTFRUIT to the God and to the Lamb."

So notice the following things about this verse:

- 1) The word "firstfruit" is in the singular and the nominative case. This means it is the subject of this part of the sentence.
- 2) The verb "being" is not a part of the Greek text and it is not really needed here.
- 3) These 144000 are the firstfruit to God the Father and to Jesus Christ. THAT IS A VERY CLEAR STATEMENT!
- 4) These 144000 are the individuals WHO WERE REDEEMED FROM AMONGST MANKIND! Again, this too is a very clear statement!
- 5) These 144000, AND ONLY THESE 144000, form the government ON MOUNT ZION with Jesus Christ after His return.

6) The Greek verb for "these were redeemed" is the aorist passive indicative of "agorazo". This verb is derived from the noun "agora" which means "market". The verb "agorazo" means "TO BUY".

The aorist passive indicative of this verb is also used in two other verses in the New Testament. In both 1 Corinthians 6:20 and in 1 Corinthians 7:23 it is translated as "YOU ARE BOUGHT".

Therefore: this verse tells us that these 144000 "WERE BOUGHT FROM AMONGST MANKIND". That seems to be quite clear, and not in need of any "interpreting". It speaks for itself.

It simply does not make sense to claim that somehow there must also be OTHERS "who were bought from amongst humanity" and "who are the firstfruit to God", BUT WHO ARE NOT THERE ON MOUNT ZION WITH JESUS CHRIST!!!

Where would they be hiding at that point in time? Why would they be separate from Christ when He establishes His government? Does God really divide "the firstfruits" into different groups? Some firstfruits who are allowed to be on Mount Zion, and other firstfruits who are NOT allowed on Mount Zion? IF there are firstfruits who are not with Christ on Mount Zion AT THAT POINT IN TIME, will they ever be allowed to be on Mount Zion at a later time, or are they excluded from ever being on Mount Zion? IF they are going to be allowed on Mount Zion later, then why not at this particular time? What about 1 Thessalonians 4:17?

Then we which are alive [and] remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to MEET THE LORD IN THE AIR: AND SO SHALL WE EVER BE WITH THE LORD. (1 Thessalonians 4:17)

This verse PLAINLY tells us that ALL who meet Christ in the air "WILL EVER BE WITH THE LORD". So what about when "the Lord" is on Mount Zion? Where are all the supposed others then? If there is no division between any people who are in the first resurrection when it comes to meeting Jesus Christ in the air, WHY would Christ THEREAFTER divide those who met Him in the air into different groups, only SOME of whom are privileged to be with Him on Mount Zion? Are those "who are BOUGHT from amongst men" and who are in the first resurrection separated into different groups? WHY? Does Revelation 5:10 ("you have made us kings and priests ...") apply to ALL in the first resurrection, or to only some? All those who will be "kings unto our God" will surely be accorded the privilege to be with Christ on Mount Zion. To ALL those who "overcome" Christ says that He will let them sit with Him on His throne (see Revelation 3:21). This is said to ALL those who will be in the first resurrection. So will there be SOME people to whom Christ will give the privilege to sit with Him on His throne, BUT THEY ARE NOT ALLOWED TO BE WITH HIM ON MOUNT ZION IN REVELATION 14:1-4?

Let's look also at verse 3.

And they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four beasts, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but THE HUNDRED [AND] FORTY [AND] FOUR THOUSAND, WHICH WERE REDEEMED FROM THE EARTH. (Revelation 14:3)

This verse is also very clear! It tells us in unmistakable terms that "144000 were BOUGHT from the earth"! Does God "buy" the people who will be in the first resurrection "in different lots", like sheep or cattle? On what authority can anyone claim that this verse allows for there also being OTHERS "who are bought" at exactly the same point in time?

ALL OF THESE QUESTIONS REQUIRE ANSWERS IF THERE ARE SUPPOSED TO BE MORE THAN 144000 IN THE FIRST RESURRECTION!

The whole concept of there supposedly being more than 144000 in the first resurrection is based on a false interpretation of Revelation chapter 7 ... the 144000 mentioned there and "the innumerable great multitude". I have explained this great multitude in a different article, but that is like trying to explain to someone who is convinced that he has an "immortal soul" that there really is no such thing as an "immortal soul". Prejudiced ideas ALWAYS block out the truth. And it doesn't matter how logically we may explain this; people always manage to "wiggle out" by looking at another Scripture somewhere else. In that way they can avoid facing the facts we have presented.

Anyway, I'll leave it at that for now.

So there will be exactly 144000 in the first resurrection. They are one group made up of 12 parts of 12000 each (i.e. all equal in size) and each part is assigned the name of one of the tribes of Israel. TOGETHER they will make up "the Israel of God", which according to God Himself (see Genesis 32:28) means "TO AS A PRINCE (i.e. RULER) HAVE POWER WITH GOD"! Those who "have power with God" are the ones who will be with Jesus Christ on Mount Zion to there establish the government of God. The word "ISRAEL" is a PERFECT description for all those who will be in the first resurrection.

So with this background, let's do some calculating. Let's see how many people God is still "looking for" at this time, in order to give them the opportunity to be in the first resurrection.

HOW MANY PEOPLE DOES GOD STILL HAVE TO CALL?

Right, let's do some calculating.

The total number needed for the first resurrection is 144000. That is the figure God is working towards. If any called for this group drop out, then replacements need to be found.

A) How many from Old Testament times will there be in the first resurrection? Most of them are either directly named or at least indirectly referred to in Hebrews chapter 11. The number probably is somewhere in the hundreds, perhaps as many as 1000, though that seems unlikely. Keep in mind that all those from the Old Testament times who will be there also had to be SPECIFICALLY CALLED by God.

B) How many Christians were there in the first era? Well, 3000 were baptized on the Day of Pentecost in 31 A.D. (Acts 2:41) and this figure soon increased to 5000 (Acts 4:4). After that Paul was used to raise up congregations in the non-Jewish areas. It is hard to know with any certainty, but perhaps the total number of Christians in the first century A.D. was in the range of up to 10000 people.

C) From then onwards the Church was persecuted and scattered. But it always survived. How many people were true Christians from the year 100 A.D. until the beginning of this present century? That is a period of 1800 years ... quite a long time. Perhaps there were anywhere from 20000 to 80000 people? That would mean that at any given time there were only from 100 to 1000 true Christians alive, who were in the Church for perhaps 20 years of their lives. (The life expectancy for much of those 1800 years was rather low. IF people were in God's Church for a total of less than 20 years each, there would have to be a higher turnover and the numbers of Christians alive at any given time could be smaller.) In practice there were probably peaks and valleys in total membership.

D) How many true Christians have there been in this present century? That is hard to say. It is certainly less than the number of people who have been baptized by the Worldwide Church of God over the

years. NOW is the time of our testing. And the testing is showing quite clearly that MANY who were baptized are NOT "HOLDING FAST" to the true teachings of the Bible, many are NOT "earnestly contending for the faith which was once delivered to the Church". Have there been (including those who are alive today) as many as 40000 true Christians? Or is it perhaps 60000 or even 70000? Hard to say. But we are probably somewhere in the right ballpark.

E) How many will come to repentance DURING the great tribulation? It will have to be the remainder that is needed to fill up the total of 144000. The equation would look like this, using the above-used paragraph letters "A to E":

$$E = 144000 - (A + B + C + D)$$

So how many people does God STILL have to call now in this age BEFORE we go to the place of safety? That is hard to say. But, if we consider that certainly SOME people will come to true repentance during the great tribulation, then it does not seem like there are still a lot of people missing to make up that number of 144000. Considerably more than 144000 people have already "attended" the Church of God during the past 1950 years.

For this reason I personally do NOT feel that there are still A LOT of new people who are required by God to come to repentance before God intervenes and takes His people to the place of safety.

The way I see it, when the Church reached roughly the number of people needed for testing, THEN God allowed Mr. Armstrong to die. And THEN our time of testing really started! As some people have baled out and "made shipwreck" concerning the faith (see 1 Timothy 1:19), so God has selected "replacement candidates" for the crowns that had been intended for the people who dropped out. There are only a limited number of crowns, so we are admonished not to let the ones intended for us slip away (see Revelation 3:11).

What has confused the issue is that ALL ALONG our figures have always been inflated. We have ALWAYS had the "tares" in our midst. Mr. Armstrong knew this very well and he "hoped" that at least 51% of us were converted. Today, in 1995, the figure for "tares" within the Worldwide Church of God is obviously much higher than 50%, as witnessed by the large number of people who very willingly go along with the heresies that have been introduced into the Church.

Yes, I realize that the figures I have suggested for true Christians throughout the ages are rather arbitrary, and as such without any value. My purpose in giving these figures is NOT to give an exact and correct break-down. Rather, my purpose is to show how the figure of 144000 can very realistically be made up. If one group is larger, then another is smaller. How many people are in each of these groups is not important. What IS important is that God has been very methodically working towards that goal of exactly 144000 people for the first resurrection.

For almost 6000 years already God has been carefully monitoring the whole process. To ensure the EXACT number of people in the first resurrection (i.e. "those who come to Christ", see John 6:44, 65) the Father has reserved the authority to Himself to individually "draw" and "call" people. Without this specific calling no one can come to Christ. This ensures control over the whole process.

When we understand that God has a very specific number of people in mind, exactly 144000, a perfect number to form the perfect government, then we should also realize that this target number is already within reach. It still depends on those who are alive today, and who have already been called to be a part of that number, going through a time of testing. Some are being tested right now, BEFORE the great tribulation starts. Others, who right now may look like they are failing the test or look like they are refusing to even respond to the invitation to take the test, will be tested after the tribulation has started.

God has planned the whole process very carefully, down to the finest details. It is all under control. And in the end there will be exactly 144000 people who have proved that they will obey God faithfully and unconditionally.

GOD'S COMMISSION TO THE CHURCH OF GOD

The Greek word translated into English as "church" means literally "the ones who have been called out of their societies", or "the called-out ones" for short.

Since the time of righteous Abel God has "called out" people with a view to eventually filling the 144000 "mansions" (see John 14:2) in the New Jerusalem. Every single individual in that group of 144000 who will be in the first resurrection, has been hand-picked by God the Father Himself (see John 6:65, 44). The reason for this should be clear: God the Father Himself very carefully selects every single one of the individuals to whom He will extend an invitation to be with Him on for all eternity! God the Father personally selects all those who will be "joint-heirs" of all things with Jesus Christ (see Romans 8:17).

That process is so important to God, that God has allotted a period of 6000 years to make these selections. At the end of those 6000 years God will have chosen and tested exactly 144000 individuals out of a total of perhaps 50 BILLION or more human beings? That is something like 3 people who have been "called out" of every one million human beings who have lived. But those 3 people are destined (after thorough testing) to rule with Jesus Christ, and to be with God as permanent citizens of the New Jerusalem for all future eternity. They are "hand-picked"!

And YOU are one of those three that God has picked out of every one million people.

The commission that Jesus Christ gave to the Church is stated in Matthew 28:19-20. It is to make disciples IN ALL NATIONS, not just in "Israel"! Then the ministry was to teach those who became a part of the Church, to instruct them in God's truth and in God's ways.

THE CHURCH OF GOD HAS NEVER HAD ANOTHER COMMISSION BESIDES THIS ONE!

The purpose of the Church of God has always been to create suitable conditions that would enable God to "call" more people for this group of 144000. God does the calling, but the Church MUST work to bring about conditions that will make it possible for people to be called. Paul explained this in Romans 10.

For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. (Romans 10:13)

Taken out of its context this statement looks like a carte blanche invitation to ANYBODY to just "come to Christ". But that is not what Paul meant at all! In the next few verses Paul explained that the ability "to call upon the name of the Lord" is actually very conditional on specific circumstances being extant. Notice:

HOW THEN SHALL THEY CALL ON HIM in whom they have not believed? and HOW SHALL THEY BELIEVE IN HIM of whom they have not heard? AND HOW SHALL THEY HEAR without a preacher? (Romans 10:14)

There is a clear reverse progression in this verse, which is continued into the next verse:

AND HOW SHALL THEY PREACH, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! (Romans 10:15)

The whole process STARTS with God "sending" His servants with the message of the true gospel about the kingdom of God. If this step does not take place, then the process cannot get started.

THIS IS THE COMMISSION OF THE CHURCH ... TO PROVIDE THE CONDITIONS THAT WILL ENABLE GOD TO "CALL" MORE PEOPLE!

After God has "sent" His servants with the message of His truth, then the next step can take place. That second step is that some people will be able "to hear" the truth of God. Once they have "heard", they will then be required by God to "make a decision". They will have to decide whether they will "have faith in" (i.e. believe) the message they have heard or not. The third step in the process is that some will "believe".

To "believe" or "have faith in" the things they have heard does not just mean that they accept the things they have been told as true! It means that they "believe" that God requires them to live by the way of life that was explained to them. What they "heard" was THE MESSAGE CHRIST BROUGHT, not some message about the person of Jesus Christ. It means to observe all the things Christ spelled out in His commission to the Church in Matthew 28:20:

TEACHING THEM TO OBSERVE ALL THINGS WHATSOEVER I HAVE COMMANDED YOU ... (Matthew 28:20)

That includes living by EVERY word of God (Matthew 4:4); that includes keeping ALL of God's commandments (Matthew 19:17) and it includes being faithful even "in that which is least" (Luke 16:10). This is all part of what Jesus Christ included in Matthew 28:20. And if they don't believe THESE THINGS, then they simply don't really "believe"!

It is only those people, who fulfill this third step of "believing", that can proceed to the next step in Paul's enumeration here in Romans 10. Only those who "believe" that they must obey God from this day forward and that God requires them to observe all of His laws as their permanent way of life are able to "call upon the name of the Lord".

Most so-called "Christian" churches have made a sham and a mockery out of these statements by Paul! Anyone who claims that the commandments of God are done away "is A LIAR"! See 1 John 2:4.

To make sure people would understand what he meant, Paul concluded this section in Romans with the following verse:

BUT THEY HAVE NOT ALL OBEYED THE GOSPEL. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report? (Romans 10:16)

"The gospel" requires us TO OBEY GOD and all of His commandments. Read this verse carefully. Paul's point in quoting Isaiah is to show that "believing" requires "obedience". Those who do not "obey" OBVIOUSLY don't "believe".

In these verses Paul has explained WHY God had commissioned His Church to make disciples in all

nations. It is so that the truth can be made available, in any appropriate medium, so that the reservoir of people from amongst whom God will call people to be included in the first resurrection can be increased and enlarged.

Now if there are people whom God wants to call for an opportunity to be in the first resurrection and they live in an area where the truth of God is simply not yet available, THEN God "sends" His servants (or their messages, written or spoken) to that area by "opening doors". God always controls the whole process. Nobody will end up in that group of 144000 at the first resurrection "by accident" or "through sheer luck" or "by just having been at the right place at the right time"! Every single one will have been specifically and individually selected by God.

So the purpose of the Church is to provide the outward circumstances (i.e. knowledge, information, understanding, help, encouragement, etc.) necessary for God to call more people, until that group of exactly 144000 has been filled up.

THAT IS GOD'S COMMISSION TO HIS CHURCH!

SO WHAT SHOULD ALL OF THE CHURCHES OF GOD DO NOW?

The new churches of God are a natural response to the apostasy that has taken place in the Worldwide Church of God. God predicted that the power of His people would be scattered. That has occurred and continues to occur. "The power" that any of these new churches has is considerably less than the power God had given to His Church under Mr. Armstrong.

Without doubt we are in a phase of being tried and tested. The most important instruction that God gives to us under these present circumstances is: "HOLD THAT FAST WHICH YOU HAVE"!

Whether the total number of people God has ALREADY selected is approaching the number God has determined, or whether there are still a lot more "mansions" that need to be filled is not important for us to know. What is important for us is to recognize that our commission is, and always has been, to preach the truth of God for the purpose of making disciples. That's what God wants us to do. Some of that preaching may perhaps bear fruit when some people repent during the tribulation? Some of that preaching will fall on deaf ears.

So any publishing and any broadcasting should be very clearly focused. That focus should be:

Our goal is to preach the truth of God in such a way that the largest number of people will hear it or read it, and thus be in a position to be called by God, if God so chooses. Our goal is to make the truth freely available to as many people as possible. But making the truth freely available has NOTHING to do with providing "a witness unto all nations", as per Matthew 24:14.

The work of God is to prepare a group of 144000 out of a period of 6000 years of human history. Only after that group has been changed into spirit beings will God work with the rest of mankind!

So, "does the Church of God still have a work to do"? Yes! But that work is not to present a witness to this world. That work is to preach the truth with the goal of making disciples as long as God provides the means and the opportunities for us to do so. We have already entered a time of a PARTIAL "famine of hearing the words of God" (see Amos 8:11). The truth that went out during Mr. Armstrong's time is now far less readily available than it was 10 years ago. But it has not yet been totally cut off. For a while some of the new churches of God may continue to make it available, though with less power than during Mr. Armstrong's time.

As we are able to do so, we should continue to make the truth available. The time when we will not be able to do so is rapidly approaching.

... he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved. (Matthew 24:13)

Frank W. Nelte