January 2010

Frank W. Nelte

'THERE MUST ALSO BE HERESIES AMONG YOU'

The Apostle Paul was quite blunt in stating to the Church of God in Corinth:

> "For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you." (1Corinthians 11:19)

So did this statement apply only to the Corinthian Church? And did this apply only to the time of the Apostle Paul? Or **are there heresies amongst us in the churches of God TODAY**? How can we know the answer to this question?

WHAT ARE "HERESIES"?

Our English word "heresy" is derived from the Greek word "**hairesis**". This word is used 9 times in the New Testament, and in the KJV it is translated 4 times as "**heresy**" and 5 times as "**sect**". Thus there is only one Greek word in the New Testament for these two concepts. In other words, from a New Testament point of view "a heresy" is the same thing as "a sect"; and "a sect" is the same thing as "a heresy". In the New Testament there is no significant distinction between the two concepts "heresy" and "sect".

> The Greek word "hairesis" basically means "a choice" or "choosing", and this Greek word refers to "**a separating tendency**".

In the context of discussing heresies there is one other NT Greek word that needs to be taken into consideration, and that is the word "**schisma**". This Greek word is used 8 times in the NT, and in the KJV it is translated 1 time as "**schism**", 5 times as "**division**" and 2 times as "**rent**" (referring to the tear in a piece of cloth). This Greek word is the root of our English word "schism".

> The Greek word "schisma" basically means "a division" or "a separation" of some kind. This Greek word refers to "**an actual separation**".

The relationship between these two Greek words is the relationship between A TENDENCY to separate and an ACTUAL separation. To put this another way:

1) **HERESIES** are usually **THE CAUSE** of DIVISIONS.

2) **DIVISIONS** are usually **THE CONSEQUENCE** of HERESIES.

These two concepts go together. If you find one of them present, then the other is not far away. You'll find the other either in the near past (i.e. heresies) or you will find it in the near future (i.e. divisions). The divisions that have occurred in our recent churches of God history were preceded by the introduction of numerous heresies. When those heresies were introduced into God's Church it was inevitable that divisions would follow. And because MANY heresies were introduced, therefore MANY divisions took place.

The definition of our English word “heresies” is “CONTRARY OPINIONS” or “CONFLICTING OPINIONS”. Our English word “schisms” refers to “separations DUE TO contrary opinions”. The relationship between these two English words is thus the same as the relationship between the two Greek words we are considering.

The **tendency** to separate invariably precedes any actual separation. And when a separation or division takes place, it is commonly the final step in a predictable process. It is commonly one party that is seeking a separation, while the other party may well be opposed to any division, though in some cases both parties seek the separation in recognition of their emphatically “contrary opinions”.

When the translators translated the Greek word “hairesis” as both “heresy” and “sect”, they were including the ultimate outcome of this word (i.e. a separation) in its application. Thus when the English text reads “heresy” this refers to “contrary opinions” within a group that should really be considered as one body; and when the English text reads “sect” then this is usually intended to refer to the ultimate consequence of “contrary opinions” (i.e. of heresies), though in the Greek text this distinction does not really exist. But in rendering “hairesis” as “sect” the translators were ascribing a meaning akin to “schisma” to the word “hairesis”. While this isn’t necessarily wrong (as seen if we examine the context of the instances where “hairesis” is rendered as “sect”) we should nevertheless be aware of this.

In its most basic form “a heresy” is a contrary opinion which is likely to result in a division or separation between two or more people, or groups of people. Later we will fine-tune this definition further, but for now this is adequate.

Thus our original question of “are there HERESIES amongst us in the churches of God today?” can be rephrased as “are there CONTRARY OPINIONS amongst us in the churches of God today?”. IF there are indeed “**contrary opinions**” amongst the scattered churches of God regarding any aspects of our religious beliefs and practices, THEN there are ipso facto also “**HERESIES**” amongst us.

A BIBLICAL HISTORY OF HERESIES

When contrary opinions develop within one religion, then we can designate those contrary opinions as “heresies”. However, if those contrary opinions develop to such a stage that PERMANENT divisions or separations come about, then this goes beyond being “heresies”. In that case totally new religions are formed. And they would then not be designated as “heresies”, though they might perhaps qualify for some other designations?

Thus:

From the time of Noah to the time of the tower of Babel all people spoke the same language and it was understood that there was (and is) one God who was worshiped or not worshiped by those people. No doubt there were “contrary opinions” amongst those people, with very few submitting their lives to the true God. Thus the term “heresies” might well have applied to those contrary opinions, though such details are in the realm of surmisings. Paul refers to this time as “when they KNEW God, they glorified Him not as God” (Romans 1:21).

When God then divided humanity along family lines into 70 different languages (Genesis 10-11), this had the effect of producing 70 schisms (major divisions) amongst mankind. With those 70 divisions coming into existence, each group with its own language, they all developed their own religions, which were mostly forms of paganism. In this process people invented their own gods.

God then worked with Abraham and his descendants through Jacob. They became the nation of Israel. The situation was then as follows:

1) The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the only true God. Anyone who worshiped this God of Abraham was a worshiper of the true God.

2) The worship of ANY OTHER GOD was paganism and idolatry. And since NONE of the nations of the ancient world worshiped the God of Abraham, therefore ALL their religions were pagan.

3) Thus from the time of Moses onwards the word “heresies” should only be applied to “contrary opinions regarding the worship of YHVH, the God of Israel”. All other religions, while they are emphatically contrary opinions to the truth, are beyond being “heresies”; they are (and were) paganism and idolatry.

4) So the word “heresies” should be limited to “contrary opinions regarding the worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”. In our examination all other religions don’t even enter the picture; they are beyond being heresies, and they don’t enter the discussion in this article.

5) Now from the time of Moses to the time of the Assyrian captivity of the northern Kingdom of Israel, there were no heresies in Israel. The reason for this is that until the time of that captivity Israel’s problems always involved IDOLATRY, rather than heresies. Repeatedly Israel got involved in the pagan practices of the nations with whom they came into contact. And so their religious problems were identified with OTHER “gods”, like Baal-worship, worshiping Molech or “the queen of heaven”, etc. And paganism is beyond heresies.

Likewise, when Aaron had made the golden calf and had said “these be your gods O Israel” (Exodus 32:4), this had been idolatry, not heresy. It represented a competing religion, not a contrary opinion regarding how YHVH is to be worshiped. Had the golden calf been presented with the words “this is YHVH O Israel”, THEN this might have been considered to be a heresy that was being introduced into the worship of the true God. But as it was, the golden calf was presented as an alternate religion to the worship of YHVH. And thus it was beyond being considered as a heresy.

Similarly, in Elijah’s time the conflict was between two competing religions. As Elijah said to the people: “if the Eternal be God, follow Him, but if Baal then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21). At Elijah’s time it was not a case of pagan practices being ascribed to the religion of YHVH.

And during the times of the kings when the people of Israel experienced a lack of true teachings (in contrast to practicing Baal-worship, etc.), then this was due to ignorance, not to the introduction of heresies. So up to the time of their captivity the Israelites were guilty of paganism, not of following heresies.

TO MAKE THIS QUITE PLAIN:

PAGANISM involves the worship of OTHER “gods”, copying the practices identified with other “gods”. And these things are typically correctly and **openly** identified with some or other pagan deity (e.g. Baal worship, the god of Ekron, etc.).

HERESIES, on the other hand, involve the introduction of false teachings and practices INTO the worship of the true God. Any **pagan connections** these false teachings may have are usually **carefully hidden**, and they are instead presented as the supposed teachings of the true God.

6) Now at the captivity of the northern kingdom, the Assyrians carried the Israelites off into captivity in a foreign land (2 Kings 17:6-7). Verse 7 clearly states that this penalty was imposed because Israel “had feared OTHER GODS”, not because they accepted heresies.

The Assyrians then brought people from Babylon into the deserted cities of the northern kingdom of Israel (2 Kings 17:24). Now notice what happened next.

> "And *so* it was at the beginning of their dwelling there, *that* **they feared not the LORD**: therefore the LORD sent lions among them, which slew *some* of them." (2 Kings 17:25)

So initially these Babylonian people who now inhabited the cities of Samaria practiced their own religions without any modifications. Some of them were then killed by lions, an event that was interpreted to be an expression of God's displeasure at being ignored by these new people. So the Assyrian king sent one of the priests from the captivity back to the cities of Samaria, to teach these Babylonians respect for "the local God" (as the Assyrians viewed the God of Israel). (Verses 26-27)

Now the priests of the northern kingdom had never been Levites of the line of Aaron! The one priest the Assyrians sent back to Bethel (verse 28) had been involved in golden calf worship, etc. But THIS PRIEST then supposedly taught these Babylonian people "**how they should fear YHVH**" (verse 28). However, this priest himself had not been a worshiper of the God of Israel to start with; he had worshiped "other gods" (2 Kings 17:7).

NOTE!

These Samaritans (as the Babylonian people in Samaria came to be called) now claimed to worship YHVH, the God of Israel. At the same time they continued to worship their pagan gods named "Succoth-benoth" and "Nergal" and "Ashima" and "Nibhaz" and "Adrammelech", etc. (verses 29-31).

Thus these people "FEARED THE LORD AND SERVED THEIR OWN GODS" (verse 33), and they "FEARED THE LORD AND SERVED THEIR GRAVEN IMAGES" (verse 41).

In plain language, these Samaritans blended parts of the true religion with various pagan teachings from their own religions. And while they eventually claimed that their religion worships YHVH, the God of Israel, in actual practice they introduced PAGAN ideas INTO the worship of the true God!

> THIS REPRESENTS THE ORIGIN OF HERESIES (false, contrary teachings) BEING INTRODUCED INTO THE RELIGION OF THE TRUE GOD!

False ideas were accepted by these new inhabitants of Samaria and they were then presented as the religion of YHVH. These people CLAIMED to serve the same God whom the Jews in Jerusalem were worshiping.

THIS WAS A CHANGE IN THE TACTICS SATAN USES AGAINST GOD'S PEOPLE!

Previously all false religious practices had been openly identified with other religions. NOW these same false ideas were presented as supposedly being a part of the worship of the God of Israel.

HERESIES HAD BEEN INTRODUCED INTO THE TEACHINGS OF THE ONE TRUE GOD!

To put this another way:

As far as religious teachings and practices are concerned, up to the captivity of the northern Kingdom of Israel Satan had always attacked God's people **from without**, from the outside. Israel was always tempted to follow other gods. Starting with the captivity of the Kingdom of Israel Satan attacked God's

people **from within**! In addition to tempting Israel to follow other religions, Satan now introduced pagan customs **into** the worship of the God of Israel. Pagan customs were deviously presented as a part of the worship of YHVH. Heresies had been introduced into the true religion.

Satan knows that an attack from within is always far more effective than an attack from without. When an attack comes from without, then those who are attacked can present a united front against such attacks. But when an attack comes from within, then this always divides and weakens those who are being attacked. This is the principle of “divide and conquer”. And THAT is precisely Satan’s tactic in introducing heresies into the true religion: in order to overcome us Satan first attempts to divide us.

One more thing we should note in this regard:

The most common way Satan has introduced heresies into the true religion is by using **OUTSIDERS** to introduce those heresies. Repeatedly Satan has **INFILTRATED** the true religion with his people, who then pretend to be devout followers of the true God, while in reality they are committed to introducing heresies into the true religion. Like unidentified cancer cells, they simply bide their time. And Satan has employed this same method in our time. Jesus Christ referred to this method of infiltration as Satan “sowing **tares among the wheat**” (Matthew 13:25).

In this case Satan used the Babylonians who had been settled in Samaria to introduce heresies into the religion of Israel. While the Samaritans claimed to serve the same God as the Jews to the south, the Jews refused to accept that the Samaritans served the same God.

Then the Jews went into their own captivity to Babylon (i.e. to the same area from where the Samaritan people themselves had originally come). When the Jews returned, the Samaritans wanted to join the Jews, but the Jews by and large firmly resisted any and all advances from the Samaritans. This was especially the case during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Centuries later during Christ’s ministry the Samaritan woman at the well still referred to “OUR FATHER JACOB who gave us the well” (John 4:12). The Samaritans claimed to be Israelites, but they were not accepted by the Jews, because the Jews knew that these people were really only Babylonians with a new identity.

The main point about the Samaritans accepting the God of Israel, while retaining many pagan customs, is that this first infiltration attempt by Satan was not particularly successful. But it was a start.

So after the Jews had returned from the Babylonian captivity, Satan further refined his infiltration into the true religion. The Samaritans were still there, but for the most part their attack was recognized as coming from the outside, and it was basically rejected. So after the deaths of the original leaders (i.e. Joshua and Zerubbabel, and later Ezra and Nehemiah) Satan launched his next attack at introducing heresies into the true religion.

After the deaths of these key post-exile leaders amongst the Jews, Satan influenced the Jewish religious leaders themselves to accept many teachings out of Hellenism. In this process the levitical priests themselves were major culprits. Within 200 years of the death of Ezra Judaism had accepted A STAGGERING NUMBER OF FOREIGN CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS into its religious life and practices. By 200 B.C. Judaism had become overrun with heresies, which were falsely presented as Israelite traditions.

While earlier the Jews had resisted all advances from the Samaritans, this time Satan had succeeded in planting a host of heresies within the religion of the Jews. It got to be so bad that many people knew that many pagan ideas had found their way into Judaism. This deplorable state triggered the Maccabean revolt. Judas Maccabeus (also spelled Judah Maccabee) wanted to return to the religion of Moses, and he set out to rid Judaism of all these pagan ways that had found acceptance within Jewish life. In this

attempt (similar to leaders in the Protestant Reformation later wanting to clean up the Catholic Church) he never succeeded, not even remotely.

In the wake of the Maccabean revolt the sect ("contrary opinions") of the Pharisees came into being. These were self-professed religious leaders, who in theory, just like Judas Maccabeus, wanted to rid Jewish life of all the heresies that had been accepted during the previous 200 years. But in practice they only compounded the problem, by introducing additional heresies into Jewish religious life and customs. And eventually the religion of the Pharisees prevailed as the dominant force in Judaism.

The development of Judaism is one and the same as the development of the religion of the Pharisees. In practical terms the sect of the Pharisees started around 150 B.C. From then onwards Judaism developed through the age of the **ZUGOT** (5 pairs of sages who completely controlled the development of pharisaical religious thought from about 140 B.C. to about 40 B.C.), to the period of the **TANNAIM** (sages who wrote the Mishnah from around 70 A.D. to 200 A.D.), to the period of the **AMORAIM** (sages who wrote the Gemara from around 200 A.D. to 500 A.D.), to the period of the **SAVORAIM** (sages who then edited the whole Talmud from around 500 A.D. to 700 A.D.). Later authorities (geonim, rishonim, and acharonim) all carried progressively less authority and need not concern us.

With this general overview it is important to recognize that the foundation of the religion of the Pharisees, and hence of modern Judaism, rests upon the age of the zugot! These five pairs of sages completely controlled the first 100 years of the development of what has become modern Judaism. Each pair (i.e. "zug") completely controlled Jewish religious life during their tenure. They sanctioned many things that are in conflict with God's instructions in the Old Testament. And they also very frequently disagreed with one another.

The fourth "zug" consisted of two men named Shemaiah and Avtalyon. Neither of these two men was ethnically of a Jewish background. The Talmud records that both of them were the sons of non-Jewish proselytes (most likely of Samaritan background, though this is embellished with prominent non-Israelite names being mentioned). (See my article "The Development of Jewish Laws Through the Ages" for more details.)

With this fourth pair of sages, who became the teachers of the first Hillel, Satan had managed to infiltrate the religion of the Jews in a very powerful way. For a whole generation the development of Jewish customs and traditions was controlled by two men who themselves were not even Israelites, let alone Jews. This was the perfect setting for expanding and consolidating heresies within Judaism.

By the time of Christ's ministry Judaism was riddled with heresies. Jesus Christ very forcefully stated that the doctrines of the Pharisees were "**COMMANDMENTS OF MEN**"! See Matthew 15:9. "Commandments of men" is another name for "**HERESIES**"! And by "commandments of men" Jesus Christ was referring to "commandments" that **EXACTLY 10 MEN** had devised, the 5 pairs of sages during the period from about 140 B.C. to 40 B.C.

Jesus Christ stated emphatically that "the traditions" which had been developed by these Jewish sages amounted to a clear rejection of "the commandment of God" (Mark 7:9). Christ continued to say that the Jewish traditions make "the word of God of none effect"; in other words that these traditions are nothing other than heresies! See Mark 7:13. Christ also added that the Pharisees had developed "MANY" such traditions that were, from the perspective of God's truth, heretical (same verse).

> This illustrates that Jesus Christ conducted His ministry within a Jewish society that was **riddled with heretical customs** and traditions!

To make this quite clear:

> AT THE TIME OF CHRIST'S MINISTRY THE EXPRESSION "TRADITION OF THE ELDERS" MEANT NOTHING OTHER THAN THE TRADITIONS WHICH **THE ZUGOT** HAD SANCTIONED OR INSTITUTED WITHIN JUDAISM!

The tannaim and the amoraim had not yet appeared on the scene. So the traditions Jesus Christ was here condemning so forcefully were the product of those 5 pairs of sages that had controlled the development of Jewish religious life for a period of about 100 years. Don't be misled by the Pharisees using the lofty expression "the tradition of **the elders**", because this meant nothing other than a total of **exactly 10 "elders"**, all of whom had been Pharisees, and two of whom had actually been non-Israelites, spanning a period of about 100 years.

Specifically, the expression "the tradition of the elders" does NOT refer to any elder prior to the death of Ezra; it only refers to leaders of the sect (i.e. contrary opinions) of the Pharisees. And these "traditions of the elders" had only been established during the less than 200 years before Christ's ministry! None of these traditions went as far back as the time of Ezra, let alone further back. Most people don't know that during NT times the expression "the tradition of the elders" referred to the teachings of a very limited group of men, exactly ten men to be precise, the 5 pairs that spanned the age of the zugot.

COMING TO THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

The Apostle John records that already during Christ's ministry there were "divisions" (Greek "schisma") amongst the people regarding Jesus Christ's role (John 7:43; 9:16). And soon after Christ's resurrection and the starting of the Church on the Day of Pentecost, a division arose in the Church over the matter of financial assistance being extended to widows in the Church (Acts 6:1), which then led to the appointment of the first seven deacons. These contentions set an early precedent for later divisions, by creating an "**us vs. them**" situation.

As the Church continued to grow, so a number of Pharisees came into the Church. And they brought many of their heretical ideas with them! As Luke recorded in the Book of Acts:

> "But there rose up certain of **the sect** (Greek "hairesis") of the Pharisees **which believed**, (i.e. they had been baptized and officially become members of the Church) saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command *them* to keep the law of Moses." (Acts 15:5)

These requirements upon which these Pharisees who had infiltrated the Church insisted were contrary opinions, they were heresies! That is why Luke wrote here: "but there rose up certain of **the heresy** of the Pharisees saying, that it was needful to circumcise them ...". Luke is showing us that **these ex-Pharisees tried to introduce heresies into the Church**. This fact is somewhat obscured in the KJV by having translated "hairesis" as "sect". In this context the correct translation of "hairesis" should be "HERESY" and not "sect".

In the conference that followed the apostles firmly rejected these heretical ideas that were presented to the Church by these ex-Pharisees.

So note!

> **WHEN SOME PHARISEES CAME INTO THE CHURCH, AN ARRAY OF HERESIES CAME**

INTO THE CHURCH WITH THEM!

Acts chapter 15 simply presents us with one specific category of heretical ideas that resulted in a confrontation fairly early on. But the issues mentioned in Acts 15 are assuredly not the only heresies that the Pharisees brought into the Church at that time!

When people from a different religious group come “wholesale” (i.e. in large numbers) into God's Church, then it is inevitable that some heresies will also come with them. That’s what **always** happens. And that is how Satan has always managed to introduce heresies into the Church of God. An influx of people from another religious background means that at least SOME of their religious ideas are going to be accommodated; it has the effect of modifying the teachings that existed prior to this influx.

This is a process that has repeated itself down to our times, that an influx of people into God’s Church always produces a modification in some teachings, and we need to recognize this process. Heresies are the most common price-tag for major growth in a church.

A focus on growth makes a church extremely vulnerable to heresies.

Let’s continue in the Book of Acts.

In Acts 24 the high priest wanted to accuse Paul before the governor Felix. In this accusation the Jewish orator involved called Paul “a ringleader of the SECT of the Nazarenes” (Acts 24:5). By referring to the new religion of Christianity as “a sect” ("hairesis"), the Jews were saying that Christianity was “a sub-division of Judaism”, that Christianity represented a contrary opinion of THEIR religion. So note carefully:

At that point in time the Jews viewed Christianity as an unacceptable sub-division of Judaism (as compared to “acceptable” sects like the Sadducees and the Essenes, whom the Pharisees did not feel a need to persecute violently). It was this view, of seeing Christianity as an unacceptable sub-division of Judaism, that was the reason for the early Jewish persecution. Had they viewed Christianity as a distinct and completely separate religion (e.g. like the pagan religions of Greece and Rome), then the Jews would not have persecuted Christianity. They still viewed Christianity as a sect of THEIR religion, and therefore they vehemently persecuted the early Church.

Compare this to how some Church of God groups today view other Church of God groups. We don’t really care what the Catholics or the Protestant churches teach, right? We don’t view them and their teachings as a threat to our beliefs, and so we don’t spend our time refuting THEIR teachings (except when we want to appeal to people who are still in those churches right now). Unacceptable teachings in those churches are of very little concern to us. But when another Church of God group introduces or accepts a teaching we find unacceptable, then THAT frequently elicits rather strong responses from us, right?

What is of no concern to us in a completely different religion is of great concern to us when it is found in a group that should really be a part of “our” group of churches. This is the reason why we find that some Church of God groups today show more tolerance for people who are Catholics or Protestants than they do for people who belong to another Church of God group. The more threatened they feel by other Church of God groups, the more they are likely to exhibit intolerance towards those other groups. And those Church of God groups which feel the least threatened by other Church of God groups are also likely to be the most tolerant towards fellow Church of God groups. That’s the same principle as the Pharisees being far more tolerant towards the Sadducees than they were towards Christianity (though Paul had managed to exploit the differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees in Acts 23:6-7).

Back to Acts 24.

In verse 5 the Jews had called Christianity "**a sect**" ("hairesis"). In his defense Paul said: "I confess unto you that after the way which THEY CALL "**heresy**" ("hairesis"), so worship I the God of my fathers" (verse 14). "Sect" in verse 5 represents the same Greek word as "heresy" in verse 14. So note!

THE JEWS called Christianity "a sect" or "a heresy" within the Jewish religion. But the Apostle Paul did not refer to the Church as a sect! Rather, Paul clearly stated that "THEY" refer to us as "a sect" or "a heresy". This wording by Paul makes clear that Paul himself was not about to refer to the Church of God as "a sect", because that would have implied that the Church of God was "a heresy".

Rather, the Apostle Paul referred to the religion of the Pharisees as a heresy! Notice what Paul said to king Agrippa:

> "... that after the most straitest (i.e. extreme) SECT ("hairesis") of our religion I lived a Pharisee." (Acts 26:5)

Here Paul called the religion of the Pharisees (and thus by extension modern Judaism) "**THE MOST EXTREME HERESY**" of the religion of "our fathers" Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. See also verses 6-7. That is pretty strong language coming from Paul.

In Acts 28:22 the Jews in Rome also referred to Christianity as "a sect" or "a heresy".

So the Jews called Christianity "a heresy", and the Apostle Paul called the religion of the Pharisees "a heresy". Only one of those two statements can be right: IF what Paul taught is the truth, THEN the religion of the Pharisees is a heresy; and IF the religion of the Pharisees was the truth, THEN the things Paul taught were heresy. The two claims are mutually exclusive, and only one can be correct.

We need to recognize that this Greek word "hairesis" (i.e. "heresy" or "sect") has negative overtones, that it commonly conveys scorn and contempt for the people to whom it is applied. While the Pharisees were showing open contempt for Christianity in Acts 24:5, we need to recognize that in Acts 26:5 Paul was showing **the same contempt for his past religion** as a Pharisee. The same Greek word in these two verses conveys the same emotion in both cases.

To make this sentiment quite clear:

There is a Greek word that expresses a division or a portion in emotionally neutral terms, and that is the word "meros". "Meros" is used 43 times in the NT and it means: a part, a division, a portion, a share. For example, this word is used in Acts 23:6 in the expression "one PART were Sadducees", and in Acts 23:9 in the expression "the scribes that were of the Pharisees' PART". So in Acts 26:5 Paul could have referred to the Pharisees as "the strictest PART ("meros") of our religion". But Paul didn't say that. Instead Paul clearly said "the most extreme HERESY of our religion". Paul was expressing **severe criticism** for his past religion when he used the word "hairesis" to describe it. This is in line with Paul viewing all his past good deeds within that religion as "dung" (Philippians 3:8).

The Greek word translated "dung" in Philippians 3:8 is "**skubalon**". This word is used only in this verse. (In Luke 13:8 and 14:35 a completely different Greek word is used.) So Paul used **a unique word** to describe **the total worthlessness** of his entire life before being called into God's Church. And from early childhood Paul had been groomed to become the strictest of Pharisees, as evidenced by his utterly irrational zeal in wanting to put church members to death (i.e. before his calling by God). All of his

previous life was worthless!

While there is some question as to the precise meaning of “skubalon”, it is clear beyond doubt that this word refers to something that is **utterly worthless and detestable**! Thus it is translated as “**REFUSE**” in the ASV, RSV, YLT, WEY and Rotherham; it is translated as “**RUBBISH**” in the NAS, NIV, NKJV, NRSV and EMTV; and it is translated as “**FILTH**” in the DARBY Translation. The word “dung” in the KJV is in fact far more polite and inoffensive than is the literal meaning of the Greek word “skubalon”. Some dictionaries offer the term “animal excrement” as a valid meaning. The word expresses **CONTEMPT** for whatever it may be applied to. “Dung”, in line with KJV sentiments, is far too polite a translation.

In Philippians 3:8 Paul was speaking about the lack of any value that he attached to his entire religious life prior to being called by God, and he used an extremely disparaging term to express this assessment. This is in line with his recognition that as a Pharisee he had been a part of the most extreme heresy within the religion of the true God. You don’t ever want to designate anything that has at least SOME value with the word “skubalon”! There is NOTHING good about “skubalon”! Period! The criticism and contempt conveyed by the word “skubalon” is crass and extremely severe!

So when we correctly understand Paul’s statements here, then it should be quite clear that we are not to look to the Pharisees or to modern Judaism for doctrinal understanding of the Old Testament. Even though they may have some things correct, they nevertheless represent, according to Paul, the most extreme heresy in the teachings that God established through Moses and the prophets. Don’t be misled by the word “sect” in this verse. The Greek word used here primarily means “**heresy**”, and “sect” is only its meaning by extension.

As the Church of God grew in numbers amongst the non-Jewish people of the Roman Empire, so Jewish persecution began to fade from the picture. Jewish opposition was based solely on JEWS accepting this new religion of Christianity; if Greeks or Romans or Egyptians, etc. accepted this new religion, that didn’t bother the Pharisees in Jerusalem. As the Church grew outside of Judea, so Jewish persecution faded. The separation between Judaism and Christianity was becoming permanent.

But new problems were arising.

We’ve already seen that the Pharisees who came into the Church brought certain heretical ideas with them. But the pagans who were converted to Christianity also brought their share of religious baggage (i.e. heretical views) with them. Their past religious backgrounds and experiences had much influence on how they interpreted the things they were hearing in the Church. And so we see the Apostle Paul addressing numerous HERESIES in his letters to the churches he was serving.

Keep in mind that divisions are the end product of heresies, and that heresies always lead to divisions. There is a very close relationship between heresies and divisions.

THE NEW TESTAMENT CONGREGATIONS

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians is an attempt to address numerous heresies within that one congregation. Perhaps now is a good time to further refine our definition of “heresies”.

Earlier we said that “a heresy” is a contrary opinion which is likely to result in a division or separation between two or more people, or groups of people. We can refine this statement further by saying:

> “A heresy is an opinion that is CONTRARY TO THE TEACHINGS OF THE BIBLE, which is then likely to result in two or more divisions amongst the people who have been called by God into His

Church."

It is another way of stating the principle that two cannot walk together unless they are agreed, unless they are without contrary opinions between them. See Amos 3:3. Heresies always divide people.

Notice what Paul said in his introductory statements to the Corinthians.

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

Paul recognized that there already were heresies (i.e. contrary opinions, divisive tendencies) amongst the Corinthians. These he addresses in the chapters that follow this statement. Here in this statement Paul was beseeching them that they would not allow these contrary opinions to lead to full-blown divisions (Greek "schisma") in their congregation. Keep in mind that the divisions Paul is warning against would have been the consequence of heresies.

Later, in discussing the way we are to observe the annual Passover, Paul focused on this relationship between heresies and divisions. Notice how Paul addressed this:

> "For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that **there be divisions among you**; and I partly believe it. For **there must be also heresies among you**, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you." (1 Corinthians 11:18-19)

So notice:

Paul had heard that there WERE divisions amongst the church members in Corinth. Since divisions are the consequence of heresies, THEREFORE Paul knew that there also MUST be heresies amongst them! It is a matter of understanding that divisions are the automatic result of heresies. So the divisions were proof that WITHOUT QUESTION there also had to be heresies amongst those people. And in this strongly corrective letter Paul addresses a number of those heresies, those contrary opinions, that existed in the Corinthian congregation. And those contrary opinions were based on ideas these people had brought with them when they came into the Church in the first place.

Any religious baggage people bring with them when they come into God's Church will almost always result in heresies, i.e. in contrary opinions existing amongst members. People in this situation may feel: "while certain things are not salvational issues, I believe the Church's teachings are wrong here and here and here". And such people never realize that what they may consider to be "issues that don't affect salvation" are in fact the seeds for heresies arising within the Church. On their particular issues they believe that THEY are right and THE CHURCH is wrong, but since these issues supposedly don't concern salvation, therefore they are prepared to stick around. Such people never understand that they are already to some degree "divided" from the Church, and that it is only a question of time before "other issues" will result in a full-blown division. This is the situation Paul faced here.

It is important for us to understand that the more involved a person was in his previous religion, the more likely he is to bring heretical ideas with him into the Church of God! It is almost inevitable, for example, that people who were studying to become priests or ministers or pastors or rabbis in some other religion prior to coming into God's Church, are going to hold fast to SOME of the ideas from their previous religious training, as did the Pharisees in Acts 15. Such holding to ideas absorbed from previous religious training amounts to "contrary opinions". It is extremely hard to view all of our past religious

experiences as "skubalon", as did the Apostle Paul (Philippians 3:8). But unless we are able to do that, we are likely to hold fast to some contrary opinions, where we believe OUR understanding is right and the Church's understanding is wrong. Those are seeds of division.

It is no coincidence that God has frequently called people who before their calling had no strong religious affiliations or aspirations (e.g. Mr. Armstrong, and for that matter even Moses). Another way of saying this is that God has frequently called people who had very little religious baggage or no baggage at all when they came into the Church. Compare this to people who had “worked their way through” half a dozen different churches before finally coming to one of the churches of God; people like that can easily bring a considerable amount of baggage with them when they come into the Church of God. And that baggage would not be good!

Whatever our religious baggage may be, be it great or be it small, we have to come to the point where we "repent" of that past religious association, and where we also view that past as “skubalon” and totally change the way we view our past religious training and understanding and way of life. If we don't change the way we think about our past religious background (i.e. prior to coming into God's Church), then we haven't really left that past religious background behind, and for all practical purposes we might as well still be in that religious environment. This goes way beyond just accepting a few specific doctrines upon coming into God’s Church. **It is the mind that has to undergo a change**.

If people who come into God’s Church bring ANY religious baggage with them, if they hold fast to ANY aspects of their previous religious associations, THEN they are still “defiled with women”. To be “VIRGINS” at the second coming of Christ requires people in the Church of God to have expunged from their minds all past religious associations; that’s what Paul did with his use of the word “skubalon”, and that’s what we also have to do. See Revelation 14:4 for a description of those who will be in the first resurrection.

These points should help us to understand why so many people in our age have actually GONE BACK to their previous religious associations; they had never fully left that behind in the first place. They had never fully understood that coming INTO God's Church involves COMING OUT OF other religions. As God instructs us in Revelation 18:4, "**come out** of her, My people", because unless we really DO "come out" we are likely to hold to at least some heretical views and ideas.

To continue with Paul:

In Galatians 5:20 Paul clearly identifies such “contrary opinions”, i.e. heresies, as one of the works of the flesh. Contrary opinions are extremely common, and we encounter them almost universally. Satan inspires a spirit of division in people, because that is how Satan then conquers people. It is no coincidence that arguments involving powerful emotional feelings are very common amongst people who should be of one mind, i.e. within families (and also amongst close friends). That is how Satan works “in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2), by inspiring contrary opinions to disrupt family unity. Even proper child rearing is at its most basic level a way of dealing with and resolving contrary opinions.

We also need to recognize that the particular issues about which the contrary opinions exist are immaterial. It doesn’t really matter whether those issues are major or whether they are only minor. What matters is that THEY HAVE PRODUCED A DIVISION! Satan doesn’t care HOW he can create divisions amongst us; the only thing in this regard that he cares about is that divisions amongst us are created. Consider that it was a disagreement over a relatively minor issue, making a mountain out of a mole hill, that created the split between Paul and Barnabas (see Acts 15:37-39), who before this split had in fact become a very powerful and effective team. The smallest of issues can create major divisions.

Now in 1 Corinthians 11:19 Paul focused on the one positive thing about heresies. This is something we

in the churches of God should take note of, because this also applies to our current situation. That positive point is that heresies expose who is really approved of God and who is not approved of God.

In the 1950's - 60's we had the situation where large numbers of people were coming into God's Church, more than could really be assimilated in such short periods of time. Recall the approximately 30% growth in annual membership every year for much of that time. Not all of these new people were converted. In fact, many were not converted at all! They were simply "converted" to one or other doctrine (e.g. the Sabbath, the Holy Days, tithing, etc.), i.e. they were argued into accepting these doctrines because they could not refute the evidence that was presented to them. But they never really changed their underlying way of thinking, i.e. they weren't really converted in their minds! And as long as everyone outwardly accepted all of the Church's teachings, it was almost impossible to see who was really committed, and who was not fully committed to the teachings they for all outward appearances accepted and endorsed.

That huge growth in membership during those two decades laid the groundwork for heresies, by establishing a receptive environment for heresies within the Church.

It then took the literal introduction of heresies in the late 1980's to expose those who are "approved" and those who are "not approved", those who are totally committed to God's ways and those who could easily be persuaded to accept false teachings. It is the introduction of heresies that reveals who is "a faithful and wise servant" (Matthew 24:45) and who is in fact "an evil servant" (Matthew 24:48). Heresies are a powerful catalyst for revealing inner feelings and attitudes, and for separating the unconverted from the converted.

Getting back to the Church, the Apostle Peter showed that some heresies are extremely destructive in their effect. Notice what Peter said:

> "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be **false teachers** among you, who privily shall **bring in damnable heresies**, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift **destruction**." (2 Peter 2:1)

Here is what Peter is telling us in this verse. The "false prophets" were amongst the people of Israel in Old Testament times, and they always tried to get the people to follow one or other pagan religion. That was the attack from the outside.

The "false teachers" is a reference to people who come into the Church, not to get people to join another religion, but to pervert the teachings of the Church from within. They are very subtle and deceptive in their modus operandi. They "privily" or SECRETLY bring in their heresies; their true intentions are disguised. They pretend that the changes they want to introduce will result in us worshiping God more correctly, when in actual fact those changes are the same pagan customs and teachings of old. Pagan customs and teachings are presented in Christian-sounding terminology, and many people are deceived by this approach. If you today call your festival "Saturnalia", then people know that it is a pagan festival. But if you call it "Christmas", while retaining all the features of "Saturnalia", then many people are likely to be deceived. That's frequently the way the false teachers operate.

Notice that there are some heresies that are "damnable", meaning that they lead to the UTTER DESTRUCTION of those who accept such heresies. I suspect that Peter was thinking of heresies that would lead to the unpardonable sin, because there really are some contrary opinions that God will simply not tolerate! In this verse the two English words "damnable" and "destruction" represent the same Greek word (i.e. "apoleia"), showing quite emphatically that "damnable" refers to total destruction. Not all "contrary opinions" are equally serious. More on this in a moment.

Paul explained this process in Romans 1:22-25. The things Paul explained here are equally true for paganism and for heresies introduced into God's Church. Notice:

"Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools," (Romans 1:22)

"Professing themselves to be wise" means that they claim to have a better way of worshiping God. But their supposed "better way" is in fact foolish at best (i.e. when they are ignorant), or at the other extreme it is diabolically devious (i.e. when they knowingly and deliberately pervert the truth of God).

Such false teachers do two things: First of all they change THE GLORY of God by in some way denying or perverting the facts about God's nature (verse 23). Does that sound familiar? Secondly, they change THE TRUTH of God into a lie (verse 25). All heretical ideas are covered by these two points. When people in other churches or other religions accept such ideas, then that is paganism; but when those things are introduced into God's Church then we are dealing with heresies.

We need to also understand one other thing.

When people ACTIVELY SEEK AND PURSUE leadership positions within the Church of God (i.e. “I really want to become a minister”), THEN such people will also frequently introduce heresies into the Church (or at least endorse heresies) in an attempt to solidify their own positions. It is not the leadership position per se that is the problem; it is THE ATTITUDE of "I want to be the leader, I want to be the important person here", etc. that is the real problem. Church leaders who feel insecure in their positions (e.g. Mr. Tkach?) will frequently resort to this approach of introducing heresies, to justify or to solidify their tenure.

The approach of seeking leadership is fine out in the secular sphere, but it is a problem in a Church context for the simple reason that no man can ever pressure God to make him a minister. The ministry is a calling from God, and God doesn't call a man into the ministry simply because that man (e.g. Simon Magus in Acts 8) has set his heart on wanting the status and position of a minister. See Ephesians 4:11-13 and 1 Corinthians 12:28 for God's hand in selecting men for the ministry.

In the Old Testament King Jeroboam of Israel felt very insecure in his position as king, even though God had told Jeroboam that he would become king. So, in order to strengthen his own position, Jeroboam introduced paganism into Israel, in the form of two golden calves and his own set of religious days (1 Kings 12:26-33). If he could persuade people to accept these idols it would obviously strengthen his position with those people. So sometimes even people who are appointed by God may feel insecure in the position God has given them.

It is the principle of: if you can get people to do something wrong, or to join you in doing something wrong, then this ties such people to you, and it ensures (at least theoretically) their loyalty to you. See Proverbs 1:10-15 as an illustration of this point. Modern gangs follow the same principle: those who wish to join their gang are required to commit some or other crime before they are accepted as members.

And some church leaders follow **the same principle**, which is: if you want to join our church then you must accept the changed teachings I have introduced. And when people do accept the changed teachings such teachers have introduced, then this ties these people to those specific leaders. Introduce a heresy (though you would call it "new truth") into the teachings of the Church, and those who accept that heretical teaching are then dependent on you.

In his letter Jude speaks about men who came into the Church for the explicit purpose of doing away with God's laws and giving people in the Church license to sin. In order to achieve these goals they first had to ingratiate themselves into positions of leadership. As Jude wrote:

> "For there are **certain men crept in unawares**, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ." (Jude 1:4)

Jude means that these men had "crept" into **positions of leadership**, positions where they could influence the Church's teachings. The thing to notice here is that these people never really departed from their previous religious positions; they brought their heretical ideas with them into the Church! And all along they were still committed to their previous ways, though they didn't show this until they had attained positions of influence and leadership. Since Jude wrote these words over 1900 years ago this has happened many times in both God's Church and also in some of the world's churches (i.e. being infiltrated by people from a different religious background with the motivation of changing the existing set of teachings).

THE CHURCH OF GOD TODAY

Earlier we looked at the relationship between Judaism and the religion developed by the Samaritans. There is a parallel to that situation today.

Where initially the religion of the Samaritans represented an attempt to introduce pagan customs into the religion of the Jews, it later got to the point where these were two distinct religious systems. The religion of the Samaritans was a totally different religion from that of the Jews, even though total outsiders (including Bible commentators) might see many similarities between these two religions. But then heresies were introduced into the religion of the Jews, initially by many of the priests themselves. Once the ball was rolling it no longer required levitical priests to keep the process of introducing heresies going. From then onwards lay people kept the process going by taking to themselves the prerogative of interpreting the Scriptures and introducing their own pet ideas (i.e. from the age of the zugot onwards, where one whole generation was controlled by two ex-Samaritans who had infiltrated the leadership of the Pharisees).

With Christianity the initial attempt was also to introduce pagan customs into the Church of God. It later got to the point where there was a clear break between the true Church of God and the dominant church that claimed to be Christian. At the time of the Protestant Reformation that "dominant church" split into numerous factions. By that time the true Church of God was a totally different religion from all the other so-called "Christian" churches. But by then the Church of God itself had faced a constant bombardment of heretical teachings, some of which were rejected while others found some acceptance in the Church. And mostly those heretical teachings came from people who had brought some of their previous religious ideas with them into the Church of God.

So today we have the situation where there are a vast number of so-called "Christian" churches on the outside, and where in addition there are also a vast number of heresies WITHIN the churches of God. Initially many of those heresies were introduced by men who had become ministers. Once this process was well under way, it has been kept going by lay people "picking up the ball" and introducing additional heresies of their own. **That is the situation we face right now.**

The vast number of divisions amongst us are clear proof that heresies have been accepted in the churches of God. Contrary opinions are **extremely common** amongst us. As in Judges 17:6, this is a time when every man is doing that which is right in his own eyes. And that's what heresies are, contrary opinions regarding what is right in religious matters.

The seeds for divisions in our age today were sown in the 1950's and 60's when large numbers of

people were baptized in short periods of time, so that during that time those people who had been in the Church for less than 4 years almost always outnumbered those who had been in the Church for 5 or more years. Many of these people brought some of their previous religious ideas with them, and some of those people eventually ended up in the ministry, just like it was in Jude 1:4. While Mr. Armstrong was still alive they for the most part kept their contrary opinions to themselves. But after Mr. Armstrong had died, and when the new leadership then showed itself to be very receptive to rejecting the things Mr. Armstrong had taught, THEN they showed their true views and intentions. THEN they showed that they had harbored contrary opinions all along. As the Apostle John stated:

> "They went out from us, but **they were not of us**; for if they had been of us, they would *no doubt* have continued with us: but *they went out*, **that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us**." (1 John 2:19)

Now does this mean that all contrary opinions are heresy? Certainly not!

VALID "CONTRARY OPINIONS" vs HERETICAL "CONTRARY OPINIONS"

How can we distinguish between contrary opinions that are justified and contrary opinions that are not justified? After all, all of us at times have "contrary opinions", and surely they are not all wrong? So how can we identify harmless contrary opinions?

The key in correctly identifying any contrary opinion is always THE MOTIVATION for that opinion! In some cases the real motivation is carefully disguised and only becomes apparent many years later, while in other cases the motivation is immediately apparent. Here are two different motivations:

1) The motivation is to rectify a demonstrable error or fault or problem with our teachings. The proof is typically easy to understand and it does not require major mental gymnastics to see the logic in the proof that is presented. There is no desire to use this contrary opinion to enhance the status of the man involved.

2) The motivation is to establish, to strengthen or to justify a specific position or status or reputation. This one is to justify why the leader is the leader, an attempt to demonstrate that "the leader" has supposedly been selected by God for his specific position in the Church. Typically a part of the motivation is also to establish a loyal following.

The above two paragraphs represent two distinctly different motivations, with one being acceptable and the other not being acceptable at all, not even when on the technical level that contrary opinion may actually be correct. With God "the thoughts and intents (i.e. motivations) of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12) are even more important than a person's outward actions and conduct. "Correct" coming from a wrong motivation is never acceptable to God. Without the right motivation outward obedience is of no value before God. The motivation MUST be right before any conduct can be pleasing to God. The second motivation presented above is never acceptable to God, unless God Himself were to order "a show-down" (as in Numbers 16 and in 1 Kings 18). But God would assuredly not order such a "show-down" when the man involved has this particular motivation.

Let's look at an example of **the acceptable kind of "contrary opinion"**. Let's consider Mr. Herbert Armstrong. Here is what we have:

1) Heresies had infiltrated God's Church for many centuries before Mr. Armstrong's time. See Revelation 2:14-15, 20. The Church of God with which Mr. Armstrong had contact still had a few correct teachings together with many other teachings that are in fact "contrary to the Bible", i.e. heresies. They had the

name "Church of God", but they were spiritually dead (Revelation 3:1-2). They had accepted many false teachings from the churches around them.

2) As God opened his mind, so Mr. Armstrong came to understand many of these heresies, one at a time.

3) And as Mr. Armstrong came to understand these individual heresies, so he came to hold "contrary opinions"; i.e. his opinions were contrary to what has been accepted by a false Christianity. His "contrary opinions" always involved being at odds with the teachings found in the world's churches. His opinions were only at odds with the churches of God with whom he had contact in as far as those churches also accepted the teachings found in the world's churches.

4) Mr. Armstrong's reasons for his "contrary opinions" were always very simple and straightforward. His reasons for disagreeing with the teachings found in the world's churches were invariably rooted in specific verses in the Bible, which very clearly contradicted specific teachings found in the world's churches.

5) A very significant point in this process was that Mr. Armstrong NEVER approached specific verses in the Bible in an attempt to prove what those verses supposedly did NOT mean! Whenever he did state what some or other verse did not mean, he always also provided an answer for what that verse actually DOES mean! His focus was always on explaining what every verse does mean, rather than trying to somehow get rid of a specific verse here or there by attempting to show what it supposedly does not mean.

6) So in establishing these opinions that are "contrary" to the teachings of false Christianity, it was never a case of either deliberately ignoring or else attempting to explain away specific Scriptures that might have contradicted the new teaching Mr. Armstrong was establishing. No "difficult Scriptures" were deliberately ignored in this process.

This process resulted in exposing many, though by no means all, of the heresies that had crept into the Church over the centuries. And once these heresies were exposed, they were then rejected by Mr. Armstrong and removed from the Church's beliefs and practices.

Now let's look at an example of **the kind of "contrary opinion" that is not acceptable**, that in effect promotes heresies. Let's consider Mr. Joseph Tkach's leadership of the Church after Mr. Armstrong's death. Here is what we have:

1) There was a desire to find fault with teachings that had been introduced into the Church by Mr. Armstrong. The concern was NOT to confront heresies from the world's churches that had crept into the Church. Rather, the motivation was a desire to restore back into the Church specific teachings that Mr. Armstrong had put out of the Church.

2) It started with a desire to change something. It did not start with specific Scriptures that supposedly called into question one or other of the Church's beliefs or practices. The basic process was as follows:

A) Here is a teaching we want to change.

B) The motivation was a desire to become more acceptable to the world.

C) So the question was: how can we discredit the Scriptures Mr. Armstrong used when he established this teaching?

D) Therefore the approach was an attempt to prove what those specific Scriptures supposedly don't mean. There was no attempt to present what those specific Scriptures actually DO mean. It was sufficient to claim that they don't mean what Mr. Armstrong stated they mean.

E) This approach invariably involved arguing against clear statements contained in those verses. And this approach of discrediting Mr. Armstrong's explanations was applied to a large number of verses.

F) Only after every attempt had been made to refute the main Scriptures that Mr. Armstrong had used to establish specific teachings was there any effort at finding "new Scriptures" that would supposedly support the desired changes. In this process far-fetched and highly convoluted explanations became the norm (e.g. over 20 hours of taped explanations were devoted to trying to discredit Mr. Armstrong's teachings regarding the nature of God, etc.).

Where Mr. Armstrong's "contrary opinions" had called into question the teachings of the false churches, the "contrary opinions" during the next administration questioned the teachings Mr. Armstrong had introduced, while readily accepting the world's popular teachings. Where Mr. Armstrong had based the changes he introduced on clear statements found in specific Scriptures, the next administration attempted to discredit the very Scriptures Mr. Armstrong had used, while at the same time having a gaping void in scriptural support for the changes they wished to make.

We should be able to recognize the differences between these two approaches. It is one thing to have an opinion that is contrary to a teaching found in the world's churches, and where this contrary opinion is based on clear biblical statements. It is another thing altogether to present a contrary opinion whose aim it is to reverse one of the teachings that was established by this approach, and which requires arguments that attempt to refute all the Scriptures that were previously presented, all for the purpose of going back to a teaching that is accepted in the world's churches.

So now let's get back to our situation today.

THE PROCESS WAS NEVER COMPLETED

When Mr. Armstrong appeared on the scene, the Church of God was riddled with heretical ideas and teachings. Most of the true understanding was "ready to die" (Revelation 3:2), and much had "died" already. So God used Mr. Armstrong to initiate the process of putting "contrary opinions", heresies, out of the Church, one at a time, and to restore the truths that had once been understood, as well as shedding light on some other truths that may never have been understood before by anyone in God’s Church.

Now while the Church of God in the late 1920's had an understanding of the weekly Sabbath and a few other truths, on most other issues the Church's views and understanding were fairly similar to the views found in the world's churches, as expounded in various Bible commentaries. (All commentaries have been written by people in the world’s churches, which means that all commentaries contain numerous heretical ideas.) So the process Mr. Armstrong went through in rejecting heretical ideas and in restoring truths was one of challenging teachings and beliefs that were commonly held by the world's churches.

The trigger points for challenging established teachings were always specific scriptural statements. For example, the statements "the soul that sins, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20) and “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23) were the trigger points for questioning the supposed "immortality of the soul"; the statements "no man has ascended up to heaven" (John 3:13) and “blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth” (Matthew 5:5) were the trigger points for questioning that heaven is the supposed reward for the saved; the statement “so shall the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth” (Matthew 12:40) was the trigger point for questioning the popular Friday afternoon - Sunday

morning teaching regarding Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, etc.

This process of rejecting heresies and of reasserting the true teachings of the Bible always depended on Mr. Armstrong examining the Bible for himself. As Mr. Armstrong searched the Scriptures, so various statements would stare him in the face. And as he examined the subject at hand, so he came to understand another heresy that had been introduced into the common understanding.

By the end of his life Mr. Armstrong believed that God had used him to restore "18 truths" that had been lost before his time, and he wrote an article to this effect. The actual number of truths that were restored during Mr. Armstrong's time is immaterial. It doesn't really matter whether more than 18 or less than 18 truths were restored during Mr. Armstrong's time.

> What is important to recognize is that, while this process of restoring truths, and therefore rejecting heretical views, was started during Mr. Armstrong's time, **it was never completed**!

It was never a case that "only 18 truths" had been lost before the 1920's. That was only a start! The process of restoring truths that had been lost was to continue after Mr. Armstrong's death. There were still many areas where our Church of God understanding of the Bible was incomplete, clouded and flawed! There was still much for us to learn, and today there is still much for us to learn. But that depends largely on us sticking our noses into the Bible and searching for understanding. If we don't diligently search the Bible (John 5:39; Acts 17:11), then God is simply not going to open our minds to a deeper and clearer understanding. It is always a matter of cause and effect (Matthew 7:7). And in-depth personal Bible study is not nearly as popular today as it used to be 40 years ago. That is an unfortunate reality.

It is a serious mistake to believe that the process of restoring truths to the Church of God ended with Mr. Armstrong. It only started with him. And it has to continue until the time of Christ's second coming. There is no way that the process of restoring truths and of rejecting heretical ideas and explanations can possibly be concluded before Jesus Christ will stand on Mount Zion in Revelation 14:1. There is no human end-time leader in the Church (and there never has been such a human leader) who will ever be "the last word" in establishing all truth. Only Jesus Christ Himself will be "the last word" regarding all truth.

We need to understand that it has always been THE PROCESS of first recognizing heretical teachings, and then dealing correctly with that understanding that God has used to test the integrity of the people He has called into His Church. FIRST God opens our eyes and helps us to understand that some teaching or belief is not correct. THEN God watches us to see how we respond to and deal with that information. That's what God did with Mr. Armstrong. That is a test of integrity. It applies to all of us: to the leader and to the follower. That is the principle of "whatsoever is not of faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). And it is also the principle of "to him that knows to do good and does it not, **to him it is sin**" (James 4:17).

It is not important that there are still other heretical teachings and ideas that we have not yet come to recognize. The only thing that is important for us is: How are we dealing with the false teachings that God **has brought** to our attention? It doesn't matter whether those false teachings are major or whether they are only minor. Are we examining the evidence **HONESTLY** and openly in sincerity and in truth? Or are we "willingly ignorant" of some things we just don't want to know? Are we willing to be faithful in facing up to false ideas even in those things we might consider "least", or do we tell ourselves that we are certainly being faithful to "all the major teachings"? Luke 16:10 is a verse worth looking at in this regard.

> “He that is **faithful in that which is least** is faithful also in much: and he that is **unjust in the least** is unjust also in much.”

In order for God to test the honesty and the integrity of human beings, it is not necessary for us to have access to all truth, or even to most of the truth. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, etc. didn’t have all truth. But in every case they had enough for God to conclusively test their integrity and to then apply the principle of Luke 16:10.

And after us there will also still be more truths to discover (which means that some more opinions will have to be changed or modified), so that the people who come after us can also have their integrity tested by God. This process will continue until Christ returns. For us it is “sufficient” to deal with the issues about which God gives us an understanding today; “the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself” (see Matthew 6:34).

And for us “the trigger points” to a better understanding should always be specific scriptural statements, the same as was the case for Mr. Armstrong. As we search the Scriptures, so these trigger points should prompt questions regarding what is right and what is true regarding what we are reading in those Scriptures.

We start with an enormous handicap when we search the Scriptures in an attempt to prove that something is “NOT so”, in an attempt to negate a scriptural statement from somewhere else that we don’t want to accept. And that unfortunately also happens some of the time: when we can’t refute a specific biblical statement that makes us uncomfortable, sometimes we try to throw a bunch of other Scriptures at that statement in an attempt to make it go away. In this process the initial motivation is usually suspect.

We, the Church of God, are currently divided. We are hugely divided! And all those divisions amongst us are due to “contrary opinions”. Paul told the Corinthian congregation “every one of you has a psalm, has a doctrine, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation” (1 Corinthians 14:26). This verse also characterizes the condition in which the greater Church of God finds itself TODAY! We argue over almost everything, and we cannot agree. We are enormously divided. And heresies, contrary opinions about the Scriptures, lie at the root of all those divisions.

Very few of us, if any, are working for unity and for reconciliation. What can we do to eliminate the divisions amongst us? Many seem quite comfortable with all these divisions. In some cases there are vested interests that motivate people to work at entrenching and cementing the divisions amongst us; the divisions have even brought personal advantages to some people.

But God is not pleased with these divisions amongst us. Today we cannot approach God with one united voice. Could we today envision the situation where the entire Church of God, scattered across numerous different organizations, would come before God with fasting and prayer with one united voice, because we can recognize the desperate urgency for God’s intervention in our affairs? That possibility seems very remote, doesn’t it?

Like quarreling siblings, it is almost as if we want God to take sides in these divisions amongst us. That is a sad state of affairs. We are not dealing honestly with the issues that divide us, which in some cases are no more significant than the petty cause of the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas.

Satan has gotten at us in a powerful way. Primarily it doesn’t matter who is right and who is wrong; what matters primarily is that the body of Christ is divided. Who is right and who is wrong could perhaps be sorted out if we were motivated by a desire to be reconciled to all the other groups that make up the scattered Church of God, if we were motivated by a desire to seek common ground and to work towards

resolving our differences.

Contrary opinions, heresies, are a powerfully divisive influence. In any situation where there are contrary opinions amongst us the only real winner is Satan! He has managed to divide us. And he doesn't even care who is right and who is wrong.

At some point before the second coming of Jesus Christ we must begin to work towards resolving our differences and to begin the process of getting rid of all these contrary opinions amongst us. And we must be on guard against "damnable heresies".

Frank W. Nelte