

### **Worldwide Church of God Picture**

Madison, Wisconsin being a university town is a town that likes to read. I noticed there were all kinds of free newspapers scattered throughout the city. The newspapers were supported mostly by advertisers and each newspaper had their own little niche. Some were aimed at the music scene, others toward family and even some on the far edge of which you might recognize the name of The Onion. Well I decided to publish my own Christian newspaper called Hope In Action. I wanted to highlight all the good things the church was doing in the world. This is my first encounter into the wide range of theology among Christians. Some churches would allow my newspaper because either I was not born again or they wanted to take an ad out against abortion. Others wanted me to lay down the law against all those sinners in Madison. I even got a call from a person who told me that he researched scripture and there are over 200 laws that Jesus proclaimed and if you don't follow all of them, you are toast. He wanted me to print those laws. Needless to say, for many Hope in Action became Hopeless in Action.

This leads me to the name of a church called the Worldwide Church of God. They gave me a call after seeing my newspaper and wanted to know if they could worship Sunday afternoon at our church. My church council asked me the same question some of you are thinking? What is the worldwide church of God?

Thanks to my good friends at Wikipedia, the Worldwide Church of God was created by a man, Herbert W. Armstrong who founded his church based on the Old Testament. This is from Wikipedia,

Armstrong's church was both authoritarian and totalitarian in its treatment of the membership. To maintain the membership's loyalty, Armstrong's ministers indoctrinated them to believe that they had been "called" by God into the only true Christian church on Earth and that all other Christian churches were Satanic counterfeits. If a called member were to question church doctrines, the member would be in peril of losing salvation and of being cast into the lake of fire on Judgment Day. Furthermore, ministers could arbitrarily disfellowship members who were suspected of any type of disloyalty. Disfellowshipping was openly announced in Sabbath services on a weekly basis but the reasons for it were rarely given. Still the church grew on a worldwide scale

So if you don't measure up, you get disfellowshipped! Imagine that! But there is still more,

Armstrong taught a strict doctrine of tithing to the members. Ten percent of a member's gross income was to be given to the church, and yet another ten percent was to be saved for traveling to one of the church's annual feast days, the Feast of Tabernacles. Every third year, members were commanded to give a third tithe, slated to care for the "widows and orphans" of the church. Finally, the church observed seven high holy days throughout the year, on which members were asked to give offerings while baskets were passed.

Now after hearing all of that, aren't you glad you are Lutherans! If any of you ever get squeamish when you hear the word tithe, well I will remind you the Worldwide church of God use to require 3 of them. Now we are going to return to this church near the end of my sermon. It is a fascinating story about what happened to them.

Why did I spend so much time this morning talking about this church? Well what they tried to do really was to be Jewish Christians. They thought that being right with God meant to act like Jews

would act. This is why they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles. To be right with God meant you had to act Jewish but believe in Jesus.

Today in Acts 15 this is the most pivotal point, or moment really in the Christian movement. We have two groups. On the one side are Jewish Christians who believe that salvation comes through Jesus but you also must become a Jew. This means you have to observe all things Jewish including Circumcision. On the other side are Gentile Christians. Paul is doing his work among the Gentiles and we read the following at the end of Acts 14:27

**“When they had arrived, they called the church together and related all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith for the Gentiles”**

You may recall in Acts 10 Peter encountered Cornelius, a Gentile who received the Holy Spirit. Peter had his famous vision of pork with God declaring, What God has made clean you must not call profane.”

But now in Acts 15 the two groups are at it once again. They end up going to Jerusalem for the first church council meeting. Paul and the Gentiles were welcomed but we also see the other group emerging. We read in 15:5,

**“But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees, stood up and said, It is necessary for them to be circumcised and keep the law of Moses”**

So what did they do? Well they got together and looked at Scripture. Peter reminds them that the yoke of being a Jew, the law, can never be fulfilled. People always fall short. What replaces the law, why of course, Jesus. So we read in Acts 15:11

**“On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will”.**

They then asked an interesting question, what is God up to? They told stories about God's work among the Gentiles. They told about signs and wonders being done by God among people who were not Jewish. An amazing thing happened. The people in power, were Jewish. Those with tradition to hold up, usually win the argument. But these people were moved to follow what God is doing! At our Tuesday afternoon Video Bible course, Dr. Timothy Luke Johnson said this about Jews and Gentiles. Please understand, Gentiles had no problem hanging out with Jews. The Jews had to give up a lot, for the sake of the Gospel to welcome the outsiders.

So you see, it really is never ever about us? It is always about God and the way of Jesus. The way of Grace matters. We get too caught up into our own little bubbles and our own way of thinking. The danger is soon we give too much weight to our own personal viewpoints forgetting that God trumps all.

So as we pray about the possibility of land for MLC, it would be good for us to ask that question, what would God want us to do with this land? How can we honor God by using the land for the sake of mission and ministry?

Do you know what happened to the Worldwide Church of God? Well thankfully in 1986, the founder, Herbert W. Armstrong died. The elders of the church took up scripture once again and realized that acting like a Jew to earn salvation was contrary to the grace found in the New Testament. So they made a decision to become Christian.

**Grace Communion International**

They changed the name to Grace Communion International. When they did this, they lost a lot of members who wanted to keep the old way. So they became a Christian church and we allowed them to worship at ours. The leadership said they needed to follow Scripture and the way of grace. Now isn't that a lesson for all of us to remember? Amen.