

The following Scripture passages are offered to aid beginning fellowships. The readings and commentary for this week are more in line with what has become usual; for the following will most likely be familiar observations. The concept behind this Sabbath's selection is *answering what is a cult?*.

Weekly Readings For the Sabbath of May 5, 2007

The person conducting the Sabbath service should open services with two or three hymns, or psalms, followed by an opening prayer acknowledging that two or three (or more) are gathered together in Christ Jesus' name, and inviting the Lord to be with them.

Recently, the question was asked, "How do you know that you are not a cult?" The person asking the question was not antagonistic, but rather, the person was genuinely curious about how such a visibly inconsequential organization such as *The Philadelphia Church* could not be a cult in a world that defines "credible denominations" through membership count, with some number in the hundreds of thousands representing "legitimate churches" as long as these fellowships adhere to Christian dogmas that were articulated in the 4th and 5th Centuries CE. Thus, the Mormons are, to this person, members of a cult even though tens of millions *Christian* disciples follow the teachings of Joseph Smith. Likewise, Seventh Day Adventists are members a cult despite membership in the millions. So it isn't merely smallness in size that constitutes a cult, but also any variance from long established orthodoxy.

The linguistic phrase "*a cult*" carries a negative stereotype of such enormous size that the stereotype alone will smother organizations that are not led by dynamic personalities, thereby assuring the continuance of the stereotype. Men such as Martin Luther, Menno Simon, and Herbert Armstrong would strongly deny that they are cultmeisters, but the "radical" nature of their teachings produced bodies of believers that continued beyond their deaths to self-identify themselves by the name of the individual, or in the case of Armstrong, by the identifying phrase, *Church of God*. Thus, as fellowships fracture into schisms, further identifying phrases are added: there is a Lutheran Missouri Synod, and a Lutheran Wisconsin Synod, and others. There is a *Living Church of God*, and a *United Church of God*, and an *International Church of God*, and a *Restored Church of God*, and even a *Philadelphia Church of God*, as well as hundreds of others, with most using some additional identifier in front of Armstrong's chosen "true name of the Church." And if a body of believers refers back to the teachings of a man or of a woman rather than to Christ Jesus and the Apostles, including Paul, then the believers are properly identified as a cult as opposed to being identified as extensions of the "universal" Church, which long ago borrowed the names of Jesus, Peter, and Paul without borrowing their beliefs or practices.

The person conducting the services should read or assign to be read 1 Corinthians chapter 12.

Commentary: There is one Body of Christ Jesus, one Church, one baptism, but many members ... how does this work? If a Lutheran and a Jehovah Witness are both members of one Body, say a foot and a hand, then truly the hand says of the foot that it does not belong to the Body as the foot says of the hand that it is false. So does what the Apostle Paul wrote about the one saying that the other is false make either any less a part of the Body, or are either a part of the Body? The Universal Church now identifies both as separated brothers, but this inclusiveness is not mutual. While a Lutheran might accept a Roman Catholic as a genuine Christian who is just a little too caught up in “Mary worship,” others such as Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists deny the genuineness of the Roman Church, and label this “universal” fellowship as the great Whore of Revelation chapter 17. So a problem exists that the Apostle Paul had not anticipated when he wrote to the saints at Corinth, themselves only recent converts to Christianity.

If the Body of Christ is one and not many, and if a member of the Body cannot justifiably deny that another member is also of the same Body, then problems exist that are concealed by Paul’s use of the human body as a metaphor for the Church, problems that prevent disciples from being one with one another, let alone with Christ Jesus and the Father; for what fellowship has lawlessness with righteousness? What fellowship has evil with good? What fellowship has disobedience with obedience? What fellowship has the filthy and the profane with the clean and the holy? What fellowship did the churches in Asia have with Paul after all had left him (2 Tim 1:15)? What fellowship did Diotrephes have with John (3 John 9-10)? Certainly some, for John, if he came, would bring up what Diotrephes was doing, even to his putting out of the church genuine disciples.

The mystery of lawlessness that was already at work when Paul wrote his second recorded epistle to the Thessalonians (2 Thess 2:7) functioned as a cancer to kill the Body of Christ; thus, the Universal Church that emerged from the theological disputes of the first centuries of Christendom appeared before the world purged of the trappings of Judaism. This Universal Church was neither the living nor dead Body of Christ, but was an elegant Greek Trojan horse parked at the gates of the Roman Empire. This “horse” was a belief paradigm through which pagan philosophers—newly converted to Christianity, of course—sought to win through their wit and their deceit what Greek armies had failed to win with swords and spears on battlefields. The Roman Empire was held together by its worship of the Emperor, and Greek philosophers, borrowing a little from Paul and much from Plato, had constructed a wooden image of Christendom that though not an accurate reproduction of what Jesus taught was nevertheless enough like Jesus to gull an Emperor ... this side of the great White Throne Judgment, what the Emperor Constantine actually saw in the sky will never be known for certain, but what he saw on the political game board was a move that, if played, would cement his control of the Roman Empire from the English Channel to the Black Sea. And he made the move that cost him almost nothing. He ended the persecution of Christians, adopted the religion, and even offered the solution of hypostasis in Christology debates at the Council of Nicea (ca 325 CE), where he proposed that Christians observe Easter rather than the Passover (after all, Jesus wasn’t twice crucified, and Judaism kept the Passover on two days in case they missed the new moon). But Constantine’s greatest legacy is that

he gave control of the Empire to succeeding generations of Greek philosophers turned Christian bishops.

The Apostle Paul wrote that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3) ... liars can! Those of the synagogue of Satan can. Those who say “I know Jesus,” but who do not keep his commandments are liars (1 John 2:4) who are able to say with their mouths that Jesus is Lord without having the Holy Spirit. But it isn’t that Paul is wrong in what he wrote. Rather, it is the inner person speaking through the acts of the flesh who is unable to say that Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit. This inner person, the new creature born of Spirit, is the one who professes in active belief and manifested faith that Jesus is Lord. The old creature, having Satan as his lord and master, has learned to say whatever it takes to deceive others—it is these “disciples” (the word here questionably applied) who form “the synagogue of Satan that say they are Jews and are not, but lie” (Rev 3:9). So endtime disciples should not use the test of whether a person says that *Jesus is Lord* as a determiner of genuineness. That test might have been appropriate in the 1st-Century (it wasn’t, for if it were than all who were in Asia would not have left Paul while he still lived – 2 Tim 1:15), but now the test of genuineness has to be evidence of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). Everything else can be faked by those who are false.

The Body of Christ is one body, not many bodies, but one Body with many members that must learn to function as one unit here on earth—the timelessness of the heavenly realm does not permit learning to function as one entity after glorification. Spiritual growth and maturity must occur prior to glorification. Disciples will not be glorified as “baby gods” (this is a false teaching of Herbert Armstrong that has been retained by *Church of God* cults). Rather, when disciples are glorified they will be as Jesus is. They will be fully mature younger siblings to Christ Jesus (Rom 8:29); for the reality of timelessness is that all change must be compatible with what is and what will be. All must function as one unit in the same way as the millions of cells forming the human body must function together to form one entity. There is no place in the Body of Christ for members “doing their own thing.” God is not in the business of creating another Satan, or more rebels, or any creature who will not by faith keep His commandments.

The point that the Apostle Paul was making when he compared the Church to a human body is a simple one: disciples differ one from another, yet they are all essential parts of a single entity. Disciples, though, are less like hands and feet than they are like the cells that form hands and feet, with denominations or churches functioning as hands and feet function. However, Paul apparently could not imagine the Body of Christ existing as one living entity consisting of many denominations.

Today, there are no denominations functioning together to form the Body of Christ, for obedience has no fellowship with disobedience nor does righteousness have any fellowship with sin. All of the large, visible denominations practice lawlessness: they have relaxed at least one of the commandments (usually, they have relaxed all of the commandments), and they teach others to break the commandments (Matt 5:19). They are of this world, and the god they worship as *Jesus* is the prince of this world. They neither know Christ, nor do they care to repent of their lawlessness—teaching the world to live in sin is just too profitable for them to quit ... an objection? How do they practice and teach lawlessness? Breaking one of the commandments causes the person to “break the commandments” (Jas 2:10), and the Sabbath commandment would have all Christians worship God on the seventh day, not the eighth day.

Jesus said that those who teach lawlessness would be denied in their resurrection (Matt 7:21-23). Whereas some in the laity worship God on the eighth day in ignorance, those who teach are not ignorant and cannot plead ignorance as a defense against their teaching disciples to break the commandments. They cannot plead the great works they have done in the name of Jesus. All that they can plead is that they taught without being sent by God as a teacher of Israel, and they taught what they, themselves, had been taught. But what kind of a defense is this? Confessing to teaching spiritual infants to erase the commandments of God written on hearts and placed in minds by the Holy Spirit? How far away from committing blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will be their confession?

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The reader should now read Ezekiel chapter 20, verses 1 through 44, with emphasis on verses 25-26.

Commentary: God gave to physically circumcised Israel “statutes that were not good and rules by which they could not have life.” He defiled them through their gifts, their firstborns cast into fire. He did not do this lightly, but after generations of lawlessness and profaning His Sabbaths. And what God did to physically circumcised Israel forms the shadow and copy of what He did and is now doing to spiritually circumcised Israelites who practice lawlessness and profane His Sabbaths ... God changes not. He is the same yesterday as he is today and as He will be tomorrow; for heaven itself is timeless. Yesterday is today, and what happens next must be fully compatible with what is. Thus, activity happens, but all activity that will happen must coexist with what is. And from this realm of timelessness, God gave lawless natural Israel statutes by which the nation could not live: upon its continued lawlessness and idolatry He commanded the nation to burn its firstborns, not something He thought of but an ongoing practice Israelites had “borrowed” from their pagan neighbors. He sought to show Israel its sinfulness, but Israel thought that even this destruction of the nation’s future was “good” and pleasing to God.

The Christian Church has practiced lawlessness and has profaned the Sabbaths of God to an even greater extent than did natural Israel.

If God changes not, then what God physically required of natural Israel He will spiritually require of spiritually circumcised Israel, only the fire through which spiritual infants are cast will be the lake of fire, the second death.

The person who teaches newly born of Spirit disciples to practice lawlessness effectively casts these infants into the lake of fire. And now we are ready to discuss the role cults play in the Body.

By today’s usage, the 1st-Century Jesus movement was a cult of Judaism. The endtime restoration of the Body of Christ will be perceived as a Christian cult, but its central figure will not be a modern personage. Rather, it will be a *Jesus cult*, and it will be derided by those who wield “authority” within Christendom.

The Philadelphia Church has to be considered as a Jesus cult if it is to be labeled as a cult; for without central authority, no cultmeister can emerge to exercise authority over any congregation but that which he raised up. And would-be cultmeisters are not inclined to invade an organization that the person cannot control. So in practical application, *The Philadelphia Church* can never become a cult even though its belief paradigms would make it one if these paradigms tended toward elevating a human being to a status displayed by, say, Herbert Armstrong, who from the pulpit at least once

identified himself as an apostle equal to the Apostle Paul in wisdom and spiritual understanding (this statement of hubris indirectly cost Armstrong a little over a million dollars, a high price for speaking foolishly).

It is possible for a man or a woman to raise up a collection of disciples that holds the person in higher esteem than is proper. God knows whether the person has made disciples for himself or herself or for another person other than for Christ Jesus, and the person's spiritual reward will reflect what God knows. Thus, every teacher of Israel should not think more highly of the work the person does than is proper—and "proper" is to give all credit to the Father and His Christ.

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The person conducting the Sabbath service should close services with two hymns, or psalms, followed by a prayer asking God's dismissal.

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