

# How Far Does CHURCH GOVERNMENT Extend into YOUR Life?

*Through whom does God make final decisions in matters of Church policy? What is your responsibility under the government of God?*

**H**OW MUCH do you, as an individual, have to say about the policy, the conduct, the practice of God's Church? What are the *Church's* prerogatives and what are each *individual's* prerogatives?

It is time we learned what questions are matters of personal decision and what are matters of Church responsibility regulating us all!

## The Church Is a COLLECTIVE Body

The Church of God is a collective body. The Greek word for church means a *group* of individuals who have been called out for a purpose.

When there is a church, a collective body, who is going to determine what the church does *collectively*? Who is responsible for determining what each member does as part of that body?

Is each individual free to decide for himself how God's law applies to him?

And what about "free moral agency?"

Every one of us is a "free moral agent." Each one of us must decide for himself whether he will obey God. God is the One who decides what we shall obey. Notice how this is explained in Deuteronomy 30:19. Moses said: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have SET before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore," says Moses, "CHOOSE life, that both you and your seed may live."

Notice Moses did not invent the difference between life and death. He did not originate it. He merely *set* it before the people. The people are to choose. God commands *you* to choose. That is your responsibility as a "free moral agent."

But God commands you to do something more, not merely to *choose*. He commands you to "choose LIFE." That is an order! And any man who refuses to choose LIFE is in defiance of God. In other words, even though you are a free moral agent, you have been *ordered* to choose life. But *you* must make that choice voluntarily! Free moral agency involves merely the question of *whether* you choose to do what God has commanded you to do, or whether you choose to go contrary to His express order by choosing death instead.

## GOD the Author of Right and Wrong

Moses merely set before the people the way of life—blessing, peace, happi-

ness—God is the AUTHOR of life! God's ministers are not free to decide for themselves what is right or wrong. That is a prerogative of God!

Is the question of right and wrong really a matter for any individual to determine for himself? Is it *your* decision which determines whether a thing is right or wrong? Or is there a HIGHER AUTHORITY than man who determines the difference between right and wrong?

Indeed there *is* a Supreme Authority which regulates human life and human conduct! Scripture reveals that Authority is God and His government!

It is time we *learn* how God rules and how His government functions.

God is the source of our way of life, of our religion. He has perfect knowledge, perfect wisdom. He *knows* right from wrong. He has not left up to people or to society or the whims of any individual to determine what is sin and what is not sin. *He* is the Lawgiver.

Seventh-day Adventists tell us that the Ten Commandments are a "moral law." The Ten Commandments are no such thing—they are a "spiritual" law (Rom. 7:14). A spiritual law is a law that must be set in motion by Spirit, by God, *not* by the morals of human society. Catholics call the Ten Commandments a "natural law." This idea has come down through the Catholic Church from paganism. The concept of a "natural law" assumes that God's law can *naturally be understood* by man. To a Catholic only those portions of the Ten Commandments are valid today which can be *naturally* understood.

The question is, Is the law of God, the way of God, *naturally understood* by man? The answer is very plainly NO!

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 2 that the spiritual things of God—God's law, His way—are not discerned by the *natural* mind. That means that as individuals we cannot *naturally* understand or discern truth, or right from wrong. The Bible is God's revelation of spiritual knowledge and of those physical laws which man could not with absolute assurance understand by himself. The Bible then is primarily a closed book to the natural mind. That is why most learned and intelligent people regard it as a book of straw, a book of superstition or fable.

Now notice how conversion and the government of God lead to understanding the Bible.

## Conversion Takes TIME

Conversion involves a genuine change of this mind. We thereby *begin* to grasp the meaning of Scripture and the Bible—we *begin* to understand the deep differences between right and wrong and recognize what sin really is.

But does this mean that everyone in God's Church is fully able—merely because he has received the earnest of God's Holy Spirit—to understand *all* the Bible, completely and perfectly? The answer is NO! Notice the Scripture proof!

Peter tells us there are some scriptures, especially those which Paul wrote, which are hard to be understood, which the unstable wrest or twist to their own destruction! Peter declares prophecy to be a light which shines more and more until the day that God finally intervenes in world affairs. Prophecy is not something that was as clear one hundred years ago as it is today.

The ability to understand the Bible is a matter of growth and development. We are told to grow in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. *But we do not all grow at the same rate.* Some individuals have been converted much longer than others. Some develop spiritually faster than others. That development depends upon the amount of earnest prayer and study and obedience. As individuals we are not all of the same competence to determine what Scripture says.

How, then, does God regulate those things which we must do together *in unity* if we do not all grow spiritually at the same rate? How are we going to have unity in the Church if as individuals we cannot all understand all things alike without assistance? The answer is that we must be led, governed, ruled by the government of God—guided by Him into truth!

## World Rejects God's Rule

The whole world is confused, divided. Even the professing Christian world is divided. Why? The cause of the division among Catholic and Protestant denominations is the REJECTION of *God's authority* and the kind of church rule He set in motion.

Let us notice how God first established rule and authority in the Church. In order to keep the children of Israel in the knowledge of the truth so they would not stray and misinterpret and misunder-

stand the law, God established His government in His Church, the congregation of Israel. First, He commanded the people, in Deuteronomy 12:8, to perform what *He* said. He forbade them to do what was right in their own eyes, as they had been doing.

But how were they to know what was right in God's eyes? The answer is that God set rule and authority in His Church to determine the difficult matters for the people. We read of this rule and authority specifically in Acts 7:35.

Notice how the people in the Old Testament Church first regarded God's government. His rule and authority. "This Moses whom they refused, saying, Who made thee a ruler and a judge? the same did God send to be a ruler and a deliverer by the hand of the angel which appeared to him in the bush." I want you to notice. The people did not accept God's government through Moses. They were carnal.

The degree to which individuals accept God's government is illustrative of the degree to which they are converted and changed from their natural carnal mindedness to the mind of God and the Spirit of God. When people say, "Well, I think I ought to decide this for myself," when it is not their decision, they are merely illustrating carnal mindedness. And to be carnal minded is death.

Scripture makes it very plain that throughout time Church members need guidance and direction. The Ethiopian eunuch did not understand what he was reading in the book of Isaiah. God sent Philip to explain that passage which he was reading. To understand, we, too, must have God-called and God-sent teachers who do know and understand the truth.

### How God's Rule Works

When it comes to collective matters the Church of God as a whole must perform, there is the need—in order that there should be unity in the Church—of a *central authority* inspired and led by Jesus Christ who is the living Head of the Church. It is the government of God, but God works through human agents. Christ worked through Moses. Christ worked, at a later time, through Joshua, then through Samuel and through David.

In Christ's own day, we find that God worked through Christ, who in turn gave authority to His ministry in His Church. Consider Matthew 18:18. When questions come up, when decisions have to be made, the ministry—this central authority to which all must appeal—has the power to *bind on earth* those matters which the Father and Christ "shall have bound in heaven." Jesus did not institute anything new when He gave His ministry in the New Testament Church the power to bind or to loose on earth. He was merely following the practice that He had already given to the physical ministry in the Old Testament Church—to the priesthood and the judges!

Notice it! Jesus said in Matthew 23:3 that, when the Scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat: "All things whatsoever they command you, that do."

So there *was* authority in the Old Testament Church.

Most people have misunderstood this scripture. They have assumed that everything the scribes and Pharisees *taught* was taught from the seat of Moses. That is not true. Whatever proceeded from the "seat of Moses" had authority—but the scribes and Pharisees did *not* teach with authority—they did not teach from Moses' seat.

The "seat of Moses" was that AUTHORITY, vested, in Christ's day, in the scribes and Pharisees and which they exercised on behalf of the whole community to keep unity and order in the congregation. It had to do with those decisions which came before the Church as a whole which had to be determined by a central authority for all the Church. Such decisions were very rarely made. Jesus recognized that the scribes and Pharisees who sat in Moses' seat had authority over the synagogues and whatever God allowed them to determine. *That* the people were to obey! Then Jesus added: "But do not do after their works."

### What If Jews Sinned While in Office?

Notice what that means! *Even if the scribes and Pharisees had individually cut themselves off from God*, yet when it came to the major decisions, God still allowed them to determine what the Old Testament Church collectively should do, and the people under the authority of the scribes and Pharisees were *required* to submit to that authority.

God still governed the Old Testament Church through the "seat of Moses." The decisions rendered by scribes and Pharisees were *allowed of God* and were to be obeyed. If those in authority did not obey their own injunctions the people were not to follow their bad examples; but they still must follow God's orders as expressed by those in authority. Pharisaic disobedience did not excuse the people from obedience to God's government!

Some people today have to learn the meaning of this example. Even if a minister today were to make a mistake, as long as God leaves him in office he is to be respected. *God* is responsible for correcting him. In the meantime we are to *submit to God's government* functioning through him.

### New Testament Church Government Today

Jesus Christ reveals His New Testament Church government through the writings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 12. In verse 18 we find God set certain offices in the Church. It is the Government of God, not the election of people. In Ephesians 4, verse 11 to 14, we are told of the same government—of apostles, of

prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers. The function of this government is to teach us and to bring us to that final goal—"Be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect."

The goal, then, is that we all may be brought to the unity of the faith, to the stature of spiritual understanding like Jesus Christ. The very fact that this is a goal and an aim and that we don't all progress to that goal with the same degree of speed, nor do we all sense the direction that we should go, *PROVES* the need of the ministry! Ministers are pictured as shepherds; and the people, in general, are called sheep because they do not always know the way to go.

Jesus Christ is the CHIEF SHEPHERD. He has set those in the ministry who are *spiritually more mature*, and who can be called "elders," and who are responsible under Christ to assist in shepherding the flock. *He holds them responsible for ruling the Church well.* We read of some of the functions of the ministry in 1 Timothy 5:17: "Let the elders that *RULE WELL* be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine."

Notice it again! One of the functions of the elders is to *RULE WELL*. This rule involves the authoritative expounding of the meaning of the Scripture. If God's rule in the Church involved *only* teaching, but no authority to enforce that teaching, the Church would quickly be divided like Protestant sects are!

If you for example tell your child to do this or do that, and he doesn't do it—and you haven't been given the authority to act, but only the authority to talk, are you going to have any unity in the family? No! Now if God says that every elder must *first* learn how to rule his own house well, that means he is also to have Church authority vested in him. He is to teach God's truth, and if the teaching isn't followed, then he is responsible for exercising authority to see that God's teaching is obeyed. The duty to rule well in the home is a necessary prerequisite to the ministry.

### You Must Decide Whether This Is God's Church

Notice Romans 10:13 through 17: "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved. But how shall they call on him on whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him on whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach except they be sent?"

We must first of all come to a knowledge of *where* God's teaching is. We must find those whom *God* has sent. Unless we have found those whom God has sent, how are we going to know that what is preached is true?

The first thing that all of us must do is to decide whether or not *this is God's Church*. We must come to know where God's Church is.

Jesus said He will be with us always, even to the end, or consumation, of this age. We know that the Church that God uses is one in which *Christ is*.

It is the Church which yields itself to all the Scripture. A Church which obeys God and which has Jesus Christ as its Head and living in its members.

When Jesus made a statement that many of His disciples didn't agree with, many of them left. Jesus asked Peter, "Are you going to leave also?" Peter said, "To whom shall we go? *You* have the words of eternal life." Now if this is not God's Church, where else *will* you find the truth? If this is God's Church, then you must recognize that God has set in this Church His government through which Christ rules.

Once you have proved this is God's Church, how far are you going to let *God* rule you? How far will His government extend in your home and into your life? What decisions are you, as an individual, to make? And how much is vested in the Church as a body? The Church, of course, authoritatively speaks *by the ministry* when it comes to making decisions *which regulate the whole Church*. (Observe Acts 15, for example.)

#### What About Personal Decisions?

There are private, personal decisions, for instance on baptism or cases of divorce. Most cannot determine whether they should be baptized, whether a prior baptism was valid. How are you to know? The answer is you come before two or more of the ministers. If the facts you provide are true, *the decision is our responsibility*. All we can do is apply God's law to the circumstances you give. If a decision has been rendered by the ministry, you are bound by that decision.

The great requirement is that you learn to submit to the government of God. After you have recognized that this *is* God's Church, you are to submit to God's government in the Church.

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