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Commentary — From the Margins

*Circumcision of the Heart*

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Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord [YHWH], when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh—Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart. (Jer 9:25-26)

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The Apostle Paul begins his letter to Titus with, “Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior” (1:1-3).

Much is claimed in the above declaration: (1) Paul is a servant of God; (2) he is an apostle; (3) he doesn’t address everyone; (4) he writes to shore up the faith of the Elect; (5) he writes to increase the Elect’s knowledge, not everyone’s; (6) knowledge equates to godliness (this assumes the knowledge is applied); (7) the knowledge pertains to eternal life; (8) God promised eternal life before the ages began; (9) God never lies; (10) at the proper time eternal life would be received, with this time declared in Scripture; (11) preaching would reveal when this proper time is; and (12) Paul was entrusted with this preaching by God.

There are those today who believe that Paul, like Moses and Aaron before, took too much unto himself, that he falsely exalted himself. Their reasoning is that all of the first disciples were apostles; all were holy, every one of them; and the Lord was among them. These detractors of Paul, like so many modern Korahs (Num 16:3), compare Paul to miniature size clones of Herbert W. Armstrong, who indeed had the audacity to publicly compare himself to Paul (that comparison cost him a million and a half dollars or so in a divorce settlement). These detractors of Paul shrink him to the size of a David Pack or a Gerald Flurry; then these detractors brush all of them away as if they were flies on carrion. Certainly Pack and Flurry behave as blow flies feeding on the corpse of the former Worldwide Church of God, but for the vapid voices arising as vapors from the stinking corpse to magnify any of the tiny Armstrong clones to Paul’s size verifies what Paul wrote to Titus:

For there are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party. They must be silenced, since they are upsetting whole families by teaching

for shameful gain what they ought not to teach. ... They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works (1:10-11, 16)

Paul apparently was not a supporter of free speech, but then, neither was God when the earth opened to swallow Korah and his supporters.

The empty talkers about whom Paul was warning Titus had caused the fellowships on Crete to fall away from what Paul taught: Paul begins his instruction to Titus with, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (1:5 — emphasis added).

The 1st-Century Church—the apostolic era—had more in common with the end of the Armstrong era than many will want to admit: whole congregations were leaving Paul, were teaching that disciples needed to be physically circumcised, or were adapting their messages to win as many Greeks as possible to Christ. At the end of the Armstrong era, whole congregations went with dissidents, or stayed with hypocrites, or returned as dogs to their vomit to the lawless gospel of Evangelical Christendom. There was no unified voice coming from a headquarters church, no unified message, but there were many teachers coming from Jerusalem to the hinterlands of Achaia and Asia, each with a message, each professing to know God, each with his hand out to receive the tithes and offerings of converts, each divvying up the dwindling pool of tithe-paying disciples Armstrong had gathered to himself. Who was a person to believe? Paul, Apollos, Phygelus, Hermogenes, Diotrephes? Or Kilough, Hulme, Meredith, Flurry, Pack? What was the faith once delivered? Jude found it necessary to write disciples to contend for this former faith (v. 3), but what was it? It certainly was not the faith of the Pharisees and Sadducees, with modern rabbinical Judaism having developed from the purity sought by the Pharisees. What is the former faith for which endtime disciples should contend? It certainly is not that of the Roman Church, with its mingling of secular and theological authority to function as an arm of spiritual Babylon. It certainly is not that of the Reform Church that continued the Roman Church’s mingling of civil and ecclesiastic authority. It certainly is not that of any faith that advocates lawlessness. Nor is it that of any faith that profanes the plural Sabbaths of God.

Regardless of what a faith professes about “knowing God,” if the faith denies Him by its works, the faith is “detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work” (Titus 1:16). It will teach what is contrary to sound doctrine (2:1), and it will be silenced by God, not by the prince of this world or by his disguised ministers.

Paul wrote Titus that Christ Jesus “gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works” (2:14). Paul told Titus, “The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works” (3:8). Paul added, “But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless” (v. 9).

The gospel Paul would have Titus deliver to what remained of the Church on Crete was a message about good works, about spurning lawlessness, about young men exercising

self-control, about young women loving their husbands, about being reverent in behavior, sober-minded, dignified, not argumentative, not pilfering. It was a gospel that required what remained of the Church to exercise godliness and renounce worldly passions. It was a gospel that would have disciples to avoid quarrels about the law or disputes about words ... what happened to this gospel? Did what remained of the Church on Crete follow after those who had left Paul? Apparently so, for the Church that comes down through history elevated the vain works of repeating words and fumbling with beads for the good works that comes from keeping the commandments.

When the vain works of the Roman Church were challenged by 16th-Century Protestant Reformers, the world was stood on end. Faith alone was determined to be adequate for salvation. No works were needed. But what was this faith? Was it doing evil so that good might come (Rom 3:8)? Was it permission to break the law at will? If God will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith, has faith overturned the law? Or does faith uphold the law (vv. 30-31)?

The gospel Paul taught fell upon hard times as his epistles were twisted by the ignorant and unstable into instruments for their destruction (2 Pet 3:16). However, from the Reform movement—and for this all Sabbatarian disciples owe a debt to the Reformers—came reformers who were called “radicals.” And these noisy Radical Reformers fled from spiritual Babylon as far as the plains of Moab, where their descendants became quiet Believers in the 17th-Century. A century of persecution caused Mennonites, Hutterites, the Amish to meekly continue in well-doing, with one foot dangling in the lawlessness of the Roman Church, the other foot firmly planted on the commandments, observing nine of them but not the Sabbath commandment for that would cause them to quarrel about the law—and apparently, it was better to be quiet and a little lawless than to earnestly contend for the faith delivered by Moses, who wrote of Christ Jesus. Unfortunately for these quiet Believers, James, brother of Jesus and Jude, wrote that to break one of the commandments made the person a lawbreaker and was as breaking all of them (2:10). The commandments are not ten laws of God, but one law that was to be written on the heart and placed in the mind of a disciple. So the quiet Believers who will not quarrel about the law also will not keep the law.

Throughout the forty years that Moses led Israel, not one Hebrew baby was physically circumcised ... does this surprise anyone? Moses had no infant circumcised, for every infant was covered by the cloud. All ate the same spiritual food; all drank the same spiritual drink (1 Co 10:1-4)—after the first thirty days, Israel under Moses ate manna. The nation’s clothes did not wear out; its sandals did not wear out. Time seemed to be suspended as the nation numbered in the census of the second year died from unbelief, one after another until only Moses, Joshua, and Caleb were left when a second covenant was made on the plains of Moab with Israel, now a mixed nation composed of the circumcised and uncircumcised children of the nation that left Egypt.

Under the second covenant, ratified by a song and not by blood as an earthly shadow of a heavenly thing (Heb 9:23)—the covenant that Paul identified as “the righteousness based on faith” (Rom 10:6)—upon the demonstration of faith, Israel would return to God’s rest and there receive circumcised hearts (Deut 30:1-2, 6), with Judea being a visible type or

representation of salvation (cf. Isa 10:22-23; Rom 9:27-28), and with Sabbath observance being analogous to entering into God's rest (cf. Heb 3:16-4:11; Ps 95:10-11; Num chap 14) ... it is to this second covenant that better promises were added when its mediator became the glorified Christ, with the foremost better promise being that receiving spiritual birth now precedes demonstrated obedience. As the cloud covered Israel in the wilderness of Sin/Zin, the garment of Christ Jesus' righteousness covers the born of Spirit nation as this latter Israel practices walking uprightly before man and God. This garment is Grace.

Note well that link between an uncircumcised Israelite initially entering into Judea where he would be physically circumcised (Josh 5:2-7) and a physically circumcised Israelite, after going into captivity, returning to Judea where he would be spiritually circumcised: in both cases, entering into Judea is contingent upon obedience (either when on the plains of Moab, or when in a far land).

The faith once delivered is found in the Book of Deuteronomy. It is found in the circumcision of hearts cleansed by a journey of faith undertaken when Israel is far from God. It is found in Gentiles who, when living in a far land, turn toward God and begin to love God with all of their hearts and minds, expressing this love through obedience to God, keeping His laws and commandments. Their uncircumcision will, when keeping the precepts of the law, be counted to them as circumcision (Rom 2:26). And the circumcised Israelite who will not undertake a journey of faith by which he cleanses his heart will be punished for his unbelief; for the journey every natural Israelite must take continues past obedience to the law, and on to professing that Jesus is Lord with one's mouth and believing in the person's heart that the Father raised Jesus from the dead (Rom 10:9).

Circumcision comes after entering into God's rest, not on the journey to God's rest. Physical circumcision did not occur in the wilderness of Sin, but after the children of Israel chose life and crossed the Jordan on the 10th day of the first month. Circumcision of the heart didn't occur when Israel was in a far land, but after God returned Israel to His rest because of Israel's demonstrated faith. For disciples, spiritual circumcision doesn't occur when born of Spirit, but after a journey of faith that cleanses the heart, with this journey taking the disciple from Babylon to the plains of Moab, then across the Jordan and into Sabbath observance.

The hearts of disciples who remain in Sunday observance are not circumcised; the laws of God have not been written on their hearts and placed in their minds. They are not today under judgment; thus, they are not yet firstfruits ... disciples are glorified or not glorified when their judgments are revealed. The person who does not take judgment upon him or herself through inclusion into the holy nation of Israel—with circumcision being the rite of inclusion—is not a part of the household of God.

Baptism has long been considered the ritual for inclusion into the household of God, but baptism marks the death of the old self that is as the nation was that died in the wilderness of Sin/Zin because of unbelief. That nation—with the exceptions of Joshua and Caleb—died in the wilderness before the children of that nation were circumcised after crossing the Jordan. The new self that is as the child was of the physically circumcised Israelite that left Egypt is not spiritually circumcised when the old self dies in a baptismal pool; rather, the new self must still

choose life or death, with choosing life constituting loving God by walking in His ways and keeping His commandments (Deut 30:15-16). The new self that turns away from God to worship other gods [all bearing the name of Jesus or Yahushua] and to serve them will perish, for these new selves have chosen death instead of life. Yes, the new self that worships a different Jesus than the one that came as the only Son of Theos, the Creator of all that has been made and for whom all things were made, will perish because of the new self's unbelief—many are called, many are born of Spirit, but few will be chosen (Matt 22:14). Few will believe God. Few hear the voice of Jesus. Few truly want to be one with the Father and the Son.

Again, who is a person to believe? Peter, Paul, John, Apollos, Phygelus, Hermogenes, Diotrophes, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Fischer, Knox, Smith, White, Dugger, Graham, Armstrong? The list is almost endless.

When Israel left Egypt, the nation was not then offered salvation; rather, it was offered physical blessings that served as carrots prompting good works. But when these physical blessings did not work—God knew ahead of time that they would not work—Israel was sent into foreign captivity where the nation was free to practice whatever form of idolatry it desired; where it was free from the cultural expectation of serving God. Now for the nation to turn to God, whom it had not been before serving (the reason for the captivity), and to begin to serve God, loving Him with hearts and minds, obeying Him, keeping His commandments, the nation would express the faith necessary to please God. However, salvation was not offered to the nation until after it completed the journey back to Judea. Only when again in God's rest was the nation offered salvation; for hearts are not cleansed by choosing life when idolatry continues to dwell in the mind. Rather, hearts are cleansed when there is no pressure placed upon the person to obey God as was the case when in a far land.

Gentiles or the uncircumcised have no cultural expectations concerning obedience to God; therefore those who did not pursue righteousness obtain it by faith (Rom 9:30), this faith causing a person from the nations to turn to God, loving God, obeying Him by keeping His commandments. For the Gentile, keeping the commandments requires the person to undertake a journey of faith that is analogous to a physically circumcised Israelite returning to God when in a far land. Beginning to observe the Sabbath, now, equates to the physically circumcised Israelite returning to the Promised Land. So it is after a Gentile convert begins to keep the Sabbath and to live as a Judean that this convert's heart is circumcised.

The natural Israelite who will not undertake a journey of faith is merely circumcised outwardly, and God promises that this Israelite will perish.

When there is no cultural expectation of obedience to God—when obedience only occurs by faith—then whatever is within the person's heart and mind becomes apparent for all to see through the person's actions. Obedience that occurs as a product of faith in, and love for God is counted to the person as righteousness; for when in a far land, disobedience is the expectation of the land whereas in Judea obedience was the expectation of the land.

What Paul did not realize is that in the 1st-Century Gentile converts entered into a church

culture that expected obedience to God. Similar expectations were placed upon 20th-Century disciples in the former Worldwide Church of God, almost all of whom were converts from some other “Christian” faith. For whatever reason, a person converted, then came under the authority of an administration [in the case of Church of God disciples] that rode roughshod over the person, delivering through fiery sermons the expectations of this new church culture though often confusing the expectations of God with the expectations of the Church.

In the 1st-Century, those who were in fellowships in Achaia and in Asia (and on Crete) left Paul. The authority Paul had established either rebelled against Paul or lost credibility within the fellowship, and every disciple, some having been decades in the faith, was set adrift to do whatever was in the person’s heart and mind. Disciples became as natural Israelites were when in Judea, with the breakup of fellowships equating to natural Israelites being exiled in far lands. When a fellowship disintegrated or when a fellowship left Paul, the disciple who desired to be one with the Father and the Son continued in well-doing, keeping the commandments by faith, but there was no longer a church cultural reason to do so. Keeping the commandments, especially the Sabbath, was strictly voluntary. Thus, most of the disciples celebrated their return to freedom, and used the opportunity to drag into Christendom the rotting corpse of Greek paganism. They kept the epistles of Paul, but quit living by them—they did not have to live by them. They were free to reject all things Jewish and still remain Christian, and it fell upon them to establish a new church culture that was purely Christian, the culture that represents historical orthodoxy.

The hundred plus thousand disciples in the former Worldwide Church of God lived in a church culture that was as repressive as any since 17th-Century Puritans immigrated to America. Ministers kept records of how much money each member gave, of when the member was last visited, of what the member’s house was like. But following Armstrong’s death in January 1986, that church culture began to fall apart, with Gerald Flurry being one of the first to rush the doors in an attempt to escape changes being made. Soon, every disciple was freed from the oppression of Armstrongism; every disciple could eat or not eat unclean meats (many disciples hurried from services to take advantage of their new found freedom at Red Lobster). Disciples were free to tithe or not tithe. Disciples were free to keep the Sabbath or to keep Sunday. Disciples were free to return to the vomit they left behind in Evangelical fellowships, and many did return to eat again the poison they had puked out years earlier. But then, this freedom was absolutely required so that God and angels could see what had been hidden within the hearts of pious members that smiled broadly as they greeted each other in services they could not culturally afford to miss.

When first entering Judea, circumcision of the heart was not offered to Israelites even though it was described in the Moab covenant; for Israel first had to go into captivity before salvation was offered following demonstrated obedience by faith ... before the hearts of disciples are spiritually circumcised, these disciples must enter into God’s rest, then have the opportunity to leave; must have freedom from the constraints of a church culture.

The authority of the Church must wax and wane with each generation so that every disciple, after having sampled the love of God, can on his or her own really decide whether he or she will by faith keep the commandments as the Christian’s expression of love for God. In other

words, the collapse of fellowships, the turning away from Paul, the great falling away in the Tribulation—all are necessary opportunities that allow disciples to “escape” from the oppression of God if that is the disciple’s will.

When a disciple chooses life on the spiritual plains of Moab, Christ begins to shape the disciple into a vessel for honored use. For the next however many years, the disciple is pinched and pulled through trials as if the pinching and pulling were occurring to a clay pot. Finally, the disciple is a formed vessel that must now be set back to dry; the disciple is as fragile as if this son of God were a greenware pot—and it is here where fellowships collapse and disciples are set adrift to revisit their conversion. It is at this stage that the disciple as a sculpted vessel can be most easily broken. Disciples do not yet have the strength of once-fired bisque ware even though they are destined to be vessels for honored use if they don’t crack in the drying process.

The many fellowships that left Paul in the 1st-Century and the splintering of the former Worldwide Church of God in the 20th-Century left disciples, as greenware vessels, without easily identifiable spiritual leadership. Who were they to follow? Anyone? Could they go it alone ... many tried, and some few achieved undiscovered success. But most were broken as if dropped from the top rack of a drying shelf onto a concrete floor.

If those disciples who were shattered by the breakup of Armstrong’s spiritual fiefdom were ever spiritually circumcised, they will be tossed into the lake of fire when resurrected. The assumption has been that they were spiritually circumcised, that they had hearts circumcised when they initially journeyed into obedience to God. But for their sake, let us hope that this is not true. Let us pray that they were as the children of Israel were in the wilderness of Sin, a nation of promise covered by the garment of Grace (the cloud), with judgment not yet upon this nation. Let us pray that only those who stayed the course, who kept the faith, who wavered neither to the right nor to the left, had their hearts circumcised when they revisited their conversion and made the same decision to obey God that they had made (in many cases) decades earlier. These disciples will be the spiritual equivalent to natural Israel in a far land when this nation returns to God, loving God with hearts and minds by keeping the commandments by faith.

Circumcision of the heart is absolutely essential before a disciple will be glorified. Those who remain only physically circumcised when judgments are revealed will perish.

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