

Dear SDA Netters:

Some of you might appreciate reading this open letter I wrote to Pastor Joseph Tkach Jr, President of the Worldwide Church of God. He had requested to meet with me here at Andrews but then he cancelled the visit after reading my essay on the crisis of the WCG. Since several pastors and members of the WCG have written to me expressing similar concerns, I decided to write an open letter. You will find that some of the issues addressed are some issues that are relevant to our Adventist church. The letter is 12 pages and I am trying to post it as instructed by our moderator, namely, by sending each segment as a reply. I hope it works. If you have problems, I would be glad to e-mail it to you personally.

AN OPEN LETTER TO PASTOR JOSEPH TKACH
AND
THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD
Samuele Bacchiocchi, Andrews University

Dear Pastor Tkach:

Thank you for your letter of January 31, where you raised some questions about my recent article: "A Church in Crisis: Causes and Lessons." Several of your supporters, both ministers and members of the Worldwide Church of God, have written to me expressing similar concerns. In the interest of time I have decided to prepare an open letter where I will endeavor to address some of the major points raised by these letters as well as the numerous posts that have appeared on the internet. For the sake of clarity, I will submit my response under major headings.

CANCELLATION OF SCHEDULED APRIL 29 MEETING

After reading your letter I concur with you that the scheduled April 29 meeting at Andrews University would be unproductive. When you first proposed to meet with me, I assumed that your intention might be to reexamine and reconsider some of your doctrinal changes, especially your interpretation of the Sabbath and Holy Days in the light of your new covenant theology. My assumption was based on a brief telephone conversation I had with your Executive Editor, Dr. Herman L. Hoeh. He offered to review my latest book God's Festivals in Scripture and History and told me on the phone that he still holds to the validity and value of the Sabbath and Holy Days. His positive remarks, coupled with the excellent comment he wrote for my book, led me to believe that perhaps you also were rethinking some of the doctrinal changes you have introduced in your church at large. Thus I assumed that the purpose of your proposed visit might be to do some "damage control," by reexamining some aspects of your new theology.

Your letter as well as your editorial "A Church Reborn" in the February issue of The Plain Truth make it abundantly clear to me that I had misunderstood your intentions. It is evident that you are not inclined at this time to reexamine the method and the content of your doctrinal changes. This means that any dialogue between us would be fruitless. The most I can do at this point is to respond to some of the questions you and your supporters have raised, hoping that this might clarify some misunderstandings and stimulate some reflection. I wish to assure you that I am writing this open letter as a caring Christian. I respect your convictions and your sincere desire to liberate your church from "a legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament" (The Plain Truth, February 1996, p. 1). I trust that we can disagree without becoming disagreeable to one another.

Thank you for the opportunity to dialogue with you and your supporters through this open letter, which I wrote with a sincere desire to be helpful.

EXPLOITATION OF WCG CRISIS TO AVERT A SPLIT IN THE SDA CHURCH

Let me begin by answering the allegation that my article exploits the crisis of the WCG by making it "the whipping boy to rally support around yours [that is, mine] traditionalist views." You believe that the "Seventh-day Adventist church is under stress" because "significant and foundational doctrines of the SDA church are being questioned from within." To warn my fellow Adventist church members of the potential danger deriving from Adventists who "do not embrace what many consider its distinctive doctrines," I am allegedly exploiting your crisis.

I find this viewpoint unwarranted for two reasons. First, I am not aware that the unity of the Adventist church is being threatened by the questioning of "foundational doctrines" on the part of some. If you are thinking of the women's ordination issue agitated in recent years, you might be interested to know that such an issue is not a "foundational doctrine." It is not even included among our twenty-seven fundamental beliefs. The issue belongs to a small minority of feminists primarily in North America. I would dare to say that over 90% of our eight million Adventist members do not even know that such an issue exists in our church today. Recently I lectured for 10 days in San Paulo, Brazil, where we have over 200,000 members in the city alone. When I asked the pastors if they wanted me to address the issue of women's ordination, they replied, "Please do not waste our time. That is an American issue. For us it is not an issue."

In my article I mention that "in recent memory some of our own best and brightest have challenged our teachings on the sanctuary, on prophetic interpretation, and on the Spirit of prophecy." The challenge to which I refer has come from a few individuals, such as Desmond Ford and Walter Rea, both of whom resigned from church employment and have faded into obscurity. As of now I do not know of any particular individual who is challenging "foundational doctrines" and threatening to split the Adventist church. The truth of the matter is that the threat to the future of the Adventist church today comes not so much from divisive theological controversies as from cultural conformity, that is, the pressure to conform to the secular values of our society and thus lose its identity and mission. In the light of these considerations I find the allegation that I used your church as the "whipping boy" to rally support against those who are challenging "foundational doctrines" to be unfounded.

A second reason for rejecting your accusation is the fact that the intent of my brief survey of the developments which led to the crisis in your church was not to use your church as a "whipping boy," but rather to provide a much needed historical perspective on what can happen when a church adopts radical changes. I am a church historian by training and profession, and I like to look at developments from a historical perspective to see what lessons can be learned. The dictum "history repeats itself" is true because often we fail to learn the lessons that history teaches us.

A LESSON TO BE LEARNED FROM THE HISTORY OF OTHER CHURCHES

Church history teaches us that introducing the kind of radical doctrinal and practical changes you and your father have brought to the WCG, can have devastating consequences. I am thinking especially of the changes dictated by your adopting the New Covenant theology which, as you put it, "resulted in our abandoning past requirements that Christians observe the seventh-day Sabbath as 'holy time,' . . . annual festivals . . . tithe . . . and that Christians must not eat foods that were

'unclean' under the old Covenant" ("A Church Reborn," Plain Truth, February 1996, p. 1). Rather than taking time to discuss what has happened during the course of Christian history to churches that relaxed their doctrinal and moral standards, I will briefly refer to the classic study Why Conservative Churches Are Growing, by Dean M. Kelly, Executive Director for Religious Liberty, National Council of Churches. Kelly traced the growth pattern of six mainline American Protestant churches that had been growing for nearly two hundred years and then started going down. In a nutshell Kelly's conclusion is that denominations stop growing and start declining when they relax their doctrinal and moral standards by reducing salvation to love and faith in Jesus Christ. In an article Kelly explained that "the trouble with these unstructured simplifications is that they're too easy. There is almost nothing you cannot justify doing, if you hold yourself to the criterion of love as you interpret it. It's too easy. It is too self-indulgent. Rather than being guilt-ridden, most of us are prone to be innocence-ridden, that is, to find justifications and excuses for doing what we want to do anyway. And if we can justify it in the name of love, all the better. These oversimplifications are inadequate because they deprive faith of its unique and necessary texture and practice and cost" (Dean M. Kelly, "How Adventism Can Stop Growing," Adventists Affirm, Spring 1991, p. 49).

How to Stop Growing. Kelly applied the conclusions of his research to our own Seventh-day Adventist church by asking: "How can the Seventh-day Adventist church stop growing?" His answer was very simple, "Be like the Methodists," (ibid. p. 49). By this he meant that if the Adventist church follows the example of the Methodist church which has gradually relaxed the high doctrinal and moral standards of early Methodism, it will eventually stop growing and start declining. Kelly cannot be accused of using the Methodist church as a "whipping boy" to warn the Adventist church, because he is himself a Methodist. He simply looked at his own church from a historical perspective and warned that what has happened to the Methodist church can happen to the Adventist church.

It was in the same spirit that I wrote my article about the crisis of the WCG. My intent was to reflect on the lessons to be learned from the recent developments that have occurred in the WCG. I had no intention to exploit your crisis, but simply to understand the causes in order to learn how to avoid similar consequences. There is a big difference between examining the crisis of a church to learn possible lessons and exploiting such crisis to the advantage of one's own church.

THE LESSON OF HISTORY FOR THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD

What concerns me, Pastor Tkach, is that you may be so involved in making history that it may be difficult for you to learn the lesson of history. You say, for example, "Gone are our obsession with a legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament. . . . We have embraced and now champion the New Testament's central theme: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. . . . We teach salvation by grace, based on faith alone, without resort to works of any kind" (The Plain Truth, February 1996, p. 1). By the way saving faith is never alone, because, as Paul puts it, it is a "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). Your triumphalistic interpretation of the doctrinal changes you and your father have introduced to the WCG, may make it difficult for you at this point to understand the lesson of history, namely, that by rejecting your old doctrines and liberalizing church standards you may be paving the way for the gradual dismantling of your church.

The impression I get from reading the material you and your associates have produced is that you interpret the freedom of the Gospel as freedom for your members to pursue their inclinations. They are free to rest or to work on the Sabbath, they are free to go to church or to the shopping mall on the Sabbath, they are free to tithe or not to tithe, they are free to eat clean or unclean meat, they are free to observe pagan holidays like Easter and Christmas, or Biblical Holy Days like Passover and Tabernacles, they are free to use or not to use excessive cosmetics and jewelry.

Several of the letters I received from your supporters express a sense of satisfaction over this new-found freedom. This was confirmed to me also by a recent conversation with a WCG member whom I met while visiting my son in Arlington, Virginia. When I asked him how he viewed the doctrinal changes of the WCG, he said: "I have no problems with them. They make my life much easier. Before I had problems with the Sabbath because of my job as a security officer. Now I have no more problems because I am free to do what I like. I can work on the Sabbath without any sense of guilt and I can go to church when I am free."

Freedom of the Gospel. This interpretation of the freedom of the Gospel as freedom to pursue on the Sabbath one's personal pleasure and profit, rather than the presence and peace of God, can have disastrous consequences for the future of the WCG. It can weaken the commitment of your members to God and their church. Let me use an example to illustrate my point. Some time ago I was invited by the Seventh-day Baptist Church to speak in Rhode Island at a rally of about 50 of their pastors from the Eastern States. As I listened to the pastors discussing some of their doctrinal beliefs, it soon became evident that there was a great diversity of beliefs and great freedom in interpreting the nature of the Gospel. Even the Sabbath was viewed by some more as a holiday than a holy day. When I asked them how did they feel about so much diversity in their church, one of them replied: "This is what makes our Seventh-day Baptist Church great. Members can believe and do what they like and still be members of the church." Do doctrinal diversity and moral permissiveness really make a church great? The historical record of the Seventh-day Baptist Church speaks for itself. As the church became more permissive in its beliefs and practices, its membership gradually declined from about 100,000 at the turn of the century to less than 10,000 at the present time. Can the same thing happen to the WCG? No one can tell for sure. Much depends upon the way you, Pastor Tkach, and your close associates interpret and translate your new understanding of the Gospel into the practical life-style of your members. The more permissive your church becomes in its beliefs and practices, the more it will lose its identity, mission, and purpose for existence.

I would urge you, Pastor Tkach, to reflect seriously upon these insightful observations by Dean Kelly: "There need to be a few rather rigorous and specific demands in every religious group to bolster its explanation of life and make it convincing, because convincingness derives from seriousness, which derives from strictness. How can a religion expect anyone to take it seriously if it doesn't take itself seriously? . . . Effective religious faith requires that you do something different, that you be something different, than you would otherwise do or be if you didn't have it. It must make some significant difference in your life, something that will cost you a lot, because that's what makes religion work. If it doesn't cost, it can't be worth much" (Adventists Affirm, Spring 1991, pp. 49, 56). Are the doctrinal changes that you and your father have introduced making the religious life of our members more or less costly, more or less serious, more or less different from the life of society in general? These are questions you may

wish to ponder.

FAILURE TO HEAR YOUR SIDE OF THE STORY

You and some of your supporters feel that in researching for my article I "chose to believe what some in the United Church of God told you [that is, me] without seeking to verify their claims." Some allege that my failure to consult your office has resulted in some misrepresentations on my part. For example, the figure I gave in the internet of about 50,000 people who left the WCG is allegedly exaggerated. This hardly seems to be the case because the figures that you, Pastor Tkach, gave on your recent interview with radio talk show host Hank Hanegraaff, suggest that the estimate given to me was actually low. You estimate that 30,000 to 35,000 people have left and joined "splinter groups," with some 40,000 still "sitting on the sidelines doing nothing." This means that between 70,000 to 75,000 members have left the WCG, which is much more than the figure I quoted.

Similarly it is not true that I made no effort to contact your office to hear your side of the story. The truth of the matter is that I did contact your office last year. In fact if you check the correspondence you will find that I offered to come to Pasadena to meet and talk with your father. It was your local WCG pastor that suggested that I contact your office, which I did. The person with whom I spoke was Mr. Carroll Miller. He requested my three Sabbath books and discussed with your father my proposed visit. A few days later he wrote to me a letter expressing appreciation for the books received but he informed me that it would not be advisable for me to visit your office. Thus it is not fair to say that I made no attempt to contact you to hear your side of the story.

Furthermore, my contacts have not been limited to ministers and members of the United Church of God. Many WCG ministers have called me to order my Sabbath books and have discussed with me some of the issues they are facing. Even this past week I had a lengthy conversation with a local elder who still belongs to the WCG. He expressed his satisfaction with some of the changes and his disappointment over others. At this point he is not sure whether he will stay in the WCG or join another Sabbathkeeping church. He mentioned that there are many members like him who are still undecided.

I should also mention that I did receive some of the study papers issued by your office, like the one on the "Sabbath," dated May 2, 1995. Thus my evaluation of your interpretation of Scripture is based also on my reading of the literature produced by your office.

THE INFLUENCE OF LIBERAL THEOLOGIANS

What seems to have displeased you most in my article, Pastor Tkach, is my reference to the influence of three key liberal theologians who have been largely responsible for the doctrinal changes in your church. The three theologians I am referring to, as you know, are yourself and your two close associates, Greg Albrecht, editor of Plain Truth, and Mike Feazell, director of Church Administration. You strongly resent my labelling you and your associates as "liberal theologians," because, to use your own words "we have based all of our changes on the Scriptures." The problem that I see is my failure to define my understanding of "liberal theologians." For this failure I apologize. In my view there are two different types of "liberal theologians." On the one hand there are those who accept the higher critical method of Biblical interpretation and consequently reject a priori the notion of any supernatural revelation and

inspiration of the Bible. For them the teachings of the Bible are of only relative value because they are the product of human religious insight rather than divine revelation. It is evident that you and your associates do not belong to this group. On the other hand there are those who in theory accept the divine revelation and inspiration of the Bible, but in practice they find ways to explain away some of its fundamental teachings. For lack of a better term I will call this second group "Evangelical Liberals." From the reading of your material I have reason to believe that you and your associates belong to this group.

Evangelical liberals are present in practically all the evangelical seminaries and churches. My own Seventh-day Adventist church is not an exception. For example, in the ongoing discussion of women's role in the church, some Adventist theologians explain away the Biblical teaching on role distinctions as being culturally conditioned and consequently not applicable to our time. In my writings I have endeavored to show that the reasons given by Paul for his teachings on role distinctions, are not cultural but creational.

THE SABBATH AS AN EXAMPLE OF LIBERAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

To give some concrete examples of liberal method in your Biblical interpretation, I will refer to your exegesis of three Sabbath texts examined in the study paper on the "Sabbath," released by the WCG on May 2, 1995. The paper recycles the arguments against the Sabbath presented by Robert Brinsmead in *Verdict*, Dale Ratzlaff in *Sabbath in Crisis*, and the symposium *From Sabbath to Lord's Day* edited by D. A. Carson. Anyone interested in my extensive analysis of these arguments is welcome to read my Sabbath books, especially *The Sabbath in the New Testament*. In this open letter I will limit myself to your exegesis of Genesis 2:2-3, Mark 2:27, and Hebrew 4:9, to exemplify the liberal method of interpreting the Bible. I have chosen these three texts because their probative value for the creation origin of the Sabbath which is negated by your method of interpretation.

Genesis 2:2-3. Your paper challenges the creation origin of the Sabbath by arguing that Genesis 2:2-3 "does not say that humans were told to follow God's example. It does not say that humans were told to rest . . ." (p. 1). I find this method of interpreting the Bible liberal because it ignores the witness of the rest of the Bible. In Exodus 20:8-11 humans are explicitly told to follow the example of God by working six days and resting the seventh day. Your argument makes Moses guilty of distortion of truth or, at least, a victim of gross misunderstanding. He traced the Sabbath back to creation when in reality it was his own new creation. Such a charge, if true, would cast serious doubts on the integrity and/or reliability of anything else Moses or anyone else wrote in the Bible.

May I ask you, Pastor Tkach, What is it that makes any divine precept moral and universal? Do we not regard a law moral when it reflects God's nature? Could God have given any stronger revelation of the moral nature of the Sabbath than by making it a rule of His divine conduct? Is a principle established by divine example less binding than one enunciated by a divine command? Do not actions speak louder than words? The reason for the absence of a divine command to observe the Sabbath in Genesis 2:2-3 is to be found in the very nature of the book. Remember that Genesis is a book of origins and not a book of commandments.

Mark 2:27. In Mark 2:27 we find a fundamental Sabbath pronouncement of Christ: "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath." Surprisingly your paper argues: "Jesus

did not say when the Sabbath came into existence. Nothing in the context indicates that Jesus was alluding to creation week. We cannot assume that something made for humans necessarily had to be made immediately after humans were. . . . We cannot assume that it [the Sabbath] was made at creation, nor that it hasn't been superseded by a better blessing in the new covenant" (pp.11-12). Your conclusion is that the value of the Sabbath "has been eclipsed by Christ" (p. 11).

I ask you, Pastor Tkach, "Was it necessary for Jesus to say 'when the Sabbath came into existence' when He said that it was made for our human well-being?" Your suggestion that God could have established it later, presumably at the time of Moses, presupposes that He saw a need for it later. Such reasoning makes God shortsighted, to say the least. Why would God establish the Sabbath long after the human creation, when He already knew that it was essential to human well-being? Does God learn as He goes along, as we humans do?

Our Lord's choice of words is significant. The verb "made-ginomai" alludes to the original "making" of the Sabbath and the word "man-anthropos" suggests its human function. Thus to establish the human and universal value of the Sabbath, Christ reverts to its very origin, right after the creation of man. Why? Because for the Lord the law of the beginning stands supreme.

The importance of God's original design is emphasized in another instance when in reproving the corruption of the institution of marriage, which occurred under the Mosaic code, Christ reverted to its Edenic origin, saying: "From the beginning it was not so" (Matt 19:8). Christ then traces both marriage and the Sabbath to their creation origin in order to clarify their fundamental value and function for mankind. Contrary to what your paper says that "the value [of the Sabbath] has been eclipsed by Christ" (p. 11), by this memorable affirmation Christ establishes its permanent validity by appealing to its original creation when God determined its intended function for the well-being of mankind.

Hebrews 4:9. Your exegesis of Hebrews 4:9 will serve as the last xample of liberal interpretation of Scripture which negates the creation-origin and universality of the Sabbath. The text reads: "So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God." Your study paper recognizes that the Greek term for "Sabbath rest," sabbatismos, "clearly refers to the weekly Sabbath" (p. 22), but it argues for a figurative interpretation, namely, as a symbol of the salvation rest to be found in Christ. The reason given is that "if the author wanted to talk about the Sabbath day, he could have used the word for Sabbath. If he wanted to talk about keeping a law, he could have said that, too. But he did not use those words because he is not talking about the Sabbath day itself. . . . Hebrews 4 is not exhorting us to keep a weekly Sabbath, but to enter the rest of God by having faith in Christ" (p. 22).

This attempt to negate Sabbathkeeping by reducing it to the salvation rest we experience in Christ ignores several important points. First, it ignores the historical usage of the term "sabbatismos-Sabbath rest." This term occurs only in this text in the New Testament, but it is used several times as a technical term for Sabbathkeeping in post-canonical literature by Plutarch, Justin, Epiphanius, the Apostolic Constitutions and the Martyrdom of Peter and Paul.

A. T. Lincoln, one of the contributors to the symposium *From Sabbath to the Lord's Day* used as a major resource for your study paper, acknowledges that in each of the above instances "the term denotes the observance or celebration of the Sabbath. This usage corresponds to the Septuagint usage of the cognate verb sabbatizo (cf. Ex 16:23; Lev 23:32; 26:34f.; 2 Chron 36:21), which also has reference to Sabbath observance. Thus the writer to the Hebrews is saying that since the time of Joshua an observance of Sabbath rest has been outstanding" ("Sabbath, Rest, and

Eschatology in the New Testament," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, ed. Donald A. Carson (Grand Rapids, 1982), p. 204).

The Nature of the Sabbath Rest. Second, the nature of the "Sabbath rest" that is still outstanding for God's people (4:9) is clarified in verse 10 which describes the basic characteristic of Christian Sabbathkeeping, namely, cessation from work: "For whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from his" (4:10). The point of the analogy is simply that as God ceased on the seventh day from His creation work, so believers are to cease on the same day from their labors. This is a simple statement of the nature of Sabbathkeeping which essentially involves cessation from works. Thus, both the reference to cessation from work found in v. 10 and the term "sabbatismos-Sabbathkeeping" used in v. 9 make it abundantly clear that the writer is thinking of a literal Sabbath observance.

Third,, your interpretation fails to recognize that the recipients of the Epistle (whether Gentiles or Jewish-Christians) were so attracted to Jewish liturgy (of which the Sabbath was a fundamental part) that it was unnecessary for the author to discuss or to encourage its actual observance. What those Christian "Hebrews" actually needed, tempted as they were to turn back to Judaism, was to understand the deeper meaning of its observance in the light of Christ's coming.

The deeper meaning of the Sabbath can be seen in the antithesis the author makes between those who failed to enter into God's rest because of "unbelief-apeitheias" (4:6, 11)-that is, faithlessness which results in disobedience-and those who enter it by "faith-pistei" (4:2, 3), that is, faithfulness that results in obedience. For the author of Hebrews the act of resting on the Sabbath is not merely a routine ritual (cf. "sacrifice"-Matt 12:7), but rather a faith-response to God. Such a response entails not the hardening of one's heart (4:7) but the making of oneself available to "hear his voice" (4:7). It means experiencing God's salvation rest not by works but by faith, not by doing but by being saved through faith (4:2, 3, 11). On the Sabbath, as John Calvin aptly expresses it, believers are "to cease from their work to allow God to work in them" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, 1972), vol. 2, p. 337). The Sabbath rest that remains for the people of God (4:9) is not a mere day of idleness for the author of Hebrews, but rather an opportunity renewed every week to enter God's rest, that is, to free oneself from the cares of work in order to experience freely by faith God's creation and redemption rest.

Fourth, your spiritual interpretation of the Sabbath rest ignores the fact that while Hebrews declares the Levitical priesthood and its services "abolished" (10:9), "obsolete" and "ready to vanish away" (8:13), it explicitly presents the "Sabbath rest" as a divine benefit that still "remains" (4:9). The verb "remains-apoleipetai," literally means "to be left behind." Literally translated verse 9 reads: "So then a Sabbath rest is left behind for the people of God." The permanence of the Sabbath is also implied in the exhortation to "strive to enter that rest" (4:11). The fact that one must make efforts "to enter that rest" implies that the "rest" experience of the Sabbath also has a future realization and consequently cannot have terminated with the coming of Christ. This dimension of the future Sabbath rest shows that Sabbathkeeping in Hebrews expresses the tension between the "already" and the "not yet," between the present experience of salvation and its eschatological consummation in the heavenly Canaan.

The foregoing analysis of your interpretation of three Sabbath texts should suffice to show what I perceive to be some of the weaknesses of your "liberal" method of Biblical interpretation. This method has been largely determined by your adoption of the New Covenant theology, to which we must now turn our attention.

THE MEANING AND IMPLICATIONS OF YOUR NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

Pastor Tkach, the doctrinal changes that you and your father have introduced have largely been dictated by your new understanding of the difference between the Old and New Covenants. For the sake of brevity and clarity, I will endeavor first to state what I perceive to be your understanding of the nature and ethical implications of the Old and New Covenants, and then to show what I consider to be the major fallacies of this position. My summary of your position is based on some of the papers your office has released, especially the Pastor General's Report of December 21, 1994, titled *The New Covenant and the Sabbath*, which devotes about 20 pages to explaining to your ministers the difference between the two covenants.

Your Understanding of the Two Covenants. Your Report defines the covenant as "a formal agreement . . . or a relationship between God and a human individual or nation" (p. 1). It argues that in the Old Testament the covenant with Abraham was "unconditional," that is, without obedience as a requirement, while the covenant with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai was conditional upon obedience. God's covenant with Abraham was unconditional because "God didn't say, I'll do this if you do that. Abraham had already done enough. He had accepted God's call, went to the land as God had commanded, and he believed God and was therefore counted as righteous" (p. 2). This statement contains a glaring contradiction. On the one hand it says that God's covenant with Abraham was unconditional. On the other hand it says that God made a covenant with Abraham because the latter accepted God's call and did what God commanded him to do. If God made a covenant with Abraham because he obeyed, then it was not unconditional.

Genesis 17:1-2 clearly indicates that God's covenant with Abraham was conditional upon obedience: "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you." The call to obedience is part of the covenant process. There is no such thing as unconditional salvation. Salvation is free to those who freely accept it, by living in accordance with God's principles by His enabling grace.

The Report argues that the covenant God made with the Israelites at Sinai was conditional, because it was based on the people's commitment to obey. "The Abrahamic covenant had emphasized God's promise, and the Sinai covenant emphasized human responsibility" (p. 4). The Ten Commandments and the Sabbath in particular formed "the core of the Sinaitic, or old covenant. . . . The Sabbath was a perpetual reminder of the covenant that Israel made at Mt. Sinai" (p. 5). Briefly stated, the Report implies that in the Old Testament God offered salvation to Abraham on the basis of faith in His promise but to the Israelites at Sinai on the basis of obedience to His commandments. The fallacies I perceive in such reasoning will be mentioned below.

According to the Report "there was something wrong with the Old Covenant" (p. 5). "The Old Covenant is set aside because it was weak. It could not make anyone perfect. It could not change their hearts" (p. 8). The problem was that the Israelites "didn't have the heart to obey-and God knew it from the very start. Therefore another covenant was needed" (p. 6). Pastor Tkach, if God knew it from the start that it wouldn't work, why did He give it in the first place? Why did He give a faulty covenant that could not change the hearts of the people? Was the problem with the covenant itself or with the way the people related to the covenant? We shall address these questions below.

The Report says that the advantage of the New Covenant is that "each person will want to obey God, not because of some list of rules written down somewhere, but because he or she has

an obedient attitude—a circumcised heart, God calls it. The laws will be internalized. People will keep the spirit of the law. They will be in allegiance with God, no longer in rebellion against him. . . . God will forgive His people without need for sacrifices" (p. 6). Do you mean to say that New Covenant Christians in general have a more obedient attitude than the Jews? If that were true, how do you explain the fact that the rate of divorce, spouse and child abuse, alcoholism, etc., is just as high among Christians today as among non-Christians? Is it perhaps because the "cheap grace" approach of the New Covenant theology does not work? Are you sure that in the Old Testament God's law was not meant to be internalized as in the New Covenant? What about the appeal of the prophets to internalize God's law (Jer 31:31-34; 32:37-41; Ez 36:26; 16:60)?

The Report indicates that the Old Covenant did not work because it was based "on a package of laws" that "could not cleanse a guilty conscience" (p. 6). On the other hand, the New Covenant works because it is based on the blood of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. "The Holy Spirit changes their [God's people] hearts. The people are transformed, and they grow more and more like Christ. . . . The New Covenant affects our innermost being. The blood of Jesus Christ changes us.

. . . His sacrifice sanctifies us, makes us holy, sets us aside for a holy purpose" (p. 7). Are you saying that the blood of Christ has some kind of magic power that automatically changes anyone who believes in Him? Are you attributing the same kind of magic power to the Spirit and to the Blood that the Jews attributed to the Law? Isn't this another form of legalism?

The Report says that the fundamental difference between the Old and New Covenants is that the Old was based on obedience to God's laws, while the New is based on faith. "In the New Covenant, faith is required" (p. 8). "Christians have a relationship with God based on faith, not on law. . . . We are saved on the basis of faith, not on law-keeping, . . . In other words, our relationship with God is based on faith and promise, just as Abraham's was. Laws that were added at Sinai cannot change the promise given to Abraham . . . That package of laws became obsolete when Christ died, and there is now a new package" (p. 11). The Sabbath is part of the old package of laws and this is why "we don't find the Sabbath commanded in the New Covenant" (Pastor General's Report, January 5, 1995, p. 1). May I ask you, Pastor Tkach, Can a person truly obey God's laws without faith? Is there such a thing as a saving faith that is not manifested in obedience to God's commandments? Is the problem of legalism resolved by changing packages of laws?

Evaluation of the New Covenant Theology. A detailed analysis of New Covenant theology espoused in your literature would require far more space than this open letter allows. I will limit myself to a few fundamental observations. If you or your members, wish me to prepare a more detailed analysis, I would be glad to work on such a project as a labor of love. Feel free to express your interest on this matter. My latest book *God's Festivals in Scripture and History* came about as a result of the many requests I received from your people to reexamine the question of the Holy Days. The fact that I changed my views on this subject shows that I try to approach the study of the Word of God with an open mind.

A fundamental problem that I see with your New Covenant theology is the faulty assumption that during the course of human history God has offered salvation to different bases at different people. God started out by offering salvation to Abraham unconditionally on the basis of faith, but at Mt. Sinai He agreed to save the Israelites conditionally on the basis of obedience to His commandments. When God discovered that such an arrangement did not work, because the law

"could not make anyone perfect. It could not change their hearts," He decided to revert to the "faith arrangement" He had worked out with Abraham. To make it easier, in the New Covenant God did away with most of the package of the Old Covenant's laws, including the Sabbath, and decided this time to work in the heart through the Holy Spirit.

If this scenario were true, it would surely open to question the consistency and fairness of God. It would imply that in redemptive history God has offered salvation on two radically different bases: on the basis of human obedience in the Old Covenant and on the basis of divine grace in the New Covenant. It would further imply that presumably God learned through the experience of His chosen people, the Jews, that human beings cannot earn salvation by obedience because they tend to disobey. Thus, He finally decided to change His method and implement a New Covenant plan where salvation is offered to believing persons as a divine gift rather than a human achievement.

Such a theological construct makes God changeable and subject to learning by mistakes as human beings do. The truth of the matter is that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb 13:8). Salvation has always been in the Old and New Covenants first and foremost a divine gift of grace and not a human achievement. No man or woman will ever be saved because of what they have done.

Sinai Covenant: Law and Grace. Part of the problem is your failure to realize that the Sinai Covenant reveals God's gracious provision of salvation just as much as the New Covenant. Note that God revealed to Moses His plan to deliver Israel from Egypt and to set her up in the land of Canaan (Ex 3:7-10, 16), because Israel is "His people" (Ex 3:10). God's deliverance of the Israelites from the bondage of Egypt reveals His gracious provision of salvation just as much as does His deliverance of Christians from the bondage of sin. Note that the Israelites responded with faith to the manifestation of salvation: "Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians . . . and the people feared the Lord; and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses" (Ex 14:30-31). When the Israelites believed, God revealed to them His covenant plan: "Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex 19:5).

These words show the gratuity of the divine election of Israel. God chose Israel without merit on her part (Deut 9:4ff), simply because He loved her (Deut 7:6ff). Having separated her from pagan nations, He reserved her for Himself exclusively. "I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself" (Ex 19:4). Through the Sinai covenant God wished to bring people to Himself by making them a worshipping community dedicated to His service, living by the principles of His Law. This divine plan revealed at Sinai was ultimately realized at the Cross when types met antitypes.

The prophets appeal to the Sinai Covenant with emotional overtones drawn from human experiences, to explain the relationship between God and His people. Israel is the flock, and the Lord is the shepherd. Israel is the vine, and the Lord the vinedresser. Israel is the son and the Lord is the Father. Israel is the spouse, and the Lord is the bridegroom. These images, as The Dictionary of Biblical Theology remarks, "make the Sinaitic covenant appear as an encounter of love (cf. Ez 16:6-14): the attentive and gratuitous love of God, calling in return for a love which will translate itself in obedience" ("Covenant," p. 95).

Faith is not Alone. The obedience called for by the Sinaitic covenant was meant to be a

loving response to God's provision of salvation, and not a means of salvation. Unfortunately, in time the Law came to be viewed as the guarantee of salvation, just as Faith alone is considered a guarantee for many Christians today. But saving faith is never alone, it always accompanied by loving obedience (Gal 5:6). Such distortions make the Old and New Covenant ineffective for many people.

Please note, Pastor Tkach, that at Sinai God invited His people to obey His commandments because He had saved them, not so that they might be saved by His laws. As George Eldon Ladd puts it in his classic work *A Theology of the New Testament*, "The Law was added (pareiselthen) not to save men from their sins but to show them what sin was (Rom 3:30; 5:13, 20; Gal 3:19). By declaring the will of God, by showing what God forbids, the Law shows what sin is" (p. 507). Ladd rightly explains that "the line of thought in Galatians 3 and Romans 4 is that all the Israelites who trusted God's covenant of promise to Abraham and did not use the Law as a way of salvation by works were assured of salvation" (p. 507).

Another point overlooked in the Report is that at Sinai God revealed to the Israelites not only principles of moral conduct but also provision of salvation through the typology of the sacrificial system. It is noteworthy that when God invited Moses to come up on the mountain, He gave him not only "the tables of stone, with the law and the commandment" (Ex 24:12), but also the "pattern of the tabernacle" (Ex 25:9), which was designed to explain typologically His provision of grace and forgiveness.

The major difference between the Old and New Covenants is not one of methods of salvation, but, we might say, of shadow versus reality. The Old Covenant was "symbolic" (Heb 9:9) of the "more excellent" redemptive ministry of Christ (Heb 8:6). Consequently, it was necessary for Christ to come "once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26).

The effect of Christ's coming is described as "setting aside" (Heb 7:18), making "obsolete" (Heb 8:13), "abolishing" (Heb 10:9) all the Levitical services associated with the Old Covenant. It is unfortunate that you interpret these statements as indicating that Christ by His coming has abrogated most of the Old Testament laws, including the Sabbath. This interpretation ignores the fact that such statements deal with the Levitical priesthood and services of the Old Covenant, and not with the principles of God's moral law, which includes the Fourth Commandment.

It is noteworthy that while Hebrews declares the typological services of the Old Covenant as "abolished" (10:9), "obsolete" and "ready to vanish away" (8:13), it explicitly teaches, as I have shown earlier that a "Sabbathkeeping is left behind for the people of God" (4:9).

PAUL AND THE LAW

The practical implications of your New Covenant theology are manifested in your teachings that Christians are no longer under the law, but under grace, consequently they are no longer bound to observe most of the Old Covenant package of laws, including the Sabbath. To support this view, your reports and study papers frequently appeal to those Pauline passages which speak negatively of the law. Unfortunately your published material makes no attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction between Paul's condemnation and commendation of the Law. Let me share with you few thoughts on my attempt to resolve the "double concept of the law" in the writings of Paul.

In Ephesians 2:15, Paul speaks of the law as having been "abolished" by Christ, while in

Romans 3:31 he explains that justification by faith in Jesus Christ does not overthrow the law but "establishes" it. In Romans 7:6, he states that "now we are discharged from the law" while a few verses later he writes that "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (7:12).

In Romans 10:4, Paul writes that "Christ is the end of the law" while in chapter 8:3-4, he explains that Christ came "in the likeness of sinful flesh . . . in order that the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us." In Romans 3:28 he maintains that "a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law," yet in 1 Corinthians 7:19 he states that "neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God." In 2 Corinthians 3:7 Paul designates the law as "the dispensation of death" while in Romans 3:2 he views it as part of the "oracles of God" entrusted to the Jews.

How can we reconcile Paul's apparently contradictory statements about the law? How can Paul view the law both as "abolished" (Eph 2:15) and "established" (Rom 3:31), unnecessary (Rom 3:28) and necessary (1 Cor 7:19; Eph 6:2, 3; 1 Tim 1:8-10)? The solution is to be found in the different contexts in which Paul speaks of the law. When he speaks of the law in the context of salvation (justification-right standing before God), he clearly affirms that law-keeping is of no avail (Rom 3:20).

On the other hand, when Paul speaks of the law in the context of Christian conduct (sanctification-right living before God), then he maintains the value and validity of God's law (Rom 7:12; 13:8-10; 1 Cor 7:19). For example, when Paul speaks of the various forms of human wickedness in 1 Timothy 1:8-10, he explicitly affirms that "now we know that the law is good" (v. 8).

The Cross of Christ. Central to Paul's understanding of the law is the Cross of Christ. From this perspective, he both negates and affirms the law. Negatively, the Apostle repudiates the law as the basis of justification: "if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose" (Gal 2:21).

Positively, Paul teaches that the law is "spiritual, good, holy, just" (Rom 7:12, 14, 16; 1 Tim 1:8) because it exposes sin and reveals God's ethical standards. Thus, he states that Christ came "in order that the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us" through the dynamic power of His Spirit (Rom 8:4).

Three times Paul states: "neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision" and each time he concludes this statement with a different phrase: "but keeping the commandments of God . . . but faith working through love . . . but a new creation" (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15).

The parallelism suggests that Paul equates the keeping of God's commandments with a working faith and a new life in Christ. The Christian, then, is not under the law as a method of salvation but is under the law as a standard for Christian conduct.

To see Paul's criticism of the law in perspective, it is important to realize that Paul's letters were written to congregations made up predominantly of Gentile converts, most of whom were former "God-fearers" (1 Thess 1:9; 1 Cor 12:2; Gal 4:8; Rom 11:13; 1:13; Col 1:21; Eph 2:11). A crucial problem among Gentile Christians was their right as Gentiles to enjoy full citizenship among the people of God, without becoming members of the covenant community through circumcision.

Gentile Legalism. Lloyd Gaston perceptively notes that "it was because of this unclarity that legalism-the doing of certain works to win God's favor and be counted righteous-arose a Gentile

and not a Jewish problem at all" ("Paul and the Torah" in *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. by Alan T. Davis [New York, 1979], p. 58). Salvation was for all who were members of the covenant community, but since the God-fearers were not under the covenant, they had to establish their own righteousness to gain such an assurance of salvation.

Marcus Barth has shown that the phrase "works of the law" is not found in Jewish texts and designates the adoption of selected Jewish practices by the Gentiles to ensure their salvation as part of the covenant people of God (Ephesians (Anchor Bible, 1974), pp. 244-248). Recognition of this legalistic Gentile attitude is important to our understanding of the background of Paul's critical remarks about the law.

Before his conversion and divine commission to the Gentiles, Paul apparently believed that Gentiles had to conform to the whole Mosaic law, including circumcision, in order for them to be saved. This is suggested by the phrase "but if I still preach circumcision" (Gal 5:11), which implies that at one time he did preach circumcision as a basis of salvation.

After his conversion and divine commission to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, Paul understood that Gentiles share in the blessing of salvation without having to become part of the covenant community through circumcision. To defend this conviction, Paul appeals in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 to the example of Abraham who became the father of all who believe by faith before he was circumcised.

In proclaiming his non-circumcision Gospel, Paul faced a double challenge. On the one hand, he faced the opposition of Jews and Jewish Christians because they failed to understand ("Israel did not understand"-Rom 10:19) that through Christ, God had fulfilled His promises to Abraham regarding the Gentiles. On the other hand, Paul had to deal with the misguided efforts of the Gentiles who were tempted to adopt circumcision and other practices to ensure their salvation by becoming members of the covenant community (Gal 5:2-4).

Law as Document of Election. To counteract the double challenge from Jewish and Gentile Christians, Paul was forced to speak critically of the law as a document of election. Several scholars have recently shown that the concept of the covenant-so central in the Old Testament-came more and more to be expressed by the term "law" (torah-nomos). One's status before God came to be determined by one's attitude toward the Law (torah-nomos) as a document of election and not by obedience to specific commandments.

The law came to mean a revelation of God's electing will manifested in His covenant with Israel. Obviously this view created a problem for the uncircumcised Gentiles because they felt excluded from the assurance of salvation provided by the covenant. This insecurity naturally led Gentiles to "desire to be under law" (Gal 4:21), that is, to become full-fledged covenant members by receiving circumcision (Gal 5:2). Paul felt compelled to react strongly against this trend because it undermined the universality of the Gospel.

To squelch the Gentiles' "desire to be under law," Paul appeals to the Law (Pentateuch), specifically to Abraham, to argue that the mothers of his two children, Ishmael and Isaac, stand for two covenants: the first based on works and the second on faith (Gal 4:22-31), the first offering "slavery" and the second resulting in "freedom." Hagar who bears "children of slavery," is identified with the covenant of Mount Sinai (Gal 4:24).

Why does Paul attack so harshly the Sinai covenant which, as we have seen, contained provisions of grace and forgiveness (for example, tabernacle-Ex 25-30) besides principles of conduct (Ex 20-23)? The answer to these questions is to be found in Paul's concern to establish

the legitimacy of the salvation of the Gentiles as Gentiles.

To accomplish this goal, Paul attacks the understanding of the law (covenant) as an exclusive document of election. This does not mean that he denies the possibility of salvation to Jews who accepted Christ as the fulfillment of the Sinai covenant. On the contrary, he explicitly acknowledges that just as he was "entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised," so "Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised" (Gal 2:7).

To defend his Gospel to the uncircumcised, Paul emphasizes that justification (right standing with God) is "by faith apart from works of law" (Rom 3:28; Gal 3:8). It is noteworthy that while the term "justification" and words related to it occur in Paul's writings over eighty times, the terms "forgiveness" and "repentance" are spectacularly absent. Why? One reason is suggested by the fact that "repentance" implied turning back to the God of the covenant, but Paul was appealing to the Gentiles to turn to God for the first time.

The foregoing considerations suggest that Paul does not attack the validity and value of the law as a moral guide to Christian conduct. On the contrary, he emphatically affirms that Christ specifically came "in order that the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us" (Rom 8:4). What Paul criticizes is not the moral but the soteriological understanding of the law, that is, the law viewed as a document of election that includes the Jews and excludes the Gentiles.

In the papers sent out by your office, Pastor Tkach, I see a failure to distinguish in Paul's writing between his moral and soteriological usages of the law. There is also a failure to recognize that Paul's criticism of the law is directed not toward Jewish Christians but toward Gentile Judaizers. Such a failure has led many to conclude fallaciously that Paul is an antinomian who rejected the value and validity of the law as a whole. Such a view is totally unwarranted because, as mentioned earlier, Paul rejects the law as a method of salvation but upholds it as a moral standard of Christian conduct.

CHANGES NEEDED IN THE METHODS AND STRUCTURE OF THE WCG

In closing this open letter I would like to briefly address two questions: (1) The method you have used to implement the doctrinal changes in the WCG, and (2) The organizational structure of your church.

A Democratic Method to Introduce Doctrinal Changes. In your letter, Pastor Tkach, you reject my suggestion that doctrinal changes should be widely discussed and adopted only with the broad support of the membership. You feel that "some things are so morally reprehensible that consensus is out of the question. . . . Paul did not wait for consensus to proclaim the gospel unadulterated with Judaism. Neither should we."

Pastor Tkach, may I remind you that you are not the Apostle Paul. Furthermore Paul himself did lay before the brethren "the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain" (Gal 2:2). If Paul felt that he would be running in vain without gaining approval for his "Gospel of the uncircumcision" (Gal 2:7) from the leaders of the church, don't you think that it would be wise for you to submit your new-found truths to your ministerial council or a representative body of your church?

A person appointed to serve as the leader of a church accepts the responsibility to uphold the beliefs and practices of the church. If the leader perceives that radical changes are needed, he should work to gain consensus from the bottom up and not dictate changes from the top down. Remember, you were appointed to administer your church, and not to use your position of

authority start a new church.

If I as a teacher were to use my classes to promote new teachings that are contrary to the beliefs of my church that pays my salary, I would be betraying the trust of those who have appointed me. The only ethical thing for me to do would be to resign and look for a job elsewhere. Pastor Tkach, the moment when you felt that in good conscience you could no longer subscribe to the fundamental beliefs of your church, you had two options:

- (1) Submit your new doctrines to the consideration of your ministers and members and wait for them to accept them and support you; or
- (2) If that proved impossible, you could have resigned and started your own church, like some of your ministers have done when they could not accept the doctrinal changes which your father began to introduce.

Lest I be misunderstood, I would like to make it clear I am not critical of all the doctrinal changes you have introduced. On the contrary, I believe that some of them were desperately needed. What I find unethical is the autocratic method you have used to bring about such changes.

Church Government. Your literature discusses at great length the need for doctrinal changes but is notably silent about the need for changes in the government of the church. This surprises me because you have a great desire to bring your church back to the teachings and practices of apostolic Christianity. Yet I find no support in the Apostolic church for such an autocratic form of church government. I never read of an apostolic church leader who appointed his son to take his place. This was true of kings but not of church leaders. When later during the Middle Ages church leaders appointed relatives to church positions, this practice was condemned as nepotism.

It is only in the Old Testament priestly system that blood was a factor in holding an office. But that was part of the Old Covenant that you have rejected. For the sake of consistency it would be advisable for you to reject such an outdated Old Covenant practice, and adopt instead the New Covenant democratic form of church government.

Final Appeal. This open letter has become much longer than I anticipated. It is my fervent hope that God may use this dialogue to help many appreciate more fully His saving plan for our lives. Yesterday one of your WCG members who had just finished reading one of my Sabbath books called me from Canada and shared with me for almost an hour some of the things that are troubling him. He told me that he thinks you have gone too far, but he does not want to leave the WCG, because he still hopes that you might reconsider some of the doctrinal changes, especially regarding the Sabbath and Holy Days. My final appeal to you, Pastor Tkach, is that you not disappoint thousands of members like this man who are still hoping that you will reconsider some of the unacceptable changes. If I can be of any help, do not hesitate to contact me. On my part I will always be glad to meet with you and your close associates at any time you think such a meeting could be profitable.

May the Lord richly bless you and your people with His wisdom and grace.

Christian regards

Samuele Bacchocchi, Ph.D