

My Story — Why?

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Why would a fifty-one year old man choose to end a thirty-year career with an organization? Why would someone turn their “theological” back on a system of beliefs they had not only embraced personally, but taught and wrote about extensively? Why would “a big fish in a little pond” decide to give it up and begin again? Why would someone knowingly make a decision that would isolate himself from friends, peers, and community? Why give up a source of financial security for the unknown in this economy? In a word, *grace*.

From the beginning I was immersed in the ministry, leadership, and culture of the Church of God (Seventh Day). I served as a local pastor, the director of the national youth agency, district superintendent, as a member of the national board of directors, vice-president of the General Conference, as a member of the national ministerial documentation committee, a speaker and instructor for national conventions, councils, and extended learning programs, and finally as a seminary instructor.

My Resignation

In September of 2001 I resigned my membership and ministerial credential with the General Conference Church of God (Seventh Day) headquartered in Denver, Colorado. My wife, whose family membership and ministry with the church went back at least four generations, also resigned her membership.

The letter of resignation stated in part: *“After processing our spiritual and theological journey of the last six or eight years we concluded that we can no longer support the polity or works oriented doctrine of the church. We believe that we are saved by grace alone through Christ alone. We believe that sin is no longer our master because we are no longer under the law, but under grace (Romans 6:14).*

It is my hope that one day the church will truly accept the gospel without qualification — that it will one day be truly Christ-centered and grace-based. For years Deborah has been asking God to forgive the church for its unwillingness to acknowledge the fullness of the gospel — asking God to bring repentance and renewal. However, we must be realistic and finally admit that a gospel-centered, Christ-centered church is the goal of a very few. This is beyond sad.

Paul said anyone (including himself or angels) bringing a gospel PLUS message perverts the gospel and is “eternally condemned” (Galatians 1:6–9). The church’s message historically has been a gospel plus message — the gospel plus Sabbath, tithing, clean meats, three days and three nights, correct Lord’s Supper date, etc. Strides have been made, but the under-girding theology of the church continues to struggle with a grace-based, Christ-centered message. This is evidenced by reactions to new covenant articles appearing in recent Forums¹ and the NAMC² resolution affirming the church’s

¹ The Ministerial Forum is a publication of the North American Ministerial Council containing studies for the consideration of the ministerial body of the General Conference Church of God (Seventh Day).

² North American Ministerial Council. This body hears and reviews doctrinal studies. They too are responsible for making doctrinal changes to the beliefs of the church. This body drafted and approved a resolution in October 2000 that affirmed the Conference’s observance of the Ten Commandments and the seventh-day Sabbath as a part of the New Covenant.

position regarding the Ten Commandments and Sabbath observance as a part of the new covenant. That is heresy.

We leave secure in our faith with no regrets. We embark on a life in which the gospel is the main thing. We affirm that the gospel is the good news that a loving God has taken the initiative to save us by grace alone, received through faith alone, based on the perfect life, atoning death and victorious resurrection of Jesus alone – plus nothing.”

Joining the True Church

Upon joining the Church of God (Seventh Day) in July 1970, I believed I had united with God’s one true church on earth. I could reason why everyone was lost except us. Sunday keepers, feast-day keepers, pork eaters, pagan day observers, believers in the Trinity, cross wearers, mixed swimmers, movie, dance and heaven goers were all eternally lost. Everyone had doctrinal error but me. The environment of the church encouraged me to believe that without a doubt I was “in the truth.”

I successfully mastered the unspoken language and code words of the church. I could state that Jesus saves, but understood that salvation was something I couldn’t really be sure of until the resurrection at the last day — and that to stay saved I had to keep the Sabbath and all the other doctrinal distinctives that set the church apart. I understood when people asked me when I *came into the truth* that this had nothing to do with my relationship with Jesus and everything to do with my correct doctrinal beliefs — and in particular, the observance of Sabbath. Words such as *Jesus* and *saved* were rarely used because they sounded too Protestant and Evangelical. I learned to refer to Jesus as *Lord*, *Christ*, *Savior*, or better yet, *Messiah*. I knew the phrase *keeping the commandments of God* was code for Sabbath keeping. Very rarely if ever were others outside our denominational circle referred to as Christians or believers, the terms of choice were *Babylon* or *the world*. I preached the gospel; however, the gospel was understood as every thing the Bible teaches — it is not understood denominationally as salvation by grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus.

The denominational culture is one of legalism. That legalistic culture is evidenced by an emphasis on correct doctrine — on correct prophetic understanding, correct diet, correct observances, correct dates and communion emblems. The emphasis is reflected in the wording of doctrinal statements such as Sabbath, The Ten Commandments, Lord’s Supper, Pagan Holidays, Clean and Unclean Foods, State of the Dead, Financial Stewardship, The Regathering of Israel, and The Kingdom.

Becoming Grace-Based

My “aha” moment was theological in nature. I became keenly aware of the contrast between the new and old covenants while studying 2 Corinthians 3. From that point on there was no stopping the journey. The new covenant with its emphasis on salvation by grace through faith in Jesus suddenly filled my every theological thought. I now understand that the issues that dominated my thinking and the thinking of the denomination I was a part of were issues of covenant.

I now understand that grace is the basis of my salvation. Grace has always been the basis for my salvation, but now I realize it and can say it without qualification or reservation. My focus was on obeying the Law. My concept of being a worthy son of God was avoiding doing wrong things and making sure I did the right things. Today I know that it is by grace I come.

The Deciding Factor

In October 2000 the North American Ministerial Council met in Glorieta, New Mexico. Four of us were asked by the president of that body to present studies addressing the issue of the covenants for informational purposes only. It was published well in advance of the meeting that no action was to be taken on these studies. That decision was made in an attempt to alleviate fears that supposedly were circulating in the field that the church was preparing to abandon the Sabbath.

Two of the studies closely represented the church's present understanding of the covenants and two of them contrasted the two covenants and introduced the ramifications of understanding the differences between them. My particular study concentrated on how the New Testament identified and contrasted the covenants. In spite of assurances that no action would be taken, the council adopted a statement affirming the church's obedience to the Ten Commandments and the Sabbath as part of the new covenant. The reason given for the need to adopt such a statement was so the brethren in the field would be assured the council was not entertaining any suggestion of abandoning the observance of the Sabbath.

In time, this statement came to represent a closing of the doctrinal creed of the church to me. While the official position of the denomination is that the doctrinal statements of the church do not represent a closed creed, the current reality is a different matter. The line had been drawn in the sand — and that line was the Sabbath.

One year later I crossed the line and stated in the resignation letter, *"We no longer believe that the covenant made at Sinai is binding on believers (2 Corinthians 3; Galatians 4:21–31). This includes the observance of the seventh-day Sabbath. We no longer believe Sabbath observance is binding on believers — Jesus is our Sabbath rest (Matthew 11:28–30; Hebrews 4:9–11). That conclusion has nothing to do with observing one day over the other. It is not a Sabbath or Sunday issue — it is a covenant issue. It is a gospel issue. It is a salvation issue."*

Conclusion

This testimony is not intended to berate any individual(s) or their faith. This is the story of my journey. Why share it now? There was a time during my journey when I was willing to mix a little old covenant into my life. No doubt there are others who are attempting to do the same. However, the New Testament warns us to **give up** law-based lives or suffer significant spiritual consequences. True faith requires an absolutely clean break from the old covenant, replacing it with a radically new and different approach to one's commitment to Jesus. This is what Jesus had in mind when he said, ***"But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do men put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out, and the wineskins are ruined; but they put new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved."*** Matthew 9:16,17 (NASB) Jesus did not come to patch up the old covenant. He provided a new garment, not a repair job on the old one. Nor did he come to fit into the old system, but to replace it. Like new wine, Jesus and the new covenant are too powerful and alive to be confined by the old. Now you know why.

Comment: Why what? Why he is sharing it now? Or why Jesus and the new covenant are too powerful and alive to be confined by the old?