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SO YOU WANT TO BE BAPTIZED?

Perhaps you are someone who has grown up in the Church of God. Your parents are members of God's Church and you have always attended services with them. You are in full agreement with the teachings of the Church ... you can see that those teachings are based on the Bible. Now you are a young adult and you too would like to commit your life to God. So you talk to your pastor and tell him that you would like to be baptized.

Or perhaps you were searching for a meaning and a purpose for life. Somehow you came into possession of some of the literature of God's Church, or you heard a radio program or saw a television program sponsored by God's Church which aroused your curiosity. You made contact with a minister and then started attending the services of God's Church. Now that you have attended services and Bible studies for a while you would like to become a member of God's Church. And so you express your desire to be baptized to the local pastor.

Whatever the circumstances may be, if we are serious about wanting to submit our lives to God and wanting to be a part of the body of Christ, then sooner or later we must face the question of baptism.

Are you ready to be baptized? What does God require of you before you can be baptized? Are there any conditions God lays down in this regard? How can you know for sure that you are indeed ready for baptism?

THE CONDITIONS FOR BAPTISM

There are only two conditions which God lays down for those who want to be baptized. They were clearly stated by Jesus Christ at the start of His ministry. In Mark chapter 1 we read:

Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, And saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: REPENT ye, and BELIEVE the gospel. (Mark 1:14-15)

Here are the two conditions for baptism:

- 1) We must repent before we can be baptized.
- 2) We must believe (have faith in) the gospel.

Those are the only requirements God has set for those who want to be baptized.

But what about Sabbath-keeping? What about observing the Holy Days? What about tithing and not eating unclean meats? What about not smoking and not getting drunk? What about keeping all of the ten commandments? What about not using bad language and not wearing immodest clothing? What about not losing our temper? Aren't those things also "requirements" God has set for those who want to be baptized?

No, none of these things are stated as requirements for baptism. And yet they certainly DO enter the picture. So let's examine these two requirements more closely.

WE MUST BELIEVE THE GOSPEL

In New Testament Greek there is a primary verb "peitho", which means: to persuade. From this root word the noun "pistis" has been formed, and this noun "pistis" means "FAITH". It is also translated into English as "BELIEF". From this noun "pistis" the verb "pisteuo" was formed, and this verb "pisteuo" is almost always translated into English as "believe".

So when we are dealing with a noun, then usually the word "FAITH" is used; and when we are dealing with a verb, then usually the word "BELIEVE" is used. But in the New Testament they refer to exactly the same thing.

I mention this because biblically there is no difference between "faith" and "belief". They refer to the same thing.

So the one requirement for baptism is that we must believe, or have faith in, the gospel. This means that we must in faith accept the truths God has revealed to us in His Word, the Bible. We must believe the whole Bible.

As the apostle Paul explained in Hebrews ...

But WITHOUT FAITH [IT IS] IMPOSSIBLE TO PLEASE [HIM]: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and [that] he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. (Hebrews 11:6)

In this verse Paul explained that we must first of all accept ON FAITH that God exists. All of the reasoning we may use to try to "prove" God's existence cannot detract from the fact that ultimately God requires us to accept His existence ON FAITH! Yes, the reasons we can put forward to "prove" God's existence are logical, fine and sound ... but we are physical beings with specific limitations, and God is a Spirit Being who has no limitations to constrain Him; and there must of necessity always be an element of faith in accepting the existence of God. We simply cannot perceive God with any of our five senses ... and God intentionally created us with this limitation.

What Paul points out in this verse is that it is not enough for there to be "just an element of faith" in this regard. Paul makes clear that unless there is actually a strong and unshakable conviction that God does indeed exist, it will be impossible to IN ANY WAY "please God".

But it is not enough for us to have a strong conviction that God "EXISTS"! That strong conviction is only the foundation. On that foundation we must also IN FAITH accept, and be convinced of the fact, that God Himself is "FAITHFUL" ... reliable and absolutely just and dependable! We must in faith be convinced that God will indeed "REWARD" those who diligently seek Him. That is the second point Paul stated in this particular verse.

Jesus Christ's statement that we must "believe the gospel" ties closely into this last point. The gospel has to do with "the rewards" God will give to those who are "faithful". God will reward those who repent and diligently seek Him with the free gift of eternal life in His Family (that free gift cannot be "earned"); and within that Family God will also give rewards of rulership to those in the first resurrection.

So one requirement for baptism is that we IN FAITH accept that:

- 1) God exists;
- 2) God is faithful and keeps His promises;
- 3) God will reward us if we diligently seek Him;
- 4) It is God's plan to create a Family of God Beings;
- 5) God desires for us to be a part of that Family;
- 6) If we are faithful to God, then God will give us the gift of eternal life and change us into God Beings at Christ's second coming.
- 7) If we die before Christ's second coming, God will resurrect us at the time of Christ's second coming.

All this is a part of the requirement to "believe the gospel". And of these things we must be convinced!

Where some uncertainty may enter the picture is when it comes to us fulfilling our part of the agreement. We can readily see our inability to live by all of God's instructions all the time; we can see that we are weak and frail and we may wonder how we can live up to God's expectations; we can see that we really deserve death and not life ... and this is another subject which I cannot address at this particular time.

But there must never be any doubt in our minds that God might not keep His side of the agreement. Such doubts would be inexcusable. As James explained:

But let him ask in faith, NOTHING WAVERING. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For LET NOT THAT MAN THINK THAT HE SHALL RECEIVE ANY THING OF THE LORD. A double minded man [is] unstable in all his ways. (James 1:6-8)

The importance of faith in God's integrity, that God cannot lie and that God will always keep His promises, cannot be stressed too highly. That's why Paul said that without faith it is impossible to please God.

WE MUST REPENT

Now let's focus on the first of the two requirements for baptism, the need to repent.

What exactly is repentance? What does it mean?

In the New Testament the Greek verb translated as "to repent" is "metanoeo". This word is formed from the preposition "meta" (which means: with, afterwards, among, etc) and the verb "noeo" (which means: to perceive with the mind). The verb "noeo" is derived from the noun "nous", which means "mind".

So the Greek word for "repent" means:

"TO PERCEIVE WITH THE MIND AFTERWARDS".

"Perceiving AFTERWARDS" implies CHANGING the mind from the way it was thinking previously.

Notice very carefully that repenting has to do with "CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK"! Repenting does not address a person's ACTIONS ... it addresses THE WAY A PERSON THINKS! The Greek word for repenting is derived from the word for "mind" ... it is not a word that refers to actions or behaviour ... it really refers to the mind.

This is also basically borne out in the English language. The definitions for the verb "repent", as listed in Webster's Dictionary, are:

- to turn from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life;
- to feel sorrow or regret or contrition;
- to change one's mind.

Putting these points together we see that in English "repent" means:

to change one's mind, usually prompted by regret or sorrow over past conduct, and thus producing a change in one's actions away from sinful ways of living.

So notice:

In biblical Greek the word "repent" means: to change the way we think. It implies that our thought-processes were guided by different motivations before we came to repentance.

In the English language the word "repent" also has this meaning of changing the way we think. However, the English word "repent" has been expanded to also include THE CONSEQUENCES of that changed way of thinking ... that is where the turning away from sin and the amendment of one's life enters the picture.

But this expansion of the meaning of the word "repent" can easily cause some confusion. So understand this point very clearly:

WHEN GOD IN THE BIBLE COMMANDS US TO REPENT, HE IS COMMANDING US TO CHANGE THE WAY WE THINK! GOD IS FOCUSING ON OUR MINDS, AND THE WAY OUR MINDS WORK! CHANGING OUR LIVES AWAY FROM THE WAYS OF SIN IS NOT REPENTANCE ... CHANGING AWAY FROM OUR SINFUL WAYS IS ONLY A CONSEQUENCE OF REPENTANCE!

Never mistake "the consequences of repentance" with "repentance itself". There is a vast difference in these two conditions.

We human beings judge by appearances, by what we can see and hear. And that is precisely why we like to focus on the consequences of repentance when we are speaking about this subject ... because the consequences are something we can see and perceive.

BUT THAT IS NOT HOW GOD JUDGES REPENTANCE!

God always looks FIRST at the heart, at the motivation and the underlying attitude, and ONLY THEN at the actions, the consequences of repentance.

As God told the prophet Samuel ...

But the LORD said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for [the LORD seeth] not as man seeth; for MAN LOOKETH ON THE OUTWARD APPEARANCE, but THE LORD LOOKETH ON THE HEART. (1 Samuel 16:7)

Looking on the outward appearance is precisely what Webster's Dictionary has done in its first definition in assessing the word "repent" ... because that is the way PEOPLE have decided to assess the word "repent". The word refers to "turning from sinful ways and amending one's life" BY POPULAR DEMAND ... but that is not what it originally referred to. Originally the word referred to THE CAUSE for turning from sinful ways. This "cause" for changing from sinful ways has today been relegated to second place ... it is only listed as the second meaning of this word.

If you want to have a clear understanding of precisely what it is that God is instructing you to do when He commands you to repent, then always keep in mind that God looks first at your heart, and therefore He is commanding you to change the way you think! Depending on how you lived prior to responding to this command to repent, A CONSEQUENCE of that changed way of thinking may be that some, or even many, of the things you do in your daily life may also change. But that is not necessarily always the case.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN OUTWARD ACTIONS AND INNER MOTIVATIONS

Two people can do exactly the same things, and yet have totally different motivations for doing them. This is especially true when what these people are doing is something that can be classified as "good".

A right motivation will always produce right actions (I am not speaking about doing something wrong or foolish in ignorance, as was the case with king Abimelech taking Abraham's wife Sarah, see Genesis 20:5-6). But right actions are not necessarily always the result of right motivations. Wrong motivations can also produce outward actions that are right. That is precisely why Jesus Christ came TO MAGNIFY the law of God ... to point out that only those outward right actions that stem from a right inward motivation are of value in the sight of God.

The LORD is well pleased for his righteousness' sake; HE WILL MAGNIFY THE LAW, and make [it] honourable. (Isaiah 42:21)

Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I AM NOT COME TO DESTROY, BUT TO FULFIL. (Matthew 5:17)

In Matthew chapter 5 Jesus Christ illustrated this by pointing out that not committing the outward action of adultery is not enough, it is THE MIND that must be controlled to not lust after another person. To not kill someone else is not enough, it is THE MIND that must be controlled to not hate anyone.

Thus there no doubt are many people who have never killed another person and who have also never committed adultery or fornication ... but that in itself does not prove that they have "repented" before God. The same is true when applied to God's other laws. For example, in Acts chapter 2 Peter was speaking to devout Jews, all of whom diligently kept the Sabbath and the annual Holy Days, and who practised tithing and who did not eat unclean foods, and who accepted the ten commandments and tried their best to live by them ... yet Peter told them all to "REPENT" in verse 38. For these Jews their Sabbath-keeping, etc. did not in any way prove that they were repentant.

Likewise TODAY there are multiple thousands of people who keep the Sabbath, multiple thousands do

practise tithing, and multiple thousands of people never eat any unclean meats (e.g. vegetarians) ... and yet these multiple thousands of people are not really repentant.

Why are they not repentant?

BECAUSE THEY HAVE NEVER CHANGED THE WAY THEY THINK! ALL THEY HAVE DONE IS CHANGE SOME OF THEIR OUTWARD ACTIONS!

This has also always been true for some of those who attend the true Church of God. There have always been some people who have complied with the outward requirements of the Church ... but they never at any stage changed the way they think. This was evident in the New Testament Church as early as in Acts chapter 5 with Ananias and Sapphira ... these two hadn't really "repented" ... i.e. changed their way of thinking.

The statement that it is impossible to please God without faith also applies to those people who may do "all the right things" ... without faith they simply cannot please God, no matter how diligently they may tithe and keep the Sabbath.

It is the thoughts and intentions of our hearts that God is primarily interested in. Paul explained this as follows:

For the word of God [is] quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and [is] A DISCERNER OF THE THOUGHTS AND INTENTS OF THE HEART. Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things [are] naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

It is only when our right actions flow from a pure heart and from the right motivations that God is well-pleased with our actions. By themselves our right actions (i.e. Sabbath-keeping, Holy Day observances, tithing, abstaining from unclean foods, etc.) are without any meaning to God. That's right! I said that by itself Sabbath-keeping is meaningless! It is only as these right actions are the expression of a changed mind before God that they take on any significance.

If you really want to commit your life to God, then you need to understand these things very clearly!

So as you contemplate meeting God's instruction to repent, don't look at your outward actions (i.e. how you are now, or always have been, in harmony with God's laws). EXAMINE YOUR MIND! Is your mind willingly and joyfully and eagerly submissive to God's will and to ALL of His wishes and instructions? Is your mind looking for what you "HAVE TO DO" in order to be right with God ... or is your mind zealously looking for EVEN THE SMALLEST HINTS of what God "WOULD LIKE YOU TO DO"? Both these minds can produce the right outward actions ... but there is a vast chasm between them, a gulf as great as the one between Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16:26.

As the apostle John explained ...

And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, AND DO THOSE THINGS THAT ARE PLEASING IN HIS SIGHT. (1 John 3:22)

We MUST go above and beyond the mere requirement of what we absolutely "HAVE TO DO". Doing no

more than we are commanded to do means we are still only "unprofitable" to God, which means that God cannot have us in His immortal Family. As Jesus Christ said ...

So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, WE ARE UNPROFITABLE SERVANTS: WE HAVE DONE [ONLY] THAT WHICH WAS OUR DUTY TO DO. (Luke 17:10)

So how can you know if you are repentant? When the outward actions are the same, what is the difference between someone who is repentant and someone who is not? The answer is bound up in the word "commitment".

THE RIGHT COMMITMENT

If not all, then certainly most of us in the ministry have at one time or another baptized someone who, it later turned out, was not really repentant. In the New Testament Philip even baptized Simon Magus (Acts 8:13), and the apostle Peter later made clear that Simon Magus certainly was not repentant (verses 18-23).

It is because repentance involves something we cannot see (changing the way our minds think and work) that makes it difficult to always correctly identify a repentant mind. We are limited to looking at the consequences of repentance, at the things a repentant mind will produce. And since a mind which is not repentant can at times produce exactly the same outward actions as a repentant mind, therefore it is easy for us to sometimes feel that some people must surely be repentant because of "the fruits" they are producing ... meek and quiet, generous, caring, hospitable, loving, outgoing, teachable, responsive, etc. Yet people who are not religious and not seeking God can at times display many of these traits. And many people in the churches of this world can also display various of these traits.

That is precisely why some people feel that there must be some true Christians in all of these churches of this world, because some of the people there display such admirable characteristics. But people who feel there are true Christians in the world's churches are looking at OUTWARD ACTIONS; they are not looking at THE MINDS of such people. And unless the thoughts and the intents of the heart are right, the right outward actions don't prove anything.

So here is the point you need to understand.

The minister you will counsel with about baptism will do his best to discern whether you are ready for baptism or not. But he cannot see into your mind. He can make mistakes in his assessments, and very likely he has made some wrong assessments in the past. He will rely largely on your outward actions ... how you speak to him, what you say and what you do. So when he tells you that you are indeed ready for baptism, he may be right or he may occasionally be wrong.

He can't really know FOR SURE that you are repentant. But YOU can know for sure! And you MUST know for sure!

The key is not that you are keeping all of God's laws perfectly. The key is not that you have a clear understanding of the Bible.

THE KEY IS YOUR COMMITMENT TO GOD!

If you are really repentant, then ...

- you have in your mind made A BINDING COMMITMENT to God;
- your commitment is to strive to ALWAYS please God;
- you have rejected this world's way of thinking;
- you have rejected this world's values and goals;
- you are committed to doing more than God requires;
- you are committed to seeking the mind of God;
- you readily submit your own will to God's will;
- you desire to see every issue from God's perspective.

Only you can know if you have made that kind of commitment, one you firmly intend to hold on to for the rest of your life. Your actions show what you are prepared to do right now. But your commitment shows what you firmly intend to do for the rest of your life. Your commitment shows the direction in which you are steering your whole life.

We all know people who kept God's laws to the best of their ability for many years ... yet now, that the Worldwide Church of God has changed its teachings, they no longer live by the laws they observed for so many years. It didn't take much to persuade them to let go of the things they once embraced.

Whatever commitment they may have made, it wasn't an unconditional commitment TO GOD! Some may have made some kind of commitment to government, or to certain leaders, but it wasn't a commitment to God. If we accept the words of men rather than the clear instructions from God, then our commitment is not to God.

YOU KNOW whether or not you have made an unconditional commitment to obey God and to seek His will and His wishes. And if you have made such a commitment, then you need to know that it will surely be tested sooner or later.

Over 35 years ago in High School we had to make a detailed study of William Shakespeare's play "The Merchant of Venice". Whenever I think of the commitment we must make to God ,I often think of this play.

A LESSON FROM SHAKESPEARE

One of the lesser plots in this play involves a young eligible heiress named Portia and the suitors who want to marry her. To ensure that his daughter would get the right kind of husband, Portia's father had before his death devised something of a riddle which the successful suitor would have to solve.

Portia's father had made three small caskets, one out of gold, one out of silver, and the third one out of lead. Each of these caskets bore an inscription which provided some clue as to what to expect. One of these three caskets contained a picture of Portia, and the first suitor to select that particular one from amongst the three caskets would be eligible to marry Portia.

The thing to ponder over are the inscriptions of these three caskets.

The gold casket read:

"WHO CHOSSES ME SHALL GAIN WHAT MANY MEN DESIRE"

The silver casket read:

"WHO CHOSSES ME SHALL GET AS MUCH AS HE DESERVES"

The lead casket read:

"WHO CHOSSES ME MUST GIVE AND HAZARD ALL HE HAS"

Inside these three caskets were the following things.

Inside the gold casket:

"A carrion Death, within whose empty eye there is a written scroll. I'll read the writing.

All that glisters is not gold;

Often have you heard that told.

Many a man his life has sold

But my outside to behold.

Gilded tombs do worms infold.

Had you been as wise as bold,

Young in limbs, in judgement old,

Your answer had not been inscrolled.

Fare you well, your suit is cold."

Inside the silver casket:

"What's here? The portrait of a blinking idiot

Presenting me a schedule! I will read it. ...

The fire seven times tried this;

Seven times tried that judgement is

That did never choose amiss.

Some there be that shadows kiss;

Such have but a shadow's bliss.

There be fools alive iwis [old English for 'certainly']

Silvered o'er, and so was this.

Take what wife you will to bed,

I will ever be your head.

So be gone; you are sped."

Inside the lead casket there was a portrait of Portia and a scroll which read as follows:

"You that choose not by the view

Chance as fair, and choose as true,

Since this fortune falls to you,

Be content and seek no new.

If you be well pleased with this

And hold your fortune for your bliss,

Turn you where your lady is,

And claim her with a loving kiss."

The lesson involved here is that it is a mistake to judge by appearances. Those who are impressed by the appearance of gold and of silver are frequently motivated by a "GET" attitude. They "get" what they deserve and what many (most?) people desire. But they don't "get" what is really important in life.

To obtain the things that really do count in life we have to change our attitude away from "get" and focus our minds on "give". Mr. Armstrong frequently referred to the two opposite ways of life as "the GET way" and "the GIVE way". We must indeed be prepared to give and to hazard all we possess if we want to draw close to God.

The commitment to God requires us to "give and hazard all we have". That's what Jesus Christ plainly explained ...

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. (Matthew 16:25)

Are we really prepared to "give and hazard" our very lives? Do we really love God above everything else? As Christ instructed in Mark 12:30 ...

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this [is] the first commandment. (Mark 12:30)

BEWARE OF A COUNTERFEIT REPENTANCE

Repentance and faith are the bedrock foundation on which we build our relationship with the Almighty

God. It is vital that our repentance is of the godly kind. However, since the Day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 2 there have been very many people whose repentance was only worldly ... it was nothing more than a counterfeit. Beware that this will not be so in your life.

How does it happen that people engage in a counterfeit repentance? Did they do this knowingly and deliberately? No, in most cases they probably didn't really understand what it is that God requires.

Here is how it may happen.

As we study the Bible we quickly come to see that God requires us to submit our whole lives to Him if we wish to be baptized and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We can see that God requires us to chose "the casket made out of lead".

And so WITH THEIR MOUTHS people will say that they have chosen the lead casket ... BUT WITH THEIR ACTIONS some people show that they really want the gold casket ... and their whole demeanour and their strivings and their conduct all show that they really want what the gold casket seems to offer ... the things that many men desire! They seek for, and strive to retain at all costs, the acceptance and the friendship of this world. And they forget or are ignorant of the fact that ...

... THE FRIENDSHIP OF THE WORLD IS ENMITY WITH GOD? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is THE ENEMY OF GOD. (James 4:4)

This desire to find acceptance and approval with the people of the world prevents people from seeing life's questions from a godly perspective. Their perspective is altered to make allowance for the things "that many men desire". They approach questions of ethics and conduct and behaviour and dress and appearance and manner of speech and observance of customs with a vested interest; that vested interest being a desire to approve as many of the world's ways as possible, and to reject only those ways where they cannot get around a clearly stated prohibition from God. Yet with their mouths they will say that they have chosen the casket that requires them to give and to hazard all they have.

But God is not fooled and God is not mocked. God sees our hearts and He is aware of our deepest and innermost motivations, some of which we may never have even acknowledged to ourselves, let alone have verbalized in the presence of other people.

But when we are talking about repentance, we are talking about honestly facing our REAL motivations, the things we are loathe to admit even to ourselves. So King David said ...

Who can understand [his] errors? CLEANSE THOU ME FROM SECRET [FAULTS]. (Psalm 19:12)

This is where "changing the way we think" comes into the picture. Unless we are willing to reject and to walk away from the values and the standards of this world, we can never get away from the world's perspective of life. And then we are not able to see our "secret faults".

The only way to change our way of thinking is to walk away from the world's values and standards (which are really Satan's values and standards, see 2 Corinthians 4:4) and to search for GOD'S values and GOD'S standards. And they are not difficult to find ... God has revealed His mind to us through the Bible. But don't search the Bible while still desperately clinging to "the gold casket" or your judgement will be severely impaired. You must let go of the past way of thinking before you can comprehend God's way. Remember what Isaiah wrote ...

FOR MY THOUGHTS [ARE] NOT YOUR THOUGHTS, neither [are] your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For [as] the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Jesus Christ pointed out that it just does not work when we try to please both, God and the world.

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. YE CANNOT SERVE GOD AND MAMMON (i.e. the world). (Matthew 6:24)

YOU YOURSELF MUST ACTIVELY SEEK TO CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK

People sometimes misunderstand what happens in repentance. They think that God must "give them repentance". There are some Scriptures in this regard, which they misunderstand.

So understand this!

YOU YOURSELF MUST CHANGE THE WAY YOU THINK. GOD WILL NEVER DO THAT FOR YOU. WHAT GOD WILL DO FOR YOU IS GIVE YOU THE ABILITY TO CHANGE YOUR WAY OF THINKING. BUT YOU YOURSELF MUST MAKE THE CHANGE.

You are a free moral agent, and you yourself control your thought-processes. You decide which thoughts to think. Oh certainly, unsolicited thoughts may at times enter your mind (like the fiery darts of the wicked), but then it is under YOUR control whether you entertain those thoughts or whether you reject them and cast them out of your mind.

When God gives us His Spirit, that Holy Spirit opens our minds to a totally new dimension; it enables us to see and to understand things we did not see before. But it does not prevent us from thinking along the ways of this world. That is something we ourselves have to actively decide to do or not to do.

Notice Romans 2:4.

Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that THE GOODNESS OF GOD LEADETH THEE TO REPENTANCE? (Romans 2:4)

God "leads" us to repentance, to a different way of thinking, by showing us the way. God gives us THE ABILITY to think in a different way from this world, an ability which the people of this world simply do not have. But having given us that ability God then requires us to make a choice. We can then choose or we can reject God's way of thinking. It is not unlike the choice God set before Adam and Eve in the Garden in Eden.

Notice also Acts 11:18 ...

When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, THEN HATH GOD ALSO TO THE GENTILES GRANTED REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE. (Acts 11:18)

After Peter had explained what had happened with the non-Israelite Cornelius, the Church realized that God had also granted THIS ABILITY to think in a different way (seeing life from a different perspective) to people from all nations. God didn't "give" Cornelius repentance on a platter! Cornelius utilized the ability to understand God's will by earnestly seeking contact with God through prayer and fasting. Cornelius had made the choice to seek repentance, and God then gave him the ability to repent.

Notice also what Paul explained to Timothy ...

In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; IF GOD PERADVENTURE WILL GIVE THEM REPENTANCE TO THE ACKNOWLEDGING OF THE TRUTH; (2 Timothy 2:25)

Here Paul is speaking about people who "oppose" the truth. They are clearly not "acknowledging" the truth. Paul instructs Timothy to deal with such people in meekness so that PERHAPS God may give them the ability to think a different way, to see things from a different perspective, and as a result to then acknowledge the truth (which they were not willing to do earlier). Acknowledging the truth would open the way for such people to break Satan's control over their lives (verse 26).

But Paul was not speaking about God somehow just "giving repentance" to people who until then had opposed the truth. Paul was referring to God opening their minds to a new dimension, a new perspective, which would then enable those people to make an active choice.

So don't expect God to somehow miraculously change your mind to a new way of thinking. That won't happen! What God will do, IF YOU EARNESTLY SEEK HIM AND HIS MIND, is open your mind to new understanding; open your mind to a new perspective and vantage point. That new perspective will set before you a choice ... you must choose between your old (and well-established) way of thinking and the new way which God is showing you. And the way to choose God's way of thinking is to actively pursue it with all your heart and with all your might. Without such diligent effort you will never inculcate God's way of thinking into your very being.

AND WITHOUT SUCH EFFORT YOU WILL NEVER EXPERIENCE A GODLY REPENTANCE!

THE CONSEQUENCES OF A GODLY REPENTANCE

Because repentance involves changing the way we think, it is often easier to identify someone who is clearly NOT yet repentant, than it is to identify with certainty someone who IS repentant. That is because repentance has certain consequences.

So here is the point.

When we repent (i.e. change to seeing life from God's point of view), then a consequence will be that we will gladly do our utmost to be in harmony with, and in submission to, all of God's commands and God's wishes. It follows that anyone who is in conflict with God's laws, anyone who is unconcerned with what God would want us to do and how God would want us to behave is clearly not repentant! They have clearly not changed their way of thinking ... and their speech and their actions show this.

But the converse is not necessarily true!

Anyone who does what is right before God could indeed be repentant. But then again, many people who are not repentant could also live the very same way. Their motivations for being more or less in harmony with God's instructions could vary considerably ... from doing what is right out of peer pressure without

any personal conviction or commitment, to being motivated by personal pride and vanity, to being motivated by fear, to being motivated by a desire to GET, to being motivated by a desire to belong to a group and to be accepted, etc.

So when people show a disrespect for God's instructions (e.g. knowingly eat leaven during the Days of Unleavened Bread when God's instructions have been made clear to them, etc.), then they clearly are not repentant ... they have not changed their way of thinking to be in line with God's perspective.

Someone who is repentant will be submissive to all of God's wishes and desires for his or her life. They will strive to live by every Word of God (see Matthew 4:4).

But not all of those who submit to God's instructions are necessarily repentant. Some submit to God for the wrong reasons or the wrong motivations.

A consequence of repentance is that we strive to live by ALL of God's laws. We will keep the Sabbath and the Holy Days; we will tithe and not eat unclean meats; we will avoid filthy language and not get drunk; we will avoid immodest dress and godless entertainment; we will not engage in behaviour which destroys our health (e.g. not smoke); we will seek to know God's mind about how God would like us to look after our hair and how God would like us to groom ourselves; we will constantly keep in mind that we belong to God, as Paul told the Corinthians ...

What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost [which is] in you, which ye have of God, and YE ARE NOT YOUR OWN? FOR YE ARE BOUGHT WITH A PRICE: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

So yes, obedience to all of God's laws is certainly important. But that obedience is not repentance; it is only A CONSEQUENCE of real repentance.

Here is a problem that may sometimes arise when people mistake obedience to God's commandments for repentance:

People think they repented because they accepted the Sabbath, the Holy Days, tithing and not eating unclean meats. And that is where they stop. These "major issues" obscure their understanding of real repentance.

Real repentance does not focus on our actions but on our thinking. We have to change THE WAY we think, away from hostility to God's laws (see Romans 8:7-8) and towards seeing things from God's point of view. THE RESULT of such real repentance will be AN ENDLESS STREAM OF CHANGES! That is because seeing life from God's perspective will have an impact and consequences for the rest of our natural lives. The process should never end in this life because there should be a constant growth in understanding how God thinks and sees things.

Thus:

- 1) First we realize that we must obey all of God's commandments, including the Holy Days and tithing and not eating unclean things.
- 2) Then we become aware of wrong speaking habits we may have, perhaps even using vulgar language and inappropriate expressions. So we strive to root these wrong things out of our lives.
- 3) Then we may have certain addictions (e.g. smoking) which we can see are not pleasing to God. So

we strive to also root these things out of our lives.

4) Then we may realize that we don't always control our feelings and our temper as God would want us to control them (see 2 Cor. 10:5). So we determine to gain a better control over our feelings and our emotions.

5) Then we may realize that our personal financial affairs are in an undesirable state ... financial pressures tempt us to compromise with tithing. So we strive earnestly to set our financial houses in order, by cutting out expenses we really cannot afford.

6) Then we see that the Bible reveals that God has certain standards for how men and women should look after their hair (see 1 Cor. 11:1-15). So we make sure that our hair-length is correct in the eyes of God ... not too long for men and not too short for women.

7) Then we come to understand God's views about borrowing and lending. If we have at times not returned or repaid things we have borrowed, then we determine to change in this area also. We determine that those who lend us things should never suffer a loss as a result of lending things to us. If we have damaged or lost things belonging to other people, then we recompense them for such losses.

8) When we come to understand how God feels about gossiping, then we determine not to spread negative comments about other people ... hard to do all the time, but the godly thing nevertheless.

9) As we come to understand God's instructions for husbands and wives, so we strive to implement those instructions in our marriages.

10) If we have children, we strive to bring them up as God would want us to do. We determine to handle situations of disobedience as we understand God would want us to handle them.

11) We make a commitment to regularly pray to God and to study His Word, the Bible. This is an endless commitment.

12) We plan to seek contact with God by fasting. We pressure ourselves to fast at certain times (appropriate to our personal health circumstances), rather than waiting for outside stimuli to prod us into fasting.

13) If you are a woman: you seek to find out how GOD feels about make-up, whether HE finds make-up pleasing or not. You seek the mind of God on this matter. You approach it from the point of what God would LIKE you to do, rather than the point of what God has not expressly forbidden.

14) If you work for an employer, you seek to understand how God would want you to conduct yourself on your job ... and then you work in accordance with that understanding.

15) If you are an employer, you seek to understand how God would want you to treat your employees ... and then you act accordingly. etc., etc.

IT IS A WHOLE WAY OF LIFE!

As you seriously study the Word of God, so you come to a deeper understanding of God's way of life. And as you come to a deeper understanding, so you constantly determine to apply that understanding more fully in your daily circumstances. So things keep changing for the better (in God's sight) in your marriage, with your children, on your job, in your community, and in your personal finances. This is not to

say that you won't have problems, tests and trials in some or all of these areas ... you surely will. But nevertheless there will be a constant progression towards being more and more in harmony with God's wishes and desires.

All of these things will be THE CONSEQUENCES of a genuine and godly repentance. And these are the things the person who thinks of repentance only in terms of the Sabbath, Holy Days, tithing and clean meats never sees. No wonder such people don't really understand what repentance is.

The importance of the consequences of real repentance should never obscure the importance of repentance itself. One day when God changes all repentant believers into immortal members of His Family, it will not be THE ACTIONS of these people that will be resurrected and placed into immortal spirit bodies ... it will be THE MINDS of these repentant believers that will be placed into those spirit bodies.

It is the mind which must be right before the right actions take on any significance.

So you still want to be baptized, right? Nothing I have said so far has deterred you from that goal. Right, then I have just one more admonition for you.

Have you counted the cost?

COUNTING THE COST

God's plan to create a Family of spirit beings is serious business. In that plan there is no room for playing any games. God will give every human being an opportunity to choose to become a part of that Family or to reject that offer. God Himself decides (see John 6:44) to whom He will extend that opportunity now in this age, and to whom He will only extend this opportunity at some stage after Christ's second coming. But we all get only one opportunity to make that choice.

In Luke 9:62 Jesus Christ said ...

And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God. (Luke 9:62)

You who understand the truth of God, YOUR opportunity to submit your life to God is NOW. You are a part of those who are being judged by God now, in this age. Peter wrote ...

For the time [is come] that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if [it] first [begin] at us, what shall the end [be] of them that obey not the gospel of God? (1 Peter 4:17)

During Christ's ministry great multitudes followed Him. As we read in Luke chapter 14 ...

And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them, (Luke 14:25)

What follows is an admonition to every person who seeks to be baptized and to commit his or her life to God. So notice ...

IF ANY [MAN] COME TO ME, AND HATE NOT HIS FATHER, AND MOTHER, AND WIFE, AND

CHILDREN, AND BRETHREN, AND SISTERS, YEA, AND HIS OWN LIFE ALSO, HE CANNOT BE MY DISCIPLE. (Luke 14:26)

We understand that this is not an instruction to actively hate the rest of our own family, but only a comparison. COMPARED TO OUR COMMITMENT TO GOD everything else must take second place by such a long, long way, that such a low order of importance almost seems like hatred. The purpose of the comparison is to make clear how complete our commitment to God must be. Nothing can ever take precedence over that commitment to God. Christ further described that commitment as follows ...

And whosoever doth not bear his cross, AND COME AFTER ME, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:27)

These two verses spell out a very tall order. I know that when I have counselled people for baptism and then referred to these verses and asked people: "Are you prepared to do this?", the answer has without exception been: "YES!". But it is still a serious and heavy commitment!

Knowing that the right answer is "the lead casket" (to give and hazard all we have), it is easy to give this right answer. But few of us grasp at that point in time what a weighty commitment this actually is ... to place EVERY RELATIONSHIP WITH ANY OTHER HUMAN BEING on an inferior level to the relationship we are entering into with God. Easy to say, but hard to do!

At this point in time there are literally tens of thousands of people, who only a few short years ago regularly attended the Worldwide Church of God, but who today are where they are only because of the relationships they have with other people! For example:

- There are those who know that WCG is now teaching heresies but who still continue to attend WCG because of a relationship to other people (parents, children, spouses, brothers, sisters, in-laws, friends, etc.). The basis for their decisions is not a commitment to God, but a relationship to some human beings which they desire to preserve.

- There are many wives who attend the Churches of God of their husbands' choices; they themselves would easily switch to a different Church of God if their husbands made such a choice. Again, the foremost consideration for such choices is the maintenance of established relationships, rather than an overriding commitment to Almighty God. The same is true for some husbands who go along with the choices their wives have made.

- There are many people today who no longer attend any of the Churches of God. Some of these people would attend one of the Churches of God, but for their spouse's refusal to also do so. Therefore they have decided to maintain the peace in the home and to also not attend any Church of God. Here also a commitment to God is not the basis for their decisions.

Yet all of these people, when Luke 14:26-27 was presented to them during the time they counselled for baptism, agreed to fulfill this requirement as stated by Jesus Christ. So what has happened?

Well, at the time of baptism they said with their mouths: "I choose the casket of lead", and they fully believed this. But they had no idea what a powerful pull "the casket of gold" would exert on them; they had no idea how deeply ingrained their longing for "what many men desire" really was; in this case the desire to have good relationships with the people we have to live with. To have good and pleasant relationships with other people is probably the most desired thing of all, and it is not at all difficult to put such a desire ahead of any commitment to God. It happens all the time ... and that is precisely WHY Jesus Christ issued this warning in Luke 14:26-27.

So think carefully and deeply before you say "Yes" to these verses. Examine your own mind; acknowledge your own priorities to yourself; admit what things are most important to you; identify how you would intend to handle conflicts between a commitment to God and your innate desire for pleasant relationships with the people you are close to. Are you REALLY prepared to choose "the casket of lead" ... to give and to hazard all you have?

It is common for commitments to make greater demands on us than we expected or anticipated. That happens all the time. The same is true for the commitment we must make before baptism ... it will invariably require a greater commitment than we initially anticipated, kind of like a vast building project where the total costs for the project are constantly being updated to higher and higher figures, as unexpected situations have to be dealt with.

Jesus Christ also drew the analogy to a building project in this context in Luke chapter 14, and He made the point that we need to IN ADVANCE "count the cost" for the whole project. Never enter a commitment which you will not be able to keep. As Jesus Christ said ...

For which of you, intending to build a tower, SITTETH NOT DOWN FIRST, AND COUNTETH THE COST, whether he have [sufficient] to finish [it]? (Luke 14:28)

And Christ then summed it all up in verse 33.

So likewise, WHOSOEVER HE BE OF YOU THAT FORSAKETH NOT ALL THAT HE HATH, he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:33)

It rather sounds like Shakespeare got his idea for the inscription on the casket of lead from these sayings of Jesus Christ in Luke chapter 14, doesn't it?

If you clearly understand the two conditions which God has set for baptism, then this matter of clearly and fully understanding the commitment which God requires you to make, a commitment for the rest of your natural life, is probably the next most important point.

This commitment is not really "a consequence" of repentance. No, the willingness to make such a commitment must actually PRECEDE your repentance. It must be the foundation on which your repentance is grounded.

It is to the mind which is willing to make commitments that God will extend the ability to think differently, the ability to repent. In our society the heroes are so often the chancers, the opportunists, the gamblers, the drifters, those who shy away from making firm commitments. But God is looking for people who are willing to make commitments and to abide by those commitments.

In Psalm 15 David asked the question ...

LORD, who shall abide in thy tabernacle? who shall dwell in thy holy hill? (Psalm 15:1)

In other words: "Who is going to be in the first resurrection? Who is going to be in the New Jerusalem with You, Lord?" And one of the answers to this question is ...

In whose eyes a vile person is contemned; but he honoureth them that fear the LORD. [HE

THAT] SWEARETH TO [HIS OWN] HURT, AND CHANGETH NOT. (Psalm 15:4)

The name of the road which leads to the Kingdom of God is called COMMITMENT! That's what God is looking for in us. And if you want to be baptized, then that is what God is looking for in YOU!

SO ... ARE YOU READY FOR BAPTISM?

Now you have all the relevant facts.

- 1) You understand the two conditions God has stated in the Bible.
- 2) You understand what is entailed in the expression "to believe the gospel".
- 3) You understand exactly what God means when He instructs you "to repent". You know that it means that you must change the way your mind works. You must change in your thinking to God's perspective.
- 4) You understand that THE CONSEQUENCES of such repentance will be an unconditional desire to obey and to please God in every single area of your life ... from the way you dress and groom yourself to the way you speak, to the way you work, to the way you treat every other human being, to the entertainment you desire, to the goals you set for yourself, to the way you respond when you are praised, to the way you respond when you are found to be at fault. Real repentance will have consequences in every area of your life ... and you understand this.
- 5) You understand that your repentance must be based on an unwavering commitment to always put God first in your life. You understand Christ's statement in Mark 12:30 ...

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this [is] the first commandment. (Mark 12:30)

You know that God is looking for commitment, not for opportunistic obedience.

- 6) You also know that not everyone whose life includes things that are some of the consequences of repentance is necessarily repentant. These "consequences" can also be produced from other, non-repentant motivations.
- 7) You have examined your own mind and your own motives very carefully. You can see the shortcomings and the failings in your past conduct. You can see your own sins and your inadequacies.
- 8) And you KNOW whether or not you are prepared to make that unconditional commitment to God, a commitment that you KNOW will be tested in various ways.
- 9) You accept in faith the sacrifice which Jesus Christ has brought on your behalf ... that by His suffering and His death your guilty past may be blotted out.
- 10) You are remorseful for the sins you have committed in your life. You are sorry for the hurt you have caused other people, since other people are inevitably also affected by our sins. This is one specific consequence of repentance.

[Comment: Some of these 10 points I have not commented on in this paper to avoid the article becoming unduly long. They are the generally more readily known and understood points on this subject.]

If you understand all these points, and if you have really, in your heart of hearts, made such a commitment to God, a commitment that will require you to give and to hazard all you may have, if you KNOW that you have really repented because you yourself can recognize that the way you think and your perspective have changed to where you are starting to see everything from God's point of view, when you can see that your set of values has changed so that this world's values are diminishing in importance, when you know that you have an unwavering faith in the integrity of Almighty God, that He is always a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him ... THEN YOU ARE READY FOR BAPTISM!

Frank W. Nelte