

## Identifying God's True Church

feel when you compare one thing with another. And in the same way, we can learn by comparisons.

It is very common, of course, for people who come out of the Christian world, more specifically the Protestant world, to see the Church of God as simply another group that has acquired certain truths that weren't known before, or were not accessible because of perhaps spiritual blindness of a particular group, but the behavior is not necessarily that much different. The Catholics might find it not uncomfortable to come into the Church of God because of the nature of the government of God. There is some authority, some responsibility, as distinct from those who have always thought that the congregation was to be in charge over the deacons or the elders.

And you see, you have different reasons why some people can feel comfortable. And of course, we have people who have hebraic background, and they often see themselves in terms of being Jewish Christians. So what we would like to take a look at today is what distinguishes us as a people from all other religions or the non-religious world, and more specifically how we may differ from Judaism or how we differ from Christianity. It may come as a surprise, of course, for you to realize how others see us. Generally speaking, we would be listed in a catalog of what would be called sex, S-E-C-T-S. Sometimes the word cult would be used, though that is a pejorative term, a very negative term, and sometimes is limited to certain groups.

Fifty, forty years ago, the word cult was not a disrespectful term to apply. The Catholic Church applied the word cult to itself no more than forty years ago. It had to do with a form of worship.

They had a form of worship. They were a cult. But now they would not use that term because the word cult has been applied to certain people whom others dislike or disrespect.

But in any case, one of the common ways of describing the Worldwide Church of God or describing you would be that you are in some way Christian Jews or sometimes Jewish. Sometimes we are called near-Christian sex, in that category. Mormons, Christian scientists, seventh-day Adventists, possibly the Church of God would be listed as near-Christian sex.

That means in some way we have appropriated the name of Christ, but in fact we're not Christian like the others are. So you have these unusual ways of looking at things to anyone who is reared in Judaism, we would without any question be conceived of as Christian, and that could have various terms. I'd like to tell you a little bit about a couple of experiences in defining what we believe and what we do to individuals because there are different ways of approaching it and obviously how I explain what the church is, for instance, to the Supreme Patriarch of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand would be quite different than how I would explain it to a Jew who teaches at Hebrew University or to a Luther, let's say, who is a writer and editor of National Geographic. I've dealt with different people like that circumstantially, you're thrown into a conversation, and it's interesting how people react and how they perceive these differences.

I will take the story of Professor Tsvi Ankhari, who perhaps only very, very few of you know of Hebraic background. He's the man who is an author, a Byzantine scholar, that means he understands and studies the area of Jewish-Greek relationship. He's written the definitive work on the Karaite Jews. He is a person of interesting personality and character, he was outspoken, but very friendly and has appreciated this work as he remembered it in the earlier 1970s. I explained to him not what we were, as others might see us, but I explained to him one day what we do, what we practice. It is

perhaps less important to describe what we believe. It was obvious that we were regarded as Christian in the sense that we do acknowledge the authority of Christ, or of Jesus, and that He is the Christ, the Messiah, that was not in question. But I chose to explain to him what we do.

There is the Sabbath, the question of clean and unclean meats, the holy days, the tithing, looking forward to the kingdom of God, and you know when you explain any number of these things that we recognize the authority of the law of God, he cut the conversation short and he said, well then you are heirs of the Jerusalem church, and he was right. But he said, come to think of it, I'm not sure I like that idea.

Because that means that you are like Jews and that you too, as Gentiles, can inherit the promises.

He thought, and I thought it was very interesting, that the problem of the Jerusalem church went away by 66 to 70 AD. But as a person of some religious conviction, he was not a little disturbed at the same time to realize that the same sect is still here, that they thought they had disposed of centuries ago. You will better understand it when you realize that our relationships in the state of Israel are essentially with the non-religious. We keep away essentially, as much as possible, from contact with the religious zealots of the period today, as Jesus of course kept away from them until the end of his ministry in the first century AD. But to a Jew who listens carefully to what we do, there is no doubt we are not a Gentile Christianity. There is no doubt that we are not a Gentile form of Christianity. We would be seen as heirs of the Jerusalem church, and to a Jew that means heirs of the congregation over which James the brother of Jesus was in charge, as both bishop and apostle. It was much later, I had an interesting opportunity when the Supreme Patriarch was in Bangkok, and we called upon him after his first visit here, and he asked me who we were. Now he knew why he was here, because he had been formally invited and the leaders of the Southern California Buddhist community were impressed with the quality and the character of our work. And they have said they wanted to make the Thai temple here, Wat Thai of Los Angeles, to have the same character externally that Ambassador College exhibits.

Now when the Supreme Patriarch came here, he came to a college, he came to a campus, and I was asked to be the host on that first visit. Later on, of course, he called on Mr.

Armstrong at a second visit. It was in Bangkok where we were invited. He was on a dais, and in the typical fashion, you know, where they fold the legs together, he did not sit on a chair, he simply sat down hardly more than one foot above the floor, and we sat down on the rug in front of him, and we had a conversation, and he asked what we were. Now he hadn't really understood, but because his purpose of the first visit was to pay respects to an institution that reflected the qualities and character that the leaders in the Thai community had appreciated.

So I gave a very simple explanation, and that explanation was something like this, that we follow the laws of the God who created the universe, and those laws are manifested in a way of life that expresses outgoing concern for others.

To help others when, and I never got to finish the thought, because he already had understood something very important. Now he grasped that we acknowledge a creator God, and Buddhism, of course, is the only great religion that is an atheistic religion. I think you should know that. Buddhism does not have a God, it only has a teacher, and it has principles, but it does not have a creative God. But I felt it was important to understand where we perceive the source of law and principle to come from, but as I briefly expounded the principle of the law without defining the Sabbath or any of the other points of the Ten Commandments, he nearly jumped out of his posture and started to explain to me that we were right. Well that was nice to have that kind of a response. He said that principle is

right when an individual or when people have sufficient for themselves and there are others who have a need, we have a responsibility to be concerned for the welfare of others. That is, as Mr. Armstrong has defined it abroad in many occasions, outgoing concern, the way of giving as distinct from the way of competition and acquiring, getting. I didn't think it was my responsibility to define the kingdom of God in that case. I was merely paying certain respects, but that was very important that he got the picture. So from his point of view, I could say that when people who are not reared in the Christian world or not reared in the Jewish world, who do not have access to the Bible, when they see us and understand what we practice, then the next question is, as a Buddhist leader said to some of us, how come you do so many Buddhist things and are not Buddhists? Well, the answer of course is that I'm addressing them. You have five of the Ten Commandments and we have ten, all of them. It's the other way around. They should become like we are.

Yes, there is a remarkable perception. The teacher there discovered the principles of five of the Ten Commandments, which represent the five basic principles that represent the way of life of this particular kind of people in Southeast Asia. So they look at it in terms of a way of life, in terms of the Jewish community, we would be perceived in terms of the law of God, the Torah, of following the law. There was a later time, I had a chance to have dinner with an editor of National Geographic Magazine, also, and I presume he was a Lutheran, I can only perceive that, but that may or may not be true. That is irrelevant here, but he approached the subject as if he were, and we were also at this occasion with the professors, Jarjo and Marilyn Buchelotti, with whom we work in the excavation in Syria, who have been very formidable in defining the qualities and characters of the college, the church, and the foundation. And we were discussing some of the things that have been written in National Geographic and our role in AICF in terms of funding. And we entered into a discussion where we knew, of course, that this gentleman had been responsible for writing the article on Martin Luther, the anniversary of Martin Luther and the Reformation in the National Geographic. And he mentioned what an interesting opportunity it was, in his case, to be able to go to Rome, you know, and to meet the false prophet. He didn't said that because he was, you know, referring to what, how Luther looked at it, that in this case he could have an interview. It was said with tongue in cheek. And we were discussing, of course, the Catholic Church and the Protestant sects. You can understand this approach.

Then the question came around about the funding of the college, sorry, the funding of the foundation, and the editor of the National Geographic, this editor, there are many editors in the National Geographic, said, well, what is the church that underlies the foundation that provides the basic source of funding of the foundation? And so I said, the Worldwide Church of God. I said, and then I realized that I had to address not one person, but two other people, that I was in fact addressing both a Protestant and Catholics, or I was addressing the Christian world.

Now, how does one present it when obviously this is not the primary reason for the conversation? You want to get over it as fast as you can. You want to ruffle no feathers unnecessarily.

You want to clear yourself of any misunderstanding. Now, I didn't start to explain to them what we believe. I didn't explain even to our Jewish friend all the things we believed. I explained the things we do. In this case, I chose neither to explain the things we believe or the things we do.

Sorry, excuse me. To my point, as I saw it, was that that was not what they were interested in, in actuality. And I didn't want to address it specifically to ourselves. So I said, we first of all are not a Protestant sect, and there I use the word sect for a special reason.

We are not a Protestant sect. We did not arise out of the Reformation.

Is that first clear to all of us? Secondly, I said, you would probably call us.

I didn't say what we call ourselves. You would probably call us a part of Jewish Christianity. We are the heirs of Jewish Christianity.

Now, that's a way of explaining it. I couldn't say the heirs of the Jerusalem Church because later on the Jerusalem Church had great archbishops, cathedrals. So that was no explanation. I couldn't use that. To a Jew, the Jerusalem Church only means up to the time of the Roman War. But to Christians, you know, there's a Jerusalem Church today over there. Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Armenian. So I didn't use that approach. I simply used the general approach of Jewish Christianity before the rise of Gentile Christianity. That places us not only not Protestant, it places us in advance of Gentile Christianity that arose later with a center at Rome and elsewhere.

And I said, of course, we can trace the history of the church through Armenia, through the Balkans, to the Alpine regions, to Britain, and coming to the United States in the latter part of the 17th century to the state of Rhode Island. And immediately he said, the editor, he said, do you mean that Robert Williams was a member of your church? No.

He simply, Roger Williams, excuse me, founded a state. And here I felt we had a very interesting way of approaching the problem that you might like to take note of, that in Rhode Island, we have the first time where a state recognized the right of individuals to their own religion without having an established religion. This was the first colony. It wasn't really a state then, but we think of Rhode Island now as a state. Because everywhere in Europe, Catholic or Protestant, there was always an established church. And the reason God's people could come to Rhode Island as distinct from any other is that they could be free to come there, which they did around 1660.

Now, he didn't need to know the history of the church. I just simply took it in one sentence, all across Europe through 15 centuries. You don't have to add anything more.

And that Mr. Armstrong came among the people out of the world of business.

And this work has grown as a result of his efforts and of many others. And the foundation reflects that aspect of the work that's distinct from the college, is distinct from the church, but where we, in a sense, use as every responsible citizen would, those sums of money for cultural, social, and even spiritual means to help others. Where the concept of the church is not, you see, a fundamental way of approaching the problem, or a small college would not be the normal means of approaching it. Now, he was satisfied. I didn't have to go any further. And I also made it clear, therefore, that we represent the teaching of the church that Jesus established before the arrival of Gentile Christianity. So this gives you some idea, some idea of how others would view us and how we can approach or explain. And the explanations will differ. To have explained to the Supreme Patriarch the brief history of the church would have been meaningless.

I mean, his concern is not over the Alpine region, not over Rhode Island, not over Armenia.

That would be a geography that is not relevant to his experience.

Nor is it relevant to the experience of the Jew that we explain where the church has been in the meantime. It's bad enough that we're still here for those who are religious. You see, we don't have to explain that. We just crop up again as he might see it, or they might see it, and that's enough of a problem. So let's take a look now at some fundamental things that distinguish, if you please, the teachings of Jesus and this church from the around. There are different ways of approaching it. I can approach it quite differently in a classroom, but this is not a classroom situation. So I propose that we

take a look at the beginning of Jesus' formal explanation of how his doctrine differed from the community to which he came. Now, there was a forerunner, John the Baptist, who laid the foundation for what Jesus was about to say.

But in John chapter 3, there was a man, he was a Pharisee, that is a man of strict religious conviction, a man who believed in the resurrection. The Sadducees did not. Here was a man who believed in the resurrection, a fundamental doctrine of the Pharisees. Nicodemus, he was a ruler of the Jewish community in the level of the Sanhedrin. He came to Jesus by night and he said to him, Rabbi, Jesus was a Rabbi, he never denied it, that just means he was a teacher. He was a teacher.

We know that you're a teacher come from God. No man can do the miracles that you do except God be with him. That you, listen carefully there, that you're a teacher come from God. God has sent you and that God is with you. Now, so that he would understand Nicodemus where Jesus came from, so to speak, or how he differed, because that's what he wanted to know, Jesus says to him, there's a certain fundamental area that you need to know and I want you to know that before I formally teach in the synagogue, this is what I will teach. And remember he had not yet gone to the synagogue in Galilee. He laid out his basic teaching to himself, a Rabbi, Nicodemus, certainly these men were rabbis without a question. He says, verily, verily, as King James wording, or truly, truly, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

So Jesus' basic doctrine that makes us differ from the Jewish community is not that we believe in the resurrection and they do not. Not that we keep the Sabbath and they do not. That's not the point, or the law, or the holy days, or unclean weeks. There is one basic difference between ourselves and the Jewish community and Jesus addresses it here. It is not enough, in other words, to be born of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and simply come up in the resurrection.

The Jews thought that that was what was required to be born of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in that line, and if boys, to be circumcised on the eighth day, and to anticipate the resurrection and the restoration of the kingdom of God to Israel. Jesus said there is something fundamentally lacking in your understanding. Partly it was never clearly explained in the Bible before, though it was certainly alluded to. David said when he awakens that he will be in God's likeness. Now how do you get in God's likeness? Is the resurrection adequate to account for that verse? But nowhere else in the Old Testament do you ever have such a statement, except a man be born again.

So one may say that the Church of God, that this is information for you, this is not information for everybody else. But Jesus explained it so that when Nicodemus would tell the rest of the Jews, they would understand that Jesus did not differ in any of these other fundamental areas. He was simply adding something of spiritual dimension that they hadn't thought of before. You have to be born again, or you cannot see the kingdom of God. Now let me just pose a question here so you understand. Do you think that you have to be born again in order to be resurrected? There are a lot of people, of course, in the Christian world who think you have to be born again, and then comes the resurrection. No, it's not that at all. What Jesus is saying here is that it was not sufficient to be born of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and to be heirs of that remarkable family. What one has to do if one is going to see the kingdom of God is that we have to be conceived and in gestation mature to that point where we are in fact born again. Now Nicodemus didn't misunderstand this term. He says to Jesus, so how can a man be born when he's old? What a funny, I mean you explain that to me now. You see how Nicodemus is approaching, and how could this be possible? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb and be born and never heard of such a doctrine? Nicodemus, after that response, listens to Jesus' explanation. I say to you, accept a man, be born of water and the Spirit. He cannot enter into the kingdom of God. Now water is clearly a reference here to what had been going

on. John the Baptist came and he ordered the children of Judah to be baptized unto repentance. So the nation was told, as John himself had already said before, there is one thing you have to do to admit that even though as men you were circumcised as little boys or as women you were part of the community but were not circumcised, even though you were a part of that community, John said you all must repent or you will perish. It wasn't enough to say that you've offered the sacrifices, that you have done your best, that your good deeds outweigh your evil ones, and since we're born of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we will automatically be heirs of the kingdom. John said you all have to start over again. You have to be baptized in water to repentance. You come to an attitude of acknowledging your guilt by repentance and not merely by penance. Or did you hear me, a word that we normally don't use in the church? John the Baptist said you must repent. Penance is not enough. Did you know what those rituals are of the law of Moses? They are appropriately designated as a form of penance. You acknowledge what you did, you don't have to repent, you simply acknowledge what you did, you either offered your animal or you took your wallet out and you paid for an animal or a bird, and you offered a sacrifice.

And as far as the community was concerned you were forgiven. There was nothing stating that you had to repent. You will not find that in terms of the rituals. Now if you were guilty and you knew it, the rituals could not prevent you from being executed if the death penalty were in order.

But John was addressing a question. He was saying it is not enough to do penance, that is to offer the sacrifices and to go on in your old way. You have to do two things, to be baptized in water, to acknowledge you want to die to the past, to acknowledge that you're going to be burying your past and you come to a new state of mind called repentance. Now John was not asked to preach anything more than that.

So Jesus, in alluding to the fact that the first birth has the fetus in the liquid in the mother's womb, you know we were all in that sense carried in water before our birth. So in terms of birth the expression is the water's burst. That's just a part of the process. All right Jesus was alluding to that natural phenomenon and John the Baptist of course had come and given the symbol for adults that we have to go down in the water. Now Jesus baptism of course went further than this.

Jesus was baptizing not only to repentance, not only in terms of the Messiah and the forgiveness of sin, but for the receiving of the Holy Spirit. So Jesus is saying here that his doctrine involves the teaching that man must be born again, which commences through, if you please, the waters of baptism to acknowledge that you are spiritually dead to the old way you are living and you must be born of the Spirit, which is a simple way of explaining that you have to receive the Spirit of God into you, so that it becomes a part of you and at the resurrection, I'm getting ahead of the story, he didn't explain all this, that you actually become composed of that Spirit. So the Spirit of God joins with the Spirit in man and begets a new life just as the physical body involved a sperm and an ovum and that began the first life which we all are as individuals.

So Jesus said, unless there is this process of baptism, of acknowledging the death of the old self and coming up to live a new life by means of the power of the Spirit of God, Moses' law never promised the Holy Spirit. Moses' law never told you that you could call on God's Spirit for power to keep the law. Moses' law simply had the rituals to help you learn the habit of obedience and to be a penalty so that you wouldn't commit the same thing again because most people take their pocketbook seriously enough that these offerings were costly. Jesus said, not only can you not see the kingdom of God, but you cannot enter the kingdom of God. So the kingdom of God is explained by Jesus as something invisible to man. Further, he said, that which is born of the flesh is flesh, that which is

born of the Spirit is spirit. So he was distinguishing not that we're born a second time of the flesh, but the first time we are born of flesh, composed of flesh.

The second time we are actually going to be born of spirit because we are begotten of spirit.

The new man, or woman, is in a sense beginning to be composed, beginning by being composed of spirit, and ultimately the whole body, if we live to that time, will be. Spirit, he says, the wind blows where it wills. That's better rendering for more modern English. You hear the sound of it, but you can't tell whence it comes. You don't see it anywhere. You only have the effect.

And you can know where it goes by the sound of the rustling of the leaves, but you don't see it.

So is everyone born of the Spirit.

Now Nicodemus knew that God is invisible, unless he manifested himself. They knew that much, and Jesus was defining spirit, and using the wind as an analogy. But yet he said, how can these things be? And Jesus said, he didn't say that you can't teach them. He said, my, just don't get it. And Jesus said, are you a master in Israel, and don't know these things? We speak what we know. Jesus is testifying to the fact that he had been in the presence of God, and testify what we have seen. And you receive not our witness. He had come and explained. I have told you of earthly things, and you believe not. How shall you believe, if I tell you, of heavenly things? And here he's not addressing Nicodemus alone. The plural ye, rather than the, means that he is talking to Nicodemus on behalf of the Pharisees and Jewish community. No man has ascended up to heaven. This is all part of the explanation. But he who came down from heaven, and John in writing adds, even the Son of Man, which today is in heaven.

So Jesus was showing, you see, that speaking of God, his Father, and himself, that he was carrying God's message, and he was a representative, like Nicodemus was a representative of the Pharisees. And he was testifying to them. We speak what we know. You don't seem to understand it. And then he explains that as he came down from a place to which no man has ascended, so he is also going to return. Jesus, therefore, made it quite clear where he got his doctrine.

He made it quite clear that he descended from heaven, and was born of Mary, and is now announcing what he remembers, because his memory is what was characteristically God in him.

By nature, physically, he was flesh. That he inherited from Mary. But most people say, well, how could he be God as well as man? Now, the person and the memory and your memory is what makes you what you are. That's how you identify yourself. People lose their memory. They don't know who they are. I hope you know that. You know who you are because of your memory. If there's nothing you can remember, all you can say is, I don't know who I am. And, of course, apparently, there are a lot of people who are trying to find themselves today to use this modern term.

It's ridiculous. They should know who they are. But Jesus' manifestation that he was God is the fact that he remembered. He remembered what it was to be with God, and he knew that as a person he had been there, and he recalled it, so that his person, his memory, his personality, all reflected this experience. The teaching, therefore, of Jesus is fundamentally different in this particular aspect. Jesus might have taken away some of the prohibitions on the Sabbath that were extreme, but those things were inconsequential. The basic difference between true Christianity, the teaching of Jesus, and Judaism is that Judaism had no way to promise how you could inherit or see the kingdom of God. They didn't realize that if the kingdom were to be restored to Israel, that they would not either see the kingdom or be in it merely by a resurrection.

Those who come up in the second resurrection do not enter the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God will rule over them, but unless that kingdom is manifest to them, they neither see it nor can inherit it until they themselves are begotten and born of God. Our relationship, therefore, does not differ fundamentally in the Jewish community with what we practice, as with the fact that we ourselves are the sons and daughters of God by baptism, the acknowledging of the death of the old self, being in possession if we have repented and believed in the Messiah and his forgiveness. We are in possession of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of God leads and guides us, and at the resurrection we're going to be born of God, and we shall be like him, as David perceived himself, to be like him in the resurrection.

This is a fundamental difference, and the Jewish community has never understood it to this day.

Now, let's look at what happened as time went on. We can pick up a verse in Acts chapter 9, verse 2, and there's some other verses, but this is the first time that Jesus' teaching is defined by others as written by the church. They desired of him letters to Damascus.

This is a story of Saul, who was breathing out threatenings, went to the high priest and asked the high priest letters to take to Damascus to the synagogue so that if he would find anyone of this way, whether man or woman, he would bring them bound to Jerusalem where they should be punished.

Christianity is called here, what we call Christianity, is called here that way or this way, depending on the context. This way, it is a way of life. Now, when Jesus spoke of the water, he was really saying, you must change. That is, your past is past and you have a new way to live, and it is built on what John said that it must involve repentance.

Now, the nature of this way is later on expounded in the book of Acts by Paul. So, we'll turn now to chapter 24, a very important quick summary.