

**THE  
PROF SAMUELE  
BACCIOCECHJ**

**AND**

**JOE TKACH, JNR**

**DEBATE**

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# 1. WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD: CRISIS AND LESSONS

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The Worldwide Church of God (WCG) has lost about 50,000 members and 500 pastors during this past year as a result of doctrinal changes in such areas as Sabbath keeping, holy days, distinction between clean and unclean meats, and tithing. The church's top administrators introduced these changes to bring their church more in line with the Protestant mainstream. Enormous financial losses have followed, causing the suspension of the church's telecast, *The World of Tomorrow*, the reduction in circulation of their outreach magazine, *The Plain Truth*, from seven million to less than half-a-million, and a substantial drop in enrollment at their Ambassador University in Big Sandy, Texas. The campus of Ambassador College with its famous auditorium, located in a prestigious section of Pasadena, has been put up for sale.

A group of ministers and elders of the WCG who could not in good conscience preach the new teachings convened in Indianapolis on April 30-May 2, 1995 and formed the United Church of God (UCG). David Hulme, former presenter of the telecast *The World of Tomorrow*, was chosen as interim Chairman of the Board. About 20,000 former WCG members have already joined the newly formed United Church of God, and their number is growing daily.

These rapid developments, which have so dramatically weakened and divided the Worldwide Church of God, give rise to two questions: (1) What factors contributed to this sudden split in the WCG? (2) What lessons can we Seventh-day Adventists learn from the sad experience of a church that has shared with us such beliefs as the Sabbath, clean and unclean meats, and the importance of obedience to God's law?

To find answers, I contacted some of the leaders of the newly formed United Church of God. During this past year it has been my privilege to become acquainted with most of their pastors, since they called me from across the country to order supplies of my three Sabbath books to meet the challenge of the anti-sabbatarian stance adopted by their former leaders in the WCG. I also received several invitations to share my research about the Sabbath at various of their rallies across the country. In May 28-29, 1995 I was invited to deliver several lectures at the well-attended "Jubilee 95: Friends of the Sabbath" convention, held at the picturesque Dana Point Hotel Resort in California. In December 24-27 I was invited again to a similar Sabbath conference held in San Antonio, Texas. For 1996 I have been invited to speak at six Sabbath conferences, three in the USA and three overseas, in Australia, England and Mexico. In spite of an admission fee of \$50.00 per person, the convention halls were full to capacity and stayed full through the last meeting.

In all my years of speaking around the world, I have never seen an audience so receptive and eager to deepen their understanding and experience of the Sabbath. A man told me at the San Antonio Sabbath Conference: "I have observed the Sabbath for thirty years and I would have never thought that I would fly across the country and pay to listen to lectures on the Sabbath. But now that the Sabbath is being challenged by our church leaders, I want to know more about its validity and value for my life." Sometimes it takes a crisis to cause us to re-examine the basis of our beliefs.

These personal contacts have given me the opportunity not only to gather information for this article, but also to appreciate the sincerity and commitment of pastors who lost their employment and of members who were disfellowshipped, all of them for choosing to remain true to their beliefs. While listening to their heart-rending stories of families split by the new teachings, I have often wondered what would happen to our church if our General Conference leaders were to promote abandoning such fundamental beliefs as the Sabbath, the sanctuary, the Spirit of prophecy, and biblical authority. What percentage of our Seventh-day Adventist pastors and members would rather be fired or be disfellowshipped than compromise their beliefs? No one can tell. But we can resolve to prevent such a thing from happening by learning from the experience of the Worldwide Church of God.

## What Led to the Split

To understand what led to the split in the WCG, it is important to know the church's origin as well as some of its recent developments. The WCG was founded by Herbert W. Armstrong. He had been ordained in 1931 in the Church of God (7th Day), where he served until 1937, when he established his own independent church, known at first as the Radio Church of God. Mr. Armstrong commenced publishing The Plain Truth magazine, and in 1947 he founded Ambassador College in Pasadena, California, to which he also moved the church headquarters.

Unlike the founders of the Seventh-day Adventist church, who believed in a democratic form of church government, Mr. Armstrong believed in a hierarchical form of church government, in which he directly dictated the beliefs, practices and programs of the WCG until his death on January 16, 1986. The church is still governed in a hierarchical manner.

Before his death, Mr. Armstrong himself chose Joseph W. Tkach as his successor as Pastor General, bypassing several close assistants who had aspired to the position. Mr. Tkach himself died recently, on Sabbath, September 23, 1995, at age 68. He had appointed his son, Joseph Tkach, Jr., to succeed him. Incidentally, Joseph Tkach, Jr. and two of his close associates, have requested to meet with me here Andrews University. I will endeavor to submit to ADVENTIST REVIEW a brief report of this meeting which is scheduled for April 29, 1996.

For four or five years after his accession in 1986 the senior Mr. Tkach enjoyed overwhelming support from the leaders and members. But by 1992 signs of change began to appear. Gradually Mr. Armstrong's publications, especially his opus magnum, *Mystery of the Ages*, were withdrawn from circulation. The new leadership modified the church's prophetic emphasis and adopted a more mainstream Protestant approach. Similarly, the emphasis on obedience to God's commandments shifted to the acceptance of salvation by grace, irrespective of works of obedience. In late 1994 began the assault on the Sabbath, holy days, distinction between clean and unclean meats, and tithing.

Regarding the Sabbath, Joe Tkach, Jr., whom his father had appointed to preside over the ministry, asserted in a study paper, published on February 14, 1995, that "The question is, Does God tell his new covenant people to rest on the seventh day? The answer is no, He doesn't." Evidently the young Tkach had adopted the popular view that the New Covenant releases us from the obligation to observe God's commandments.

Informed sources believe that these doctrinal changes were influenced by the so-called "Azusa Pacific University theologians," men whom the church had sponsored through graduate degrees in theology and biblical studies, mostly at Azusa Pacific University. The WCG needed qualified teachers to gain accreditation for their Ambassador University. Some of these young theologians became part of Joseph W. Tkach's administrative cabinet. Their avowed goal was to lead their church into the evangelical mainstream by doing away with beliefs such as Sabbathkeeping which they considered as vestiges of the Old Covenant.

At first, church loyalists preferred to think that their Pastor General, Joseph W. Tkach, was unaware of the "New Theology" promoted by his administrative cabinet. Many others, however, recognized that the young "Azusa Pacific University theologians" were exerting an enormous influence on the senior Tkach. All doubts were finally resolved in December, 1994, when Joseph W. Tkach videotaped a sermon which was played in virtually all WCG congregations in early January, 1995. In that sermon, Tkach made it clear that he had embraced the new theology and was now prepared to enforce it by firing and/or disfellowshipping recalcitrant pastors and church members.

## Lessons to Be Learned

After reflecting on the events that have split the Worldwide Church of God, causing irreparable damage to its financial, educational and organizational structures worldwide, I feel that as Seventh-day Adventists—a people who also keep the Sabbath and who are preparing for Jesus' second advent—we can learn four important lessons from this traumatic experience.

## Danger of Hierarchical Structure

A first lesson to be learned from the experience of the WCG is that there is great danger in a hierarchical form of church government in which the decision-making process rests in the hands of a few administrators. Pastor General Joseph W. Tkach exercised almost pontifical authority in the WCG. A small administrative cabinet advised him, but ultimately he dictated what ministers ought to preach and what members ought to practice. Such an autocratic form of church government does not allow for any meaningful participation by the laity and clergy in the government of the church, and it rejects any type of dissent.

Several former ministers of the WCG informed me that they repeatedly requested Mr. Tkach to convene a ministerial council to discuss the doctrinal changes, but their request was rejected. Such autocratic policy can only alienate members and undermine the leadership's credibility. The strength of a church organization is measured by the degree of consensus and conviction among its members. These cannot be dictated from the top down; they must grow from the bottom up through involvement in the decision-making process.

The current hierarchical structure of the WCG reminds us of the Seventh-day Adventist administrative structure at the turn of the century. At that time a few General Conference leaders exercised what Ellen G. White called "kingly power." Largely as a result of her timely counsels, the 1901 General Conference session effected a much-needed reorganization which, among other things, allowed wider representation in the General Conference executive committee.

Church administrators will always be tempted to consolidate their power in order to facilitate the implementation of their policies and programs. This was one of the issues hotly debated at the just-concluded 56th General Conference session. History teaches us that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. To protect our leaders from the corrupting influence of too much power, it is imperative to preserve our current representative system of church government, with all its checks and balances.

## Influence of Liberal Theologians.

The influence of liberal theologians who question the authority of the Bible and the validity of their denominational beliefs is felt in practically every denomination, including the Seventh-day Adventist church. This is part of the price churches are paying today for promoting higher education. To receive accreditation for their church-related colleges and universities, younger churches especially have to sponsor qualified students to earn graduate degrees in institutions of higher learning where humanism, secularism and higher criticism prevail. When exposed to these ideologies daily for several years, it is difficult for anyone to remain unscathed. So it is not surprising that some of the promising young people sent out by their churches to earn degrees in such institutions return with liberal views which are not compatible with their churches' teachings.

The solution to the problem is not in doing away with higher education. There is no merit in ignorance. Rather, the solution is to ensure that those who serve in academic institutions or administrative positions are committed to the beliefs and standards of the church they serve. People who during their graduate studies have become critical or even cynical of the beliefs of their church cannot and should not serve in their church. To fulfill their church's expectations would require them to be untrue to their conscience and beliefs; teaching divergent beliefs would be unfair to the church that pays their salaries.

## Change Requires Consensus

A third lesson to be learned from the recent experience of the WCG is that proposed doctrinal changes should be widely discussed and examined and adopted only with the broad support of the membership. Doctrinal changes dictated by one or a few, against the will of the majority, can split a church and destroy its credibility.

It is not surprising that some WCG theologians have questioned some of their beliefs and have worked hard to change them. Unfortunately, they went about doing so the wrong way, by dictating doctrinal changes from the top down rather than by achieving gradual consensus from the bottom up, from the rank and file of their

membership. Furthermore, in their desire to purge the church of undesirable beliefs, they went too far by adopting a dispensationalist view which rejects such legitimate Old Testament institutions as the Sabbath, tithing, and the distinction between clean and unclean meats.

In my association with pastors and members of the newly formed UCG, I have sensed that they are open to a re-examination of their doctrinal beliefs. In fact, many of them have urged me to research the annual feasts of Israel in Scripture and history, and share with them the finding of my investigation, whether favorable or unfavorable to their position. I accepted the challenge and last December I shared with them the conclusions of my book *GOD'S FESTIVALS IN SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY* at the San Antonio's Sabbath conference, recently reported in the *Adventist Review*. The text of the lecture was posted few days ago. This example serves to show that there is considerable openness on the part of former members and pastors of WCG to re-examine some of their beliefs, but they want this to be done in an open and democratic way in which delegated pastors and members can participate.

Changes in doctrinal beliefs cannot be dictated by a few without splitting the church. Imagine what would happen if our General Conference president had authority unilaterally to impose the ordination of women on all Seventh-day Adventist churches around the world, irrespective of the conviction of our members. The result would be very similar to what has happened in the WCG. Our representative form of church government has made it possible for the issue to be debated and voted by all the delegates attending the last two General Conference sessions.

Yet even our Adventist system needs some fine tuning. A simple majority of 51% is hardly sufficient to approve the adoption or rejection of an important policy. To adopt a divisive policy rejected by 49% of the membership means to split the church down the middle. Changes that impinge on fundamental biblical beliefs should have the support of a vast majority. A church's strength depends on its doctrinal cohesiveness. A church divided on important doctrinal or policy matters no longer represents the unity of the body of Christ. Her identity is blurred, her mission weakened, and her credibility destroyed. To a large extent this is what has happened to the WCG.

#### Dangers Arise Within

A fourth lesson to be learned from the recent experience of the WCG is perhaps the most sobering of all: the greatest dangers to a church arise from within itself. No pressures strictly from outside have brought the present turmoil in the WCG. No civil power or rival religion has dealt her this blow. The damage has come from within the church. Could such a thing happen to our church as well?

Ellen G. White noted, "We have far more to fear from within than from without. The hindrances to strength and success are far greater from the church itself than from the world" (*Selected Messages*, 1:122). In recent memory some of our own best and brightest have challenged our teachings on the sanctuary, on prophetic interpretation, and on the Spirit of prophecy.

The experience of the Worldwide Church of God should serve as a warning to Seventh-day Adventists. We can learn these valuable lessons and prevent such painful trauma in our own church. We must avoid the dangers of concentrating too much power in the hands of a few and of allowing influential liberal voices to shape our policies and doctrinal understandings and mold the emerging generation of young Seventh-day Adventists. We must insist on broad consensus for doctrinal changes and over policies that would imply such changes. And we must remember that our greatest dangers come from within.

If we learn these lessons, we can protect our church from divisive influences and work together to fulfill our global mission.

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## 2. AN OPEN LETTER TO PASTOR JOSEPH TKACH AND THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD

Dear Pastor Tkach:

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

### CANCELLATION OF SCHEDULED APRIL 29 MEETING

After reading your letter I concur with you that the scheduled April 29 meeting at Andrews University would be unproductive. When you first proposed to meet with me, I assumed that your intention might be to re-examine and reconsider some of your doctrinal changes, especially your interpretation of the Sabbath and Holy Days in the light of your new covenant theology.

My assumption was based on a brief telephone conversation I had with your Executive Editor, Dr. Herman L. Hoeh. He offered to review my latest book *God's Festivals in Scripture and History* and told me on the phone that he still holds to the validity and value of the Sabbath and Holy Days. His positive remarks, coupled with the excellent comment he wrote for my book, led me to believe that perhaps you also were rethinking some of the doctrinal changes you have introduced in your church at large. Thus I assumed that the purpose of your proposed visit might be to do some "damage control," by re-examining some aspects of your new theology.

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

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

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

I find this viewpoint unwarranted for two reasons. First, I am not aware that the unity of the Adventist church is being threatened by the questioning of "foundational doctrines" on the part of some. If you are thinking of the women's ordination issue agitated in recent years, you might be interested to know that such an issue is not a "foundational doctrine." It is not even included among our twenty-seven fundamental beliefs. The issue belongs to a small minority of feminists primarily in North America.

I would dare to say that over 90% of our eight million Adventist members do not even know that such an issue exists in our church today. Recently I lectured for 10 days in San Paulo, Brazil, where we have over 200,000 members in the city alone. When I asked the pastors if they wanted me to address the issue of women's ordination, they replied, "Please do not waste our time. That is an American issue. For us it is not an issue."

In my article I mention that "in recent memory some of our own best and brightest have challenged our teachings on the sanctuary, on prophetic interpretation, and on the Spirit of prophecy." The challenge to which I refer has come

from a few individuals, such as Desmond Ford and Walter Rea, both of whom resigned from church employment and have faded into obscurity. As of now I do not know of any particular individual who is challenging "foundational doctrines" and threatening to split the Adventist church. The truth of the matter is that the threat to the future of the Adventist church today comes not so much from divisive theological controversies as from cultural conformity, that is, the pressure to conform to the secular values of our society and thus lose its identity and mission. In the light of these considerations I find the allegation that I used your church as the "whipping boy" to rally support against those who are challenging "foundational doctrines" to be unfounded.

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

### **A LESSON TO BE LEARNED FROM THE HISTORY OF OTHER CHURCHES**

Church history teaches us that introducing the kind of radical doctrinal and practical changes you and your father have brought to the WCG, can have devastating consequences. I am thinking especially of the changes dictated by your adopting the New Covenant theology which, as you put it, "resulted in our abandoning past requirements that Christians observe the seventh-day Sabbath as 'holy time,' . . . annual festivals . . . tithe . . . and that Christians must not eat foods that were 'unclean' under the old Covenant" ("A Church Reborn," *Plain Truth*, February 1996, p. 1).

Rather than taking time to discuss what has happened during the course of Christian history to churches that relaxed their doctrinal and moral standards, I will briefly refer to the classic study *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, by Dean M. Kelly, Executive Director for Religious Liberty, National Council of Churches. Kelly traced the growth pattern of six mainline American Protestant churches that had been growing for nearly two hundred years and then started going down.

In a nutshell Kelly's conclusion is that denominations stop growing and start declining when they relax their doctrinal and moral standards by reducing salvation to love and faith in Jesus Christ. In an article Kelly explained that "the trouble with these unstructured simplifications is that they're too easy. There is almost nothing you cannot justify doing, if you hold yourself to the criterion of love as you interpret it. It's too easy. It is too self-indulgent. Rather than being guilt-ridden, most of us are prone to be innocence-ridden, that is, to find justifications and excuses for doing what we want to do anyway. And if we can justify it in the name of love, all the better. These oversimplifications are inadequate because they deprive faith of its unique and necessary texture and practice and cost" (Dean M. Kelly, "How Adventism Can Stop Growing," *Adventists Affirm*, Spring 1991, p. 49).

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

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

### **THE LESSON OF HISTORY FOR THE WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD**

What concerns me, Pastor Tkach, is that you may be so involved in making history that it may be difficult for you to learn the lesson of history. You say, for example, "Gone are our obsession with a legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament. . . . We have embraced and now champion the New Testament's central theme: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. . . . We teach salvation by grace, based on faith alone, without resort to works of any

kind" (*The Plain Truth*, February 1996, p. 1). By the way saving faith is never alone, because, as Paul puts it, it is a "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). Your triumphalistic interpretation of the doctrinal changes you and your father have introduced to the WCG, may make it difficult for you at this point to understand the lesson of history, namely, that by rejecting your old doctrines and liberalising church standards you may be paving the way for the gradual dismantling of your church.

The impression I get from reading the material you and your associates have produced is that you interpret the freedom of the Gospel as freedom for your members to pursue their inclinations. They are free to rest or to work on the Sabbath, they are free to go to church or to the shopping mall on the Sabbath, they are free to tithe or not to tithe, they are free to eat clean or unclean meat, they are free to observe pagan holidays like Easter and Christmas, or Biblical Holy Days like Passover and Tabernacles, they are free to use or not to use excessive cosmetics and jewellery. Several of the letters I received from your supporters express a sense of satisfaction over this new-found freedom. This was confirmed to me also by a recent conversation with a WCG member whom I met while visiting my son in Arlington, Virginia. When I asked him how he viewed the doctrinal changes of the WCG, he said: "I have no problems with them. They make my life much easier. Before I had problems with the Sabbath because of my job as a security officer. Now I have no more problems because I am free to do what I like. I can work on the Sabbath without any sense of guilt and I can go to church when I am free."

**Freedom of the Gospel.** This interpretation of the freedom of the Gospel as freedom to pursue on the Sabbath one's personal pleasure and profit, rather than the presence and peace of God, can have disastrous consequences for the future of the WCG. It can weaken the commitment of your members to God and their church. Let me use an example to illustrate my point. Some time ago I was invited by the Seventh-day Baptist Church to speak in Rhode Island at a rally of about 50 of their pastors from the Eastern States. As I listened to the pastors discussing some of their doctrinal beliefs, it soon became evident that there was a great diversity of beliefs and great freedom in interpreting the nature of the Gospel. Even the Sabbath was viewed by some more as a holiday than a holy day. When I asked them how did they feel about so much diversity in their church, one of them replied: "This is what makes our Seventh-day Baptist Church great. Members can believe and do what they like and still be members of the church."

Do doctrinal diversity and moral permissiveness really make a church great? The historical record of the Seventh-day Baptist Church speaks for itself. As the church became more permissive in its beliefs and practices, its membership gradually declined from about 100,000 at the turn of the century to less than 10,000 at the present time. Can the same thing happen to the WCG? No one can tell for sure. Much depends upon the way you, Pastor Tkach, and your close associates interpret and translate your new understanding of the Gospel into the practical life-style of your members. The more permissive your church becomes in its beliefs and practices, the more it will lose its identity, mission, and purpose for existence.

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

### FAILURE TO HEAR YOUR SIDE OF THE STORY

You and some of your supporters feel that in researching for my article I "chose to believe what some in the United Church of God told you [that is, me] without seeking to verify their claims." Some allege that my failure to consult your office has resulted in some misrepresentations on my part. For example, the figure I gave in the internet of about 50,000 people who left the WCG is allegedly exaggerated. This hardly seems to be the case because the figures that you, Pastor Tkach, gave on your recent interview with radio talk show host Hank Hanegraaff, suggest that the estimate given to me was actually low. You estimate that 30,000 to 35,000 people have left and joined



"splinter groups," with some 40,000 still "sitting on the sidelines doing nothing." This means that between 70,000 to 75,000 members have left the WCG, which is much more than the figure I quoted.

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

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

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

### THE INFLUENCE OF LIBERAL THEOLOGIANS

What seems to have displeased you most in my article, Pastor Tkach, is my reference to the influence of three key liberal theologians who have been largely responsible for the doctrinal changes in your church. The three theologians I am referring to, as you know, are yourself and your two close associates, Greg Albrecht, editor of Plain Truth, and Mike Feazell, director of Church Administration. You strongly resent my labelling you and your associates as "liberal theologians," because, to use your own words "we have based all of our changes on the Scriptures."

The problem that I see is my failure to define my understanding of "liberal theologians." For this failure I apologise. In my view there are two different types of "liberal theologians." On the one hand there are those who accept the higher critical method of Biblical interpretation and consequently reject a priori the notion of any supernatural revelation and inspiration of the Bible. For them the teachings of the Bible are of only relative value because they are the product of human religious insight rather than divine revelation. It is evident that you and your associates do not belong to this group. On the other hand there are those who in theory accept the divine revelation and inspiration of the Bible, but in practice they find ways to explain away some of its fundamental teachings. For lack of a better term I will call this second group "Evangelical Liberals." From the reading of your material I have reason to believe that you and your associates belong to this group.

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

### THE SABBATH AS AN EXAMPLE OF LIBERAL INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE

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

**Genesis 2:2-3.** Your paper challenges the creation origin of the Sabbath by arguing that Genesis 2:2-3 "does not say that humans were told to follow God's example. It does not say that humans were told to rest . . ." (p. 1).

I find this method of interpreting the Bible liberal because it ignores the witness of the rest of the Bible. In Exodus 20:8-11 humans are explicitly told to follow the example of God by working six days and resting the seventh day. Your argument makes Moses guilty of distortion of truth or, at least, a victim of gross misunderstanding. He traced the Sabbath back to creation when in reality it was his own new creation. Such a charge, if true, would cast serious doubts on the integrity and/or reliability of anything else Moses or anyone else wrote in the Bible.

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

**Mark 2:27.** In Mark 2:27 we find a fundamental Sabbath pronouncement of Christ: "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath." Surprisingly your paper argues: "Jesus did not say when the Sabbath came into existence. Nothing in the context indicates that Jesus was alluding to creation week. We cannot assume that something made for humans necessarily had to be made immediately after humans were. . . . We cannot assume that it [the Sabbath] was made at creation, nor that it hasn't been superseded by a better blessing in the new covenant" (pp.11-12). Your conclusion is that the value of the Sabbath "has been eclipsed by Christ" (p. 11).

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

Our Lord's choice of words is significant. The verb "made-ginomai" alludes to the original "making" of the Sabbath and the word "man-anthropos" suggests its human function. Thus to establish the human and universal value of the Sabbath, Christ reverts to its very origin, right after the creation of man. Why? Because for the Lord the law of the beginning stands supreme. The importance of God's original design is emphasised in another instance when in reproving the corruption of the institution of marriage, which occurred under the Mosaic code, Christ reverted to its Edenic origin, saying: "From the beginning it was not so" (Matt 19:8). Christ then traces both marriage and the Sabbath to their creation origin in order to clarify their fundamental value and function for mankind. Contrary to what your paper says that "the value [of the Sabbath] has been eclipsed by Christ" (p. 11), by this memorable affirmation Christ establishes its permanent validity by appealing to its original creation when God determined its intended function for the well-being of mankind.

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

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

A. T. Lincoln, one of the contributors to the symposium *From Sabbath to the Lord's Day* used as a major resource for your study paper, acknowledges that in each of the above instances "the term denotes the observance or

celebration of the Sabbath. This usage corresponds to the Septuagint usage of the cognate verb sabbatizo (cf. Ex 16:23; Lev 23:32; 26:34f.; 2 Chron 36:21), which also has reference to Sabbath observance. Thus the writer to the Hebrews is saying that since the time of Joshua in observance of Sabbath rest has been outstanding" ("Sabbath, Rest, and Eschatology in the New Testament," in *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, ed. Donald A. Carson (Grand Rapids, 1982), p. 204).

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

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

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

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

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

## THE MEANING AND IMPLICATIONS OF YOUR NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY

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

**Your Understanding of the Two Covenants.** Your *Report* defines the covenant as "a formal agreement . . . or a relationship between God and a human individual or nation" (p. 1). It argues that in the Old Testament the covenant with Abraham was "unconditional," that is, without obedience as a requirement, while the covenant with the Israelites at Mt. Sinai was conditional upon obedience. God's covenant with Abraham was unconditional because "God didn't say, I'll do this if you do that. Abraham had already done enough. He had accepted God's call, went to the land as God had commanded, and he believed God and was therefore counted as righteous" (p.2). This statement contain a glaring contradiction. On the one hand it says that God's covenant with Abraham was unconditional. On the other hand it says that God made a covenant with Abraham because the latter accepted God's call and did what God commanded him to do. If God made a covenant with Abraham because he obeyed, then it was not unconditional. Genesis 17:1-2 clearly indicates that God's covenant with Abraham was conditional upon obedience: "I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you." The call to obedience is part of the covenant process. There is no such a thing as unconditional salvation. Salvation is free to those who freely accept it, by living in accordance with God's principles by His enabling grace.

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

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

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

The *Report* indicates that the Old Covenant did not work because it was based "on a package of laws" that "could not cleanse a guilty conscience" (p. 6). On the other hand, the New Covenant works because it is based on the blood of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. "The Holy Spirit changes their [God's people] hearts. The people are transformed, and they grow more and more like Christ. . . . The New Covenant affects our innermost being. The blood of Jesus Christ changes us. . . . His sacrifice sanctifies us, makes us holy, sets us aside for a holy purpose" (p. 7). Are you saying that the blood of Christ has some kind of magic power that automatically changes anyone who believes in Him? Are you attributing the same kind of magic power to the Spirit and to the Blood that the Jews attributed to the Law? Isn't this another form of legalism?

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

as a saving faith that is not manifested in obedience to God's commandments? Is the problem of legalism resolved by changing packages of laws?

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

A fundamental problem that I see with your New Covenant theology is the faulty assumption that during the course of human history God has offered salvation to different bases at different people. God started out by offering salvation to Abraham unconditionally on the basis of faith, but at Mt. Sinai He agreed to save the Israelites conditionally on the basis of obedience to His commandments. When God discovered that such an arrangement did not work, because the law "could not make anyone perfect. It could not change their hearts," He decided to revert to the "faith arrangement" He had worked out with Abraham. To make it easier, in the New Covenant God did away with most of the package of the Old Covenant's laws, including the Sabbath, and decided this time to work in the heart through the Holy Spirit.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## PAUL AND THE LAW

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

In Ephesians 2:15, Paul speaks of the law as having been "abolished" by Christ, while in Romans 3:31 he explains that justification by faith in Jesus Christ does not overthrow the law but "establishes" it. In Romans 7:6, he states that "now we are discharged from the law" while a few verses later he writes that "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (7:12).

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

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

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

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

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

Three times Paul states: "neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision" and each time he concludes this statement with a different phrase: "but keeping the commandments of God . . . but faith working through love . . . but a new creation" (1 Cor 7:19; Gal 5:6; 6:15). The parallelism suggests that Paul equates the keeping of God's commandments with a working faith and a new life in Christ. The Christian, then, is not under the law as a method of salvation but is under the law as a standard for Christian conduct.

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

**Gentile Legalism.** Lloyd Gaston perceptively notes that "it was because of this unclarity that legalism—the doing of certain works to win God's favor and be counted righteous—arose a Gentile and not a Jewish problem at all" ("Paul and the Torah" in *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, ed. by Alan T. Davis [New York, 1979], p. 58). Salvation was for all who were members of the covenant community, but since the God-fearers were not under the covenant, they had to establish their own righteousness to gain such an assurance of salvation.

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

Before his conversion and divine commission to the Gentiles, Paul apparently believed that Gentiles had to conform to the whole Mosaic law, including circumcision, in order for them to be saved. This is suggested by the phrase "but if I still preach circumcision" (Gal 5:11), which implies that at one time he did preach circumcision as a basis of salvation. After his conversion and divine commission to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, Paul understood that Gentiles share in the blessing of salvation without having to become part of the covenant community through circumcision. To defend this conviction, Paul appeals in Romans 4 and Galatians 3 to the example of Abraham who became the father of all who believe by faith before he was circumcised.

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

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

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

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

Why does Paul attack so harshly the Sinai covenant which, as we have seen, contained provisions of grace and forgiveness (for example, tabernacle-Ex 25-30) besides principles of conduct (Ex 20-23)? The answer to these questions is to be found in Paul's concern to establish the legitimacy of the salvation of the Gentiles as Gentiles. To accomplish this goal, Paul attacks the understanding of the law(covenant) as an exclusive document of election. This does not mean that he denies the possibility of salvation to Jews who accepted Christ as the fulfillment of the Sinai covenant. On the contrary, he explicitly acknowledges that just as he was "entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised," so "Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised" (Gal 2:7).

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

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

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

### **CHANGES NEEDED IN THE METHODS AND STRUCTURE OF THE WCG**

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

**A Democratic Method to Introduce Doctrinal Changes.** In your letter, Pastor Tkach, you reject my suggestion that doctrinal changes should be widely discussed and adopted only with the broad support of the membership. You feel that "some things are so morally reprehensible that consensus is out of the question. . . . Paul did not wait for consensus to proclaim the gospel unadulterated with Judaism. Neither should we." Pastor Tkach, may I remind you that you are not the Apostle Paul. Furthermore Paul himself did lay before the brethren "the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain" (Gal 2:2). If Paul felt that he would be running in vain without gaining approval for his "Gospel of the uncircumcision" (Gal 2:7) from the leaders of the



church, don't you think that it would be wise for you to submit your new-found truths to your ministerial council or a representative body of your church?

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

If I as a teacher were to use my classes to promote new teachings that are contrary to the beliefs of my church that pays my salary, I would be betraying the trust of those who have appointed me. The only ethical thing for me to do would be to resign and look for a job elsewhere. Pastor Tkach, the moment when you felt that in good conscience you could no longer subscribe to the fundamental beliefs of your church, you had two options: (1) Submit your new doctrines to the consideration of your ministers and members and wait for them to accept them and support you; or (2) If that proved impossible, you could have resigned and started your own church, like some of your ministers have done when they could not accept the doctrinal changes which your father began to introduce.

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

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

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

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

Christian regards

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph.D.  
Professor of Theology and Church History, Andrews University  
4990 Appian Way, Berrien Springs, MI 49103, USA.

### 3. AN OPEN LETTER TO SAMUELE BACCHIOCCHI FROM PASTOR-GENERAL JOSEPH W TKACH

April 1, 1996

To Internet surfers interested in the Worldwide Church of God,

As some of you know, earlier this year I cancelled a scheduled meeting that Greg Albrecht, Mike Feazell and I had planned to have with Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi of Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan. We had anticipated this meeting as an opportunity to discuss with him the inspiring doctrinal and administrative changes taking place within the Worldwide Church of God. For several years we have communicated on a similar basis with various Christian leaders who shared a loving concern for the Worldwide Church of God.

Many have expressed great joy at the reformation and renewal that is sweeping through our fellowship. That reformation is made possible only because we have a gracious God who has called us to Jesus Christ. We have heard that call and responded. His grace excites us today more than ever before. How wonderful it is that the Holy Spirit has led us out of the slavery of legalism and into the freedom of Christian grace.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer explained, Christian grace is not cheap grace. It has its demands. God, through the cross, justifies the sinner but not the sin. God calls on the justified sinner to repent, to live a life of Christ-inspired love. Christian discipleship requires that we each carry a metaphorical cross in sacrificial service to the Lord and to humankind. To fully live as Christians is liberating and demanding. With Christian liberty comes Christian responsibility.

Because Dr. Bacchiocchi advocates the Saturday-Sabbath as a Christian ethic, we expected he would be concerned that we no longer share his views. We now accept the New Testament teaching that the Mosaic law is not binding on Christians (Ephesians 2:13-16). It is by grace we are saved through faith, not by works (verse 8). Believers do not have to live as Jews. They are free to live as gentiles (Galatians 2:14). They are free to keep or not keep days (Romans 14:5-6).

As Paul instructed the Galatians, the Worldwide Church of God has cast out the bondwoman -- the old covenant and its laws (Galatians 4:21-31). What God binds on Christians is not the shadow of the Sabbath but the substance of Jesus (Colossians 2:16-17). In him we have our rest (Matthew 11:28-30).

While we anticipated Dr. Bacchiocchi's concern, we nevertheless expected our dialogue with him to be from positions of mutual respect. It was therefore disappointing to us to read his article in the Fall 1995 Adventists Affirm. As my private letter to him stated, that unless he addressed in writing our specific concerns about the article there could be no benefit in our meeting together. Rather than respond to me privately, Dr. Bacchiocchi chose to post his response on the Internet. Apparently Dr. Bacchiocchi wishes to make a private correspondence a public dispute. Because he did not give his readers access to my letter, they had no way of judging whether he adequately -- or even accurately -- handled my concerns. (Observers of Seventh-day Adventism will also wonder how accurately his response to me deals with the internal tensions within his own Seventh-day Adventist church. Many would find his response inadequate.) With this as background, in a letter to Dr. Bacchiocchi, I now address specific issues that his comments on the Internet raised.

In Christian love,

Joseph Tkach (Jr.)

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April 1, 1996

Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi  
Biblical Perspectives  
4990 Appian Way  
Berrien Springs MI 49103

Dear Dr. Bacchiocchi,

We are surprised that you have responded publicly on the Internet to my private letter. You have chosen to make a private communication into a public dispute. While we do not intend to cause offense, our feeling is that this was extremely inappropriate because your open letter gives disinformation to anyone who reads it. This happens because they have not seen my brief and private letter to you.

I believe that you have confused the issues by combining your response to me with your response to others, while making no distinctions where one begins and the other ends. It is not my intent to accuse you of any malicious action, nevertheless, we believe you have publicly misrepresented my letter to you, and because our first communication was private, some of your readers will be unable to tell how far afield many of your comments are. Since the tone of your letter seems to be extremely corrective, I am surprised that you would have chosen to write a public, open reply. It appears that your expectations for the now-canceled April 29 meeting were quite different from ours. Our expectations were to enjoy a dialogue regarding the issues of unity in the body of Christ.

Your letter mentions a "brief telephone conversation" with one of our "unnamed scholars," who allegedly has favorably commented on one of your books. We are concerned that you may have spoken to someone from another organization posing to be one of our representatives. I believe that you can appreciate the curiosity this arouses. If we had a brief telephone conversation with and product endorsement from a Seventh-day Adventist scholar who had misgivings about current Adventist teachings, we would not assume that he or she expressed the concerns of the Adventist leadership. Had important doctrinal changes occurred within Adventism that were of interest to us, it would be folly for us to assume that Adventist denominational leaders who wished to dialogue with us about those changes were now questioning them. How arrogant it would be for us to think they were coming to learn from us where they had gone wrong. Yet your public response to my private letter gives us the impression that you made just those kinds of assumptions about us. Your letter mentions that you were unaware that the unity of the Adventist church was threatened by Adventists questioning its foundational doctrines. You went further and said that you were unaware that anyone was threatening to split Adventism.

My letter does not make such a statement. I never said that the Seventh-day Adventist church was in danger of splitting. It appears to me that you are reading into my words what was not there. What I said was, "If the Seventh-day Adventist church were to split, would we be treating you fairly if we naively accepted all the stories told us by those opposing you? Would it then be fair if we took those views and published them as facts, without even consulting you about them? Would it be proper for us to use their biased views without qualification as weapons against those within our own denomination with whom we might disagree?" In these comments I was not prophesying Adventism's future. In a private communication, I was giving you the opportunity to respond privately to questions we had about your ethics -- questions arising from both what you wrote and how you wrote about us for Adventists Affirm. Dr. Bacchiocchi, I would have appreciated a private response, clarifying any misunderstanding that I may have had. Further, I had hoped you would have written to Adventists Affirm to correct the mistakes you made in that article.

Your misreading of my comments raises serious questions as to your exegetical methods. If you misinterpret my simple letter, how can we have confidence that you properly read Paul? (You reminded me that I am not the apostle Paul. Thank you, however, I believe that we both know that I am not under such an illusion. I respect Paul and his inspired writings.) I did say that the Seventh-day Adventist church is under internal stress. That is true, as many Adventists know. Questions about the validity of Ellen White's prophetic gift and whether she plagiarized the writings of others have not gone away. Concerns whether Adventism properly understands grace continue to arise. There are Adventist leaders who doubt the Adventist sanctuary doctrine. These are foundational issues for Adventism. stresses within Adventism. For example, the March 9, 1996 Los Angeles Times reported on what it called a "gadfly organization" of Adventists. The article described the Association of Adventist Forums as a group of "unofficial churchgoers [who] promote intellectual freedom through conferences and magazines that sometimes challenge church policies and interpretations." Among those scheduled to speak at their San Diego meeting were the highly-regarded church historian Edwin Gaustad and Charles Teel Jr., an instructor at the Adventist-run La Sierra University. When your open letter to me mentioned "liberal" theologians whom you apparently consider a threat to Adventism, did you have these men or this organization in mind?

Most likely you are familiar with and may well have authored articles for Ministry magazine, a Seventh-day Adventist periodical directed toward professional clergy. Over the past several years Ministry has discussed the kinds of issues to which I was referring. The August 1994 issue of Ministry published George R. Knight's article "Adventist Theology: 1844 to 1994." One of its subheads read "State 4: 'Adventism in theological tension' (1956-1994)." This portion of the article summarizes what it calls the "theological factions" within Adventism. It calls these divisions among Seventh-day Adventist theologians as "serious." Knight observes that "Adventism is also being challenged by a polarizing dynamic. While some individuals fear liberalism and appear to be reaching for the fundamentalism of the 1920s (apparently confusing it with the mind-set of pristine Christianity . . . ), other Adventist thought leaders . . . are in danger of backing into an advocacy of the liberal Christianity of the 1920s." Knight calls for moderation. The February 1995 Ministry published several letters in response to the above article. One reader wrote "Connecting our past disunities to present disunity brings both continuity and understanding . . . . It is sheer folly to continue on as we are, dividing and subdividing, and defrocking into purer and yet purer Adventists -- until only I am left." Another writer spoke of "the church's theological tangle."

Six months later, the July-August 1995 Ministry carried two informative advertisements. One asked in bold letters, "Will the church survive?" Speaking of the Seventh-day Adventist church, the advertisement for the book *The Fragmenting of Adventism* said, "But the hardest challenges, and the brightest hopes, may lie just ahead as Adventism confronts the factors that threaten it with fragmentation." Further into the magazine another advertisement asked, "Who's Got the Truth?" This advertisement was for a book by that same title as the question it asked, *Who's Got the Truth?* One part of the advertisement read "From the author of *Adventist Hot Potatoes*, Martin Weber, comes this Berean inquiry into five different presentations of the gospel." These five different presentations are from five different Adventist theologians.

Given these articles published by your denomination, it seems incongruous that you would construe from my statements about the stresses within Adventism that I claim that Adventism is threatening to split. I never claimed such a thing. But my claim that Adventism is under stress is true. In my original letter I charged that "It seems clear to us that you chose to believe what some in the United Church of God told you without seeking to verify their claims." You deny this charge by referring to contacts you had with Carroll Miller, a writer in our Personal Correspondence Department, contacts with the office of my deceased father, and your having read some of our doctrinal material. While I do not know the circumstances of why my father chose not to meet with you, his overwhelming schedule and his terminal cancer may have been factors.

In that same context you mention that someone has accused you of exaggerating the number of members that we have lost. However, nothing in my communication with you ever made such a claim. Nor have I communicated this charge against you to anyone else. To whom then are you responding? To the casual reader it appears that you are responding to false charges made by me. I certainly would not want to believe that you were purposefully disinforming people who would not have the benefit of objectivity from reading my letter to you. May I also point out that I never claimed you had no contact with us. What I stated, and still assert, is the inappropriateness of publishing "what some in the United Church of God told you without seeking to verify their claims." Contacting us is not the same thing as verifying false accusations. I am very surprised that you did not take any time to confirm or refute specific charges which could have easily been accomplished without ever meeting with my father. It is painful for us to see that you chose to repeat unsubstantiated accusations anyway. I specifically have in mind your inference in *Adventists Affirm* that my father in January 1995 high-handedly and arrogantly was "prepared to enforce it [the new theology] by firing and/or disfellowshipping recalcitrant pastors and church members. Upwards to 170 ministers resigned or were terminated."

Unmentioned by you is that many significant theological changes had already taken place in the church since the death of Herbert Armstrong in 1986. We disfellowshipped no ministers because they continued to believe old teachings. Most were still employed in our ministry. Our approach to the changes announced in late 1994 and early 1995 was no different. As I wrote to you in my letter, "Much time, effort and money have been spent patiently addressing questions that many have raised. That we have done so is a well-documented historical fact completely missing from your material. Disagreements have never been grounds for disfellowshipment. Unethical behavior has been." Further, your article made no distinction between resignation and termination. A casual reading of your article leaves the clear impression that most ministers who went with United were terminated, when the truth is they resigned. There was no high-handed attempt to purge them. In fact, we left some men in pastorates whose attitudes, preaching and counseling were openly against our changes in the hope they could be redeemed. Yet those who read your article might never know any of this. Unwittingly, you have given them a completely distorted picture.

Unfortunately, this is not the only distortion in your response. It appears that you assumed that we are unaware of sociological studies on church decline that emphasize how the relaxation of strict moral codes generally produces a decline in church roles. You unnecessarily and inaccurately applied a quotation from Dean Kelly to our situation. You cite Kelly as writing, "There is nothing you cannot justify doing, if you hold yourself to the criterion of love as you interpret it." Of course that is true. But I am offended that you would use this statement to imply that we have set ourselves up to decide what is love -- that we are out to justify anything. You neglected to mention that even the relaxation of human-made standards will reduce church membership. So what is a church to do, maintain its strict human-created standards just so that it can keep its members? Is that what you suggest? We believe that a church ought to free its membership from the slavery of man-made standards so that they can freely serve Jesus Christ. That is what we have done.

Surely you do not hold that organizational preservation is a higher ideal than the courageous proclamation of the truth. Unfortunately, this idea comes through both in your original Adventists Affirm article and in your public response. You spend many words to explain how what we have done will lead to the dangerous numeric decline of any denomination. You urge Adventists not to follow our example for the sake of preserving Adventism's present numeric strength.

While I definitely wish to preserve the Worldwide Church of God, denominational preservation is not why our Lord came in the flesh and gave his life as a ransom. I have been called to follow Jesus Christ. If in following Jesus our denomination must experience losses, then we must bear it as we follow our Sovereign Lord. Our belief, however, is that we will soon hit bottom and eventually start to grow. We believe that there is power in the gospel and we believe in preaching Jesus Christ. We believe that salvation is by Christ alone. Faith alone. Grace alone. Salvation is not conditional on what denominations add to the gospel.

We seek the preservation of the Worldwide Church of God not for its own sake, but because we believe it can be an effective tool in our Lord's hands. That a denomination such as ours can make so many dramatic biblically-sound changes in such a short time is a powerful witness to the work of the Holy Spirit. Please do not let your concerns about the Sabbath day obscure your vision of what God is doing here. Our goal is not to preserve a monument to our past, but to reform and renew the church for its future. Our ministry and members have been increasingly yielding to the lead of the Holy Spirit. Our reformation and renewal is underway.

There seems to be an inherent contradiction in what you have written. You claim that you had no intent to use us as a whipping boy to deal with issues within your own denomination. Yet you admit your comments about us in Adventists Affirm were intended to warn Adventists about what might happen to Adventism if the Adventist church were to lower its standards. As we said in our first letter, "We do not appreciate being used as the whipping boy to rally support around your traditionalist views. This offense is magnified by your misrepresentation of our recent troubles and your apparent maligning of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ." We have not lowered any God-given standards. While we no longer see the Sabbath as literally applicable under the New Covenant -- our rest is in Christ -- the law of Christian love has its demands. We are teaching those demands as never before.

For example, we are speaking out against racism and working toward racial reconciliation. We are involving our membership in community service, volunteer work and assistance to charities, instead of turning our backs to human need. We are insisting that members treat each other with more grace, that they give encouragement and support rather than condemnation to those struggling against sin. We have repented of falsely condemning other Christians as unbelievers simply because they did not agree with our doctrines. We are purging culturally insensitive attitudes from our midst. We are praying more and praising Jesus more. And we are insisting that our pastors recognize and develop the God-given gifts that every member has.

Where once our members might just "pay and pray," they now find the church actively challenging them to live a fully Christian life in all of their relationships. Our members are discovering how a narrow sectarianism once led them to misunderstand the true nature of Christian love. They can now reconcile with those whom they alienated through their misguided zeal for an Old Testament-based legalism. Christian love has helped free them. We do not set our own standards. Our standard of love is Christ and the cross. We ask ourselves, how can we incarnate that same love to all of humankind? We teach that it is not enough for Christians to sit in the pews. God has called us to spread the good news of Christ's crucifixion, burial and resurrection. Christians everywhere should share this good news. Christian love demands that of us. Were we to meet personally, I would like to read through Galatians 2 together --

and discuss the role of Peter and Paul. As a Christian, how do you feel about these "changes," Dr. Bacchiocchi? I cannot imagine that you would characterize them as "liberal." Our members are not free to pursue their own carnal inclinations! We are not morally permissive! You say our literature impresses you as being permissive, yet you offer no such evidence of it. I am also chagrined at your use of language. In my first letter I pointed out the inaccuracy of implying that our changes came about through the influence of liberal theologians who deny the authority of the Bible. As we believe you well know, our theologians do not deny the authority of Scripture. I wrote, "We suspect your real concern is that they do not agree with your views of the Sabbath."

Your public response confirms that impression. I appreciate that you did apologize for failing to define in Adventists Affirm what you meant by "liberal theologian." However, you proceeded to coin your own phrase -- "Evangelical Liberals" -- to which you had to give your own definition. You defined an "Evangelical Liberal" as they "who in theory accept the divine revelation and inspiration of the Bible, but in practice they find ways to explain away some of its fundamental teachings." Because you believe that the seventh-day Sabbath is a fundamental biblical teaching for Christians, it is apparent that almost all Bible-believing Christians fall under your pejorative label of "Evangelical Liberal." Even those Seventh-day Adventists who see a biblical basis for the ordination of women are accused by you of denying "fundamental teachings." According to your view, they are obviously dangerous liberals. We would suggest a very different approach. We may have disagreements with people who hold such views, but just because someone who views Scripture as authoritative disagrees with our understanding of the current application of some of its teachings is no reason to disparage them as "liberal." Remember, Paul was considered liberal by some of his opponents. To support your charge against us you created a straw man about what we believe. You said, "According to your interpretation Moses traced the Sabbath back to creation when in reality it was his own new creation." We never said any such thing. We have consistently understood the Sabbath to be a creation of God and it is disappointing, to say the least, that you made such an accusation. Perhaps, this would have been avoided if you would have checked with us before misstating what we believe. An issue that you continue to avoid is the obvious point that the Bible gives no Sabbath command until God gave it to Israel. The Bible never commands gentile nations to keep the Sabbath. Never tells them they were wrong for not keeping it. Never punishes them for breaking it. Why? Because God gave the Sabbath to Israel as a sign of his covenant relationship with them. If everyone was to keep it, then it could not have been Israel's sign.

When Jesus came, he never told gentiles to keep the Sabbath, nor did the early church. The Sabbath was made for man, Jesus said, and the men God gave it to were Israelites. Now that their covenant has ended, the sign of that covenant has also ended. Galatians shows that once a person becomes a Christian, they are free to live as gentiles. As Paul told Peter, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force gentiles to follow Jewish customs?" (Galatians 2:14, NIV). Yet you would have the church tell gentiles to keep a day God never told them to keep.

In the past, we have suffered from such misguided zeal, so it is not difficult for us to see that you have fallen prey to the same mistake. By emphasizing the sign of the Sabbath, you are supporting ministers and members of two of our splinter groups. You are seen by these people as legitimizing their actions and teachings. Among these two factions you are unwittingly supporting are beliefs such as: people will become very God when Christ returns, the Sabbath and annual festivals are required for salvation, there are two separate Gods, the Holy Spirit is only a power, and the pseudo-historicity of British-Israelism.

Certainly you would agree that there is a difference between God making an unconditional covenant in response to Abraham's obedience and a covenant conditioned to that obedience. The Abrahamic covenant had no conditions attached to it. The Mosaic covenant did. When you say, "There is no such thing as unconditional salvation" we agree. The condition is faith in Jesus as the Christ. But you then add, "Salvation is free to those who freely accept it, by living in accordance with God's principles by His enabling grace."

If we understand you, this free salvation you speak of actually is conditioned on "living in accordance with God's principles," i.e., conditioned on works. While we believe that Christian faith produces good works, and in that sense good works accompany faith, it cannot be that receiving salvation is "by living in accordance with God's principles." Salvation is not by works. Why? Because none of us have lived up to that standard. We are all sinners. No Christian perfectly meets the conditions you specify, no matter how moral he or she is. That is why "works righteousness" fails. Legalism is not the gospel.

In your discussion on gentile legalism you refer to Marcus Barth's discussion in the Anchor Bible of the Pauline phrase "works of the law" (Ephesians, Anchor Bible, pages 244-248). As of 1963, this was not known in any first-century Jewish writings. Now what are we to make of this? You are not suggesting that Barth supports your Sabbatarianism, are you? Or are you suggesting he is a scholar we should all respect? I thought this man was an "Evangelical Liberal"! Why then are you turning to him as authoritative? This appears inconsistent with your stated position about "liberal theologians."

Of course Marcus Barth does not support Sabbatarianism. As he writes in that same article, "In the New Testament the term 'works of the law' and polemics against 'righteousness by law' occur only in contexts where the imposition of some legal elements upon the Gentiles is discussed. . . . The imposition of the selected principles upon Gentiles is restricted. Of the commandments which 'some' (anonymous subjects) sought to force upon Gentile Christians, the only things explicitly mentioned are circumcision, dietary laws, observance of the Sabbath, and a festival calendar." Two paragraphs later Barth comments that Paul "was aware of the absurdity of imposing the law given to the elected people of Israel alone upon nations and individuals who were not members of God's [Mosaic] covenant." Like the New Testament church, the Worldwide Church of God similarly rejects the imposition of Jewish law on gentile believers. It is sad to see that you quoted Marcus Barth out of context. (As former legalists and Sabbatarians were aware of the clever ways to quote others out of context. We are deeply sorry for having done so.) Perhaps what I should ask you at this point is, Do you believe God requires Christians to keep the Sabbath to be saved? Of course, not one New Testament verse says that. It does say that Peter was free to live as a gentile, and that Roman Christians could choose not to observe special days to God. Sabbatarianism is never a condition of or sign of salvation. Because this is the New Testament approach, that is now how it is in the Worldwide Church of God.

What you fail to see is that Paul does not hold up the Mosaic law as a moral standard of Christian conduct. Rather, he holds up Jesus Christ, the suffering of the cross, the law of Christ, the fruit and leadership of the Holy Spirit, nature, creation and moral principles that were generally understood throughout the gentile world as the basis of Christian ethics. He never -- I repeat, never -- argues that the law is the foundation of Christian ethics. Paul looks to Golgotha, not Sinai. The most we can say is that on one or two occasions he refers to the law for examples, but he never points to the Mosaic law as foundational for Christian ethics. Paul points to the cross, not to the tables of stone. He does this both soteriologically and ethically. Finally we want to address your concerns about our hierarchical church government, and the way in which we have introduced changes. It appears that you believe a democratically formed consensus should be achieved before any church introduces monumental changes. Without arguing whether such a church government is biblical, let us say that democracy is no guaranteed avenue to truth or righteousness. Often, democratic church structures have resisted God's righteousness. The pre-Civil War splits between Northern and Southern churches over slavery are but one illustration. Would you have us believe that regarding the Sabbath, a Christian denomination should not become Sabbatarian until their members vote for it? Was it wrong for us to reject British-Israelism without taking a vote on it? Our church structure has been historically hierarchical. Changes have always been introduced from the top. Our members and ministers have understood this and lived with this from the early 1950s. If we were to become more democratic, such a change would have to be made from the top. To take a vote of our members to see if they wanted such a change would have to be a hierarchical decision.

It has also been our tradition that the one at the top of the hierarchy did not occupy that position simply to support established church doctrine. Unlike all of our other ministers, the man at the top had the responsibility to change doctrine when he believed the Bible demanded it. So, while other ministers had the moral responsibility to resign if they felt a need to preach against church doctrine, the man over our denomination had the moral responsibility to speak out. If he failed to speak out, then he was not fulfilling an important purpose for which he was installed.

Your suggestion that my father or I should have resigned because he no longer believed some of our long-held doctrines fails to understand both our church government and how it has historically operated. In speaking out he fulfilled his responsibility. Under our circumstances a failure to speak out might be grounds for resignation. Further, because God had placed in his hands the means to bring spiritual renewal and biblical integrity to our church, my father was obligated to God to exercise that authority. We rejoice that he did so.

We do believe that the New Covenant requires that we reevaluate how the church hierarchy relates to our lay members. Toward that end we are moving to decentralize many of our functions and to equip God's people for ministry. We are seriously examining what many Christian leaders feel has gone lacking in the modern church, the priesthood of all believers. With that in mind we are behaving more graciously toward one another and toward the world.

Undoubtedly there remains much we need to do.

You have been in contact with a few of our ministers, and called one of our Pasadena employees with the intent of selling copies of books you have authored. We have read several of your books and have explained that we have no interest in promoting the sales of them because many of your interpretations have been discredited by objective biblical scholarship. I conclude with my opinion that it would be better for you to promote unity within the body of Christ than to promote the sales of your books. I really prefer that you not carry on such a public debate with us. If you wish to communicate with the administrators of our church fellowship, please allow us the courtesy of conversation together, rather than orchestrate a public controversy.

May our Lord bless you as you seek His will and work for the furtherance of His kingdom.

In Christian love,

Joseph Tkach (Jr.)



## **4. BACCHIOCCHI'S REPLY TO PASTOR GENERAL JOSEPH TKACH, WORLDWIDE CHURCH OF GOD**

A PERSONAL NOTE: Pastor General Joseph Tkach of the Worldwide Church of God had requested to dialogue with me here at Andrews University on April 29. After reading an article where I examine the current crises of the WCG, he cancelled the appointment. I decided to address some of the issues of his New Covenant Theology in an Open Letter I sent him and posted on the Internet last February 11. On April 1 Pastor Joseph Tkach replied to my Open Letter by posting himself an Open letter. What you are about to read is my response to his latest letter where I address first few personal allegations and then his understanding of the law and the Sabbath. These are issues that have split the WCG, causing a massive exodus of over 70,000 members. I trust you find this five parts letter informative.

April 15-1996

Pastor Joseph W. Tkach  
Worldwide Church of God  
Pasadena,  
California 91129

Dear Pastor Tkach:

Thank you for taking time from your busy schedule to respond to my Open Letter with your own Open Letter dated April 1. I recognize that preparing an open letter is time consuming for both of us. Yet I believe that we are rendering a vital service to thousands of your former and current WCG members who have been left confused by the doctrinal changes you and your father have introduced. Furthermore our dialogue provides food for thought to many other Christians who are seeking for a fuller understanding of how the law in general and the Sabbath in particular relate to our salvation in Christ.

During the past few weeks I have received countless letters and telephone calls expressing appreciation for my Open Letter to you and the WCG. Truly I can say that during the past 25 years of research and writing, I have never received so many expressions of gratitude from so many people. What these people appreciate most is the effort I made in my Open Letter to examine your New Covenant Theology. They feel that there was a desperate need for a trained scholar to examine and respond to the arguments you have marshalled in support of your doctrinal changes. In replying publicly to your previous and present letter, I wish to make it known at the outset that my intent has been and is to examine not your moral integrity but some aspects of your New Covenant theology that you have embraced. An indication of this concern is the fact that in my previous Open Letter I devoted 7 of the 12 pages to an analysis of some aspects of your new theology. The same will be true in this Open Letter.

I will endeavor to deal briefly with some of the questions you have raised about my moral integrity and then proceed to address the real issues, namely, your interpretation of the role of the law in general and of the Sabbath in particular in our Christian life today. I sincerely hope and pray that this open dialogue will help not only your WCG members but also many other Christians who seek to understand the relevance of God's law for today. For the sake of clarity, I will submit my response again under major headings.

### **MAKING A PRIVATE COMMUNICATION INTO A PUBLIC DISPUTE**

In your Open Letter, Pastor Tkach, you express surprise and displeasure that I allegedly chose "to make a private communication into a public dispute." This allegation surprises me because I stated in the opening paragraph of my Open Letter that I was responding not only to your letter but also to many former and current members of your WCG who have contacted me in recent months. My primary concern was not merely to reply to your letter, but to address the issues raised by your New Covenant Theology to which I devoted the largest portion of my letter. These are the issues which have left thousands of your members bitter and confused. Many of them have contacted me by letter and by phone during this past year because I am known in the Christian community for my research on the Sabbath.

I can appreciate your desire to keep any analysis of your New Covenant Theology as private

correspondence. This is a good "damage control policy," but it hardly helps your members who are confused by your new teachings. So far most of them have heard only your views. No opportunity has been given them in your church papers or in public forums to hear an open discussion of the pro and con of the doctrinal changes you and your father have introduced. You wrote in your letter: "Much time, effort and money have been spent patiently addressing questions that many raised." Surprisingly, in all the WCG study papers and publications that I have read, I have not seen a single article offering a response to your viewpoints. In your letter you endeavor to show at considerable length that in the Adventist church there is theological "stress" because articles and even advertisements in MINISTRY discuss different theological view points. What you seem to ignore, Pastor Tkach, is that our Adventist Church is open enough to allow discussion of different view points even in our church papers. To my knowledge such openness does not exist in your church. The only views that appear in print are your own. No discussion of other viewpoints is allowed.

Apparently this has been true also at the regional meetings you convened to promote your new doctrines. Many of your members have told me that the discussion has always been one-sided. No one has ever been given equal time to present a reasoned response to your New Theology. This situation may explain why my Open Letter has circulated like wildfire around the world among your former and current members. Many of your members want to hear a scholarly response to your New Theology. I believe that these Open Letters are meeting, at least in part, this deeply felt need.

### **MY CONVERSATION WITH AN "UNNAMED SCHOLAR" OF THE WCG**

Your letter questions the credibility of my reference to a brief telephone conversation I had with an "unnamed scholar" of the WCG who still holds to the validity and value of the Sabbath and Holy Days. You suggest the possibility that I could "have spoken to someone from another organization posing to be one of our representatives." On the basis of this mistaken assumption you go on to argue: "If we had a brief telephone conversation with and product endorsement from a Seventh-day Adventist scholar who had misgivings about current Adventist teachings, we would not assume that he or she expressed the concerns of the Adventist leadership."

You might be interested to know that the "unnamed scholar" is not "someone from another organization," but none other than Herman L. Hoeh, Ph. D., Executive Editor of the WCG. I understand that he is one of the most respected scholars of the WCG church, having served it with distinction for over 40 years. Because of his untarnished reputation, I called him last January at your headquarters in Pasadena to find out if he would be willing to review my latest book *GOD'S FESTIVALS IN SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY* and issue me a brief comment to use in a promotional flier. He graciously agreed to do so and sent me a positive endorsement.

In our telephone conversation Dr. Hoeh reassured me that he still believes in the validity of the Sabbath and Holy Days. It was this experience that led me to assume that you also may be rethinking some of your doctrinal changes and wanted to meet with me here at Andrews to discuss these topics. I chose not to mention the name of Dr. Hoeh in my Open Letter to avoid the risk of exposing him to unnecessary criticism.

### **ATTEMPT TO SELL MY BOOKS TO A FEW OF YOUR MINISTERS**

Another allegation of your Open letter reads as follows: "You have been in contact with a few of our ministers, and called one of our employees with the intent of selling copies of books you have authored. We have read several of your books and have explained that we have no interest in promoting the sale of them because many of your interpretations have been discredited by objective biblical scholarship."

This allegation greatly surprises me because I have never initiated a contact with any of your ministers for the simple reason that no directory of your ministers is available to the general public. In the past when the WCG still believed in the Sabbath, a good number of your ministers did write to me to request copies of my Sabbath books which we mailed them. Note, however, that not one of your ministers ever gave me the name of a fellow minister I could contact, because this was against the policy of your church.

I do not recall ever calling your office with the intent of selling my books. The first time I called was over a year ago when I spoke with your correspondent Carrol Miller. The purpose of the call was to see if there was any interest on the part of your father to dialogue with me over the doctrinal changes that were creating so much unrest and confusion among your ministers and members. You might be interested to know that it was a local WCG minister

who encouraged me to call your office to offer my services. Mr. Miller requested a set of my three Sabbath books which I mailed. Later he communicated with me by letter saying that the proposed meeting with your father was not feasible at that time.

The second time I called your headquarter was last January to ask Dr. Herman L. Hoeh if he would be willing to review my book **GOD'S FESTIVALS IN SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY**, which he graciously agreed to do. The allegation that I called one of your employees with the intent of selling my books boggles my mind, because it does not make sense. How in the world could I even imagine calling your office to sell my Sabbath books when I knew so well that you had given up the Sabbath? It would be like my trying to sell refrigerators to the Eskimos. I would like to believe that I do have enough common sense not to do such senseless things.

### **MANY OF MY INTERPRETATIONS HAVE BEEN DISCREDITED**

Another allegation of your Open Letter is that "many of your [that is, my] interpretations have been discredited by objective biblical scholarship." This allegation surprises me, because my scholarship is highly respected even by the contributors to the symposium **FROM SABBATH TO THE LORD'S DAY** which forms the basis of your study paper on the "Sabbath," published May 2, 1995. On the very first page of the paper you acknowledge your indebtedness to this symposium produced by seven doctoral students from Cambridge University, in England and published by Zondervan in 1982.

You may have noticed, Pastor Tkach, that the introductory chapter describes at great length "the vast influence" that my work has exerted in the English-speaking world because "it is well written and easy to follow, even though it is extensively documented. On the whole it has received very positive reviews" (p. 15). If you look at the index of authors you will notice that I am by far the most quoted author, being referred to throughout the book 56 times. You might be interested to know that some of the contributors to this symposium wrote to me saying that they changed their minds on several areas after reading my research. For example, they accepted my conclusions regarding the post-apostolic origin of Sunday observance coming as a result of an interplay of social, political, and pagan factors. This is evidenced, for example, by the following statement on pages 135-136 of the book: "We must conclude that it is barely imaginable that first-day Sabbath observance commenced before the Jerusalem council. Nor can we stop there; we must go on to maintain that first-day Sabbath observance cannot easily be understood as a phenomenon of the apostolic age or of apostolic authority at all." The source given in support of this statement (footnote 266) is my book **FROM SABBATH TO SUNDAY**, pages 153-156.

To further show the respect that my Sabbath research enjoys in scholarly community, I could submit hundreds of positive comments from reviews of respected scholars of all denominations. For the sake of brevity I will submit only a half dozen comments.

"From Sabbath to Sunday is a thorough and painstaking piece of research, which every future investigator will have to take into account." Bruce M. Metzger, Professor of NT, PRINCETON THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

"From Sabbath to Sunday is a well-researched and well-written treatise which combines erudition, devotion and an irenic spirit. The implications are staggering not only for the Sabbath/Sunday question, but for the larger question of the relation between the Old and New Testaments" Don A Carson, Ph. D., Editor, FROM SABBATH TO THE LORD'S DAY.

"Regardless of one's ecclesiastical orientation, he will find Dr. Bacchiocchi's study of Sunday observance a most impressive, helpful work of first rank scholarship." Vernon C. Grounds, President, DENVER CONSERVATIVE BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

"A thoughtful reading of Divine Rest for Human Restlessness may change your life for the better." Robert T. Fauth, President, EDEN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY.

"Divine Rest for Human Restlessness is a definitive treatment of Christendom's most neglected commandment." Review, CHRISTIANITY TODAY "From Sabbath to Sunday is a remarkable ecumenical portent. After reading this solid piece of research any reasonable person must question the general easy uncritical acceptance of Sunday as the Lord's Day." Marcus Ward, The Expository Times, England

## **DISAGREEMENTS HAVE NEVER BEEN THE GROUND FOR DISFELLOWSHIP**

In your Open Letter, Pastor Tkach, you claim that "disagreements have never been grounds for disfellowship. Unethical behaviour has been." I referred to this statement few days ago at a Sabbath Conference attended mostly by former ministers and members of the WCG. Their reaction was surprising. They erupted in a loud laugh. When later I asked some of them why they laughed, they told me that they found your statement amusing because it is so contrary to what many of them have experienced.

During this past year over 200 of your former ministers have contacted me. When I asked them, Why did you leave your ministry in the WCG? the most common answer was, "I had no other choice. I either accepted the new teachings or resigned." I have in my possession letters from two current teachers at Ambassador University who expect to be terminated by the end of this school year, because they have not embraced your new teachings. They wrote to me to find out if there might be any openings for teaching positions here at Andrews University.

It is hard for me to believe your claim, Pastor Tkach, that "there was no high-handed attempt to purge them [recalcitrant ministers]," when these men say that they had no choice but to resign. If half of the ministers of our Adventist church were forced to resign because they were unwilling to accept doctrinal changes implemented by our leaders, it would be difficult to believe that our leaders were being tolerant toward them.

You claim that "unethical behaviour" and not disagreements has been the ground for disfellowship. I am wondering, what do you consider to be "unethical behaviour"? Surely those who chose to resign or leave the church because in good conscience they could not accept your new teachings can hardly be accused of unethical behaviour.

## **DRAMATIC CHANGES WITNESS TO THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

In your Open Letter, Pastor Tkach, you see in the dramatic doctrinal changes introduced in the WCG in such a short time a clear indication of the work of the Holy Spirit. You wrote: "That a denomination such as ours can make so many dramatic biblically-sound changes in such a short time is a powerful witness to the work of the Holy Spirit." I am not in a position to judge what role the Holy Spirit has played in the dramatic doctrinal changes you and your father have made in your church. It would seem to me, however, that the work of the Holy Spirit can be more readily recognized in changes that preserve the unity of church rather than in those that split a church. We are told that when the Holy Spirit was manifested on the day of Pentecost the believers were in "one accord" (Acts 1:14). In Ephesians 4:3 Paul exhorts us "to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

In the formative days of our Adventist church Bible Conferences were held to discuss doctrinal differences. One such difference was the time for beginning and ending the Sabbath. Differing views were held: from sunrise to sunrise, from midnight to midnight, from 6:00 p. m. to 6:00 p.m., and from sunset to sunset. The brethren searched the Scriptures, praying for the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The result was that the sunset to sunset principle was accepted without causing any split in the church.

Sometimes divisions occur in the church because some are so eager to implement needed reforms too fast without giving time for the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of fellow believers. In 1872 Ellen White offered sensible counsel to our Adventist church regarding reforms: "We must go no faster than we can take those with us whose consciences and intellects are convinced of the truths we advocate" (Testimonies vol. 3, p.20). To a large extent the Adventist church has heeded this counsel and this may explain why in our history we have had very few off-shoots. This has hardly been the case in the history of your WCG. The March 25 issue of IN-TRANSITION carries an article by Alan Ruth entitled, "WCG offshoots now number more than 75." The article is basically a directory with the name, address, and founder of each the 75 churches or organizations that have recently come out of the WCG. In my view such a proliferation of offshoots does not bespeak of the work of the Holy Spirit manifested in the unity of the church.

## **THE SABBATH WAS MADE FOR ISRAEL AND NOT FOR MANKIND**

There are several other personal allegations in your Open Letter that I would like to address, but to do so would make this letter exceedingly long and ultimately detract from my major concern to focus on some important doctrinal issues. So I will respond to these at some other time.

At the root of the debate is your view that the Sabbath is Mosaic in its origin and consequently was meant to be observed only by the Jews. I have traced this view historically in a paper I presented at an International Sabbath Symposium sponsored by the University of Denver and attended by Catholic, Protestant and Jewish scholars. The paper was published in the book *THE SABBATH IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS*, available from Crossroads publishers. I would be glad to send you a gift copy, if you are interested.

In your Open Letter you state this position as follows: "An issue that you continue to avoid is the obvious point that the Bible gives no Sabbath command until God gave it to Israel. The Bible never commands Gentile nations to keep the Sabbath. Never tells them they were wrong for not keeping it. Never punishes them for breaking it. Why? Because God gave the Sabbath to Israel as a sign of His covenant relationship with them. If everyone was to keep it, then it could not have been Israel's sign."

"When Jesus came, he never told Gentiles to keep the Sabbath, nor did the early church. The Sabbath was made for man, Jesus said, and the men God gave it to were Israelites."

Let me assure you, Pastor Tkach, that I have not intentionally avoided the issue of the origin and nature of the Sabbath. In fact, I have examined these question extensively in my three Sabbath books, *FROM SABBATH TO SUNDAY*, pp. 55-61, *DIVINE REST FOR HUMAN RESTLESSNESS*, pp. 35-42, and *THE SABBATH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT*, pp. 42-44, 135-140. For the sake of clarity I will address the three basic assumptions which form the basis of your view on the Mosaic origin and Jewish nature of the Sabbath. 1. "The Bible gives no Sabbath command until God gave it to Israel." 2. "The Bible never commands Gentile nations to keep the Sabbath." 3. God made the Sabbath for the Israelites and not for mankind.

No Sabbath Command Before Sinai. Pastor Tkach, you interpret the absence of a command to observe the Sabbath before the giving of the Ten Commandments as meaning that Sabbathkeeping was unknown before Sinai. Your interpretation ignores the fact that the absence of such a command could well suggest instead that Sabbathkeeping was taken for granted. Four reasons support this explanation.

First, it is important to remember that Genesis is not a book of commands but a book of origins, as the name of the book indicates. Genesis does not contain laws like Exodus, but rather a brief sketch of origins. Though there is no specific mention in Genesis of any of the Ten Commandments, we are told in Genesis 26:5, for example, that "Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." Which commandments did Abraham observe? Did God give one set of moral laws to Abraham and another set to Moses? To me it makes more sense to believe that God's moral principles were known orally during the patriarchal period before they were promulgated in a written form at Sinai. Since no mention is made of any other commandment before Sinai the silence regarding the Sabbath is not exceptional.

Second, we have a similar example of silence regarding the Sabbath between the books of Deuteronomy and 2 Kings, a period of about 600 years. Such silence can hardly be interpreted as non-observance of the Sabbath, since when the first incidental reference occurs in 2 Kings 4:23, it describes the custom of visiting a prophet on the Sabbath.

Third, there are throughout the book of Genesis and the early chapters of Exodus circumstantial evidences for the use of the seven-day week, which would imply the existence of the Sabbath as well. The period of seven days is mentioned four times in the account of the Flood (Gen 7:4,10; 8:10, 12). The "week" is also apparently used in a technical way to describe the duration of the nuptial festivities of Jacob (Gen 29:27) as well as the duration of mourning at his death (Gen 50:10). A like period was observed by the friends of Job to express their condolences to the patriarch (Job 2:13). Possibly all these mentioned ceremonials were terminated by the arrival of the Sabbath. Lastly, the Sabbath is presented in Exodus 16 and 20 as an already existing institution. The instructions for the gathering of the double portion of the manna on the sixth day presuppose a knowledge of the significance of the Sabbath: "On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily" (Ex 16:5). The omission of any explanation for gathering a double portion on the sixth day would be inexplicable if the Israelites had no previous knowledge of the Sabbath.

Similarly in Exodus 20, the Sabbath is presupposed as something already familiar. The commandment does not say "Know the Sabbath day" but "Remember the Sabbath day" (Ex 20:8), thus implying that it was already known. Furthermore, why would God root the Sabbath commandment in His resting, blessing, hallowing of the seventh day

at creation (Ex 20:11), if it was meant to be observed only by the Israelites? After all, there were no Israelites at the time of creation. Why would God go to the trouble of blessing and sanctifying the seventh-day Sabbath at creation, when it was meant to be a blessing only to a Semitic race that would come into existence twenty five centuries later? Why would God establish the Sabbath only for the Jews? Are the spiritual needs of the Jews much different from those of the Christians? I would urge you, Pastor Tkach, to ponder these questions.

To speculate on how the patriarchs kept the Sabbath would be a fruitless endeavor since it would rest more on imagination than on available information. Considering, however, that the essence of Sabbathkeeping is not a place to go to fulfill rituals, but a set time to be with God, ourselves, and others, it seems entirely possible that the patriarchs spent the Sabbath holy hours within their households, engaged in some of the acts of worship described in Genesis, such as prayer (Gen 12:8; 26:25), sacrifice (Gen 12:8; 13:18; 26:25; 33:20), and teaching (Gen 18:19).

"The Bible never commands Gentile nations to keep the Sabbath." Your second assumption is that "the Bible never commands Gentile nations to keep the Sabbath." This assumption ignores a fundamental fact that God never gave two sets of commandments, one for the Jews and one for the Gentiles. God has one plan of salvation with one set of moral principles for all people. In the OT the salvation of the Gentiles is not seen as being separated from that of the Jews, but as being part of it. God called the Israelites to be the channel through whom the blessings of salvation would reach all the families of the earth (Deut 28:10; Ps 22:27; Gal 3:8).

Please note, Pastor Tkach, what the prophet Isaiah says about the Gentiles: "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, every one who keeps the sabbath, and does not profane it, and holds fast my covenant-these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; . . . for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples" (Is 56:6-7). Does not this passage clearly invite the Gentiles to accept the Lord and to keep the Sabbath without profaning it? Why then do you say that "the Bible never commands Gentile nations to keep the Sabbath"?

You may wish to argue that the Gentiles were exempted from Sabbathkeeping together with circumcision by the Jerusalem Council. This is a popular but mistaken view because the Jerusalem Council did exempt the Gentiles from the circumcision but not from the Mosaic law in general or from Sabbathkeeping in particular. This conclusion is supported by two major considerations.

First, the Council endorsed James's proposal to exempt Gentiles from the circumcision because James appealed to Moses for his authority: "For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues" (Acts 15:21). In other words, James argues that his proposal is to be accepted because it expresses what Moses expects from the Gentiles (sojourners) who wish to live among the Israelites. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the four ritual laws are part of the Mosaic law (Lev 17-18).

Second, if the Gentiles were instructed by the Council to respect the four ritual Mosaic laws required of the sojourners who dwelt among the Israelites (Lev 17-18), they could hardly have been exempted from Sabbathkeeping which was seen as even more important than ritual laws. It is only the fact that Gentile Christians were already observing the Sabbath that made it unnecessary for the Jerusalem Council even to discuss it. In the light of these considerations the Jerusalem Council could hardly have considered exempting Gentile Christians from Sabbathkeeping. God made the Sabbath for the Israelites and not for mankind. Your third assumption is that the Sabbath is a Jewish institution because God made it for the Israelites, and not for mankind. In your Open Letter you wrote: "When Jesus came, he never told Gentiles to keep the Sabbath, nor did the early church. The Sabbath was made for man, Jesus said, and the men God gave it to were Israelites."

Pastor Tkach, I find your interpretation of Christ's memorable statement "The Sabbath was made for man" (Mark 2:27) as meaning the Israelites only and not mankind, incredible, to say the least. In 25 years of studying Sabbath literature I never read anywhere that "man-anthropos" means "Israelites," and not "mankind." Surprisingly this interpretation contradicts your study paper on the SABBATH ( May 2, 1995) which says: "When Jesus used the word 'man' in Mark 2:27, he was using in a general sense, without reference to Jews specifically or to gentiles specifically"(p.11). I am wondering what caused you to change your mind. Was it perhaps a new vision, dream, or a direct communication from God? Please let us know.

The truth of the matter is that Christ establishes the permanent validity of the Sabbath by appealing to its original creation when God determined its intended function for the well-being of mankind. Our Lord's choice of

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

The Early Church did not teach Sabbath keeping. You also mention in the statement quoted earlier that the Early Church did not teach Sabbathkeeping. This view ignores the witness of both the New Testament and the early Christian literature which contain implicit and explicit indications of the existence of Sabbathkeeping. In this Open Letter I can only make a brief allusion to a few significant evidences.

The earliest indications of Sabbathkeeping come to us from the New Testament itself. In chapter V of my book **THE SABBATH IN THE NEW TESTAMENT** discuss the numerous New Testament references to the fact and manner of Sabbathkeeping. The unusual coverage given by the Evangelists to the Sabbath healings and teachings of Christ is indicative of the great importance attached to Sabbathkeeping at the time of their writing.

More significant still is the New Testament witness to the new Christian understanding of Sabbathkeeping, namely, a day "to do good" (Matt 12:12), "to save" (Mark 3:4), "to loose" physical and spiritual bonds (Luke 13:16), and to show "mercy" rather than religiosity (Matt 12:7). This new Christian interpretation indicates that the Apostolic Church did observe the Sabbath, but with a new meaning and in a new manner.

The existence of Sabbathkeeping is attested also in the early Post-New Testament references to Sundaykeeping. The Epistle of Barnabas, for example, dated between A.D. 130 and 138, speaks of the observance of the "eighth day" (that is, Sunday) in addition to, rather than as a substitute for the Sabbath. After having argued for the superiority of the eighth-day, Sunday, over the seventh-day Sabbath, the author writes, "This is why we also observe the eighth day with rejoicing" (15:9). 1 The "also"(dio kai) suggests that Sunday observance was introduced as an addition to rather than as a substitute for the Sabbath.

Justin Martyr, writing from Rome by the middle of the second century, differentiates between two types of Sabbathkeepers. He speaks of some Sabbathkeepers who compelled everybody to observe the Sabbath and of other Sabbathkeepers who did not induce others to do likewise. 2 This clearly implies that Sabbathkeepers existed in Rome by the middle of the second century, though they appear to have been a minority.

In the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, dated in the middle of the second century, Jesus is reported to have said, "If you fast not from the world, you will not find the kingdom; if you keep not the Sabbath as Sabbath, you will not see the Father" (chapter 27). Though this saying can hardly be authentic, it does reflect a high view of the Sabbath in the community where the document circulated.

Another document known as the Martyrdom of Polycarp, dated about A.D. 120, records that Polycarp's death occurred on "a Festival Sabbath day" (8:1). This phrase could well reflect Sabbath observance among some Christians in Asia Minor, in spite of their hostile attitude toward the Jews exhibited in the narrative. Another document known as the Martyrdom of Polycarp, dated about A.D. 120, records that Polycarp's death occurred on "a Festival Sabbath day" (8:1). This phrase could well reflect Sabbath observance among some Christians in Asia Minor, in spite of their hostile attitude toward the Jews exhibited in the narrative.

Early in the third century, the Alexandrian theologian, Origen, refers to Sabbath observance in a sermon, saying: "Forsaking therefore the Judaic Sabbath observance, let us see what kind of Sabbath observance is expected of the Christian. On the Sabbath day, nothing of worldly activity should be done. If therefore desisting from all worldly works and doing nothing mundane but being free for spiritual works, you come to church, listen to divine readings and discussions and think of heavenly things, give heed to the future life, keep before your eyes the coming judgment, disregard present and visible things in favor of the invisible and future, this is the observance of the Christian Sabbath."

3 Origen's mention of Sabbathkeeping in Alexandria is significant, since two centuries later two church historians, Socrates Scholasticus and Sozomen, inform us that the custom of assembling together on the Sabbath was practiced everywhere except in Rome and Alexandria. 4 A major factor which contributed to an earlier abandonment of Sabbathkeeping in these two cities was, as I have shown elsewhere, the presence of strong anti-Judaic feelings. For the sake of brevity I will not list other sources indicating the existence of Sabbathkeeping both in the East and

West. One of the most telling evidences of the Sabbathkeeping in early Christianity which is often ignored is found in the ongoing polemic against Sabbathkeeping. The bizarre and sometimes ridiculous arguments which were fabricated to show the superiority of Sunday over the Sabbath, are indicative not only of the existence of, but also of the influence exerted by Sabbathkeepers.

Justin Martyr (about 150), for example, argues that Christians must not observe the Sabbath because it is a Mosaic ordinance given exclusively to the Jews (does it sound familiar?) as a sign of their wickedness to distinguish them for punishment they justly deserve. Instead, Christians are to assemble for worship on Sunday to commemorate the first day creation of light and the resurrection. <sup>5</sup> Justin's false and senseless denunciation of Sabbathkeeping as a trademark of Jewish depravity must be seen as a desperate attempt to wean Christians away from such a practice. Another fitting example of the ongoing Sabbath/Sunday controversy is found in the Syriac Didascalia (c. 250), where the author appeals to Sabbathkeepers to stop saying "that the Sabbath is prior to the first day of the week" because, he argues, when the first day, Sunday, was made at creation "the seventh day was yet unknown." He continues, "which is greater, that which had come into being, and existed, or that which was yet unknown, and of which there was no expectation that it should come to be?"

<sup>6</sup> The author draws another argument from the paternal blessings which are bestowed not on the last but on the first child and also from Matthew 20:16, which says, "The last shall be first and the first last." On the basis of such senseless reasoning he concludes that Sunday is greater than the Sabbath. <sup>7</sup> These bizarre and artificial arguments to justify Sundaykeeping are indicative of the existence and persistence of Sabbathkeeping in early Christianity.

### **IS SABBATHKEEPING REQUIRED TO BE SAVED?**

An important question you asked me in your Open Letter is: "Do you believe God requires Christians to keep the Sabbath to be saved? Off course, not one New Testament verse says that. It does say that Peter was free to live as a gentile, and that Roman Christians could choose not to observe special days to God."

My answer to your first question is simple. Salvation is first and foremost a divine gift and not a human achievement. No person will ever be saved or lost because he or she observed or did not observed the Sabbath. We are not saved by observing commandments but through Christ's atoning death.

Accepting God's gift of salvation means, however, also accepting God's claim to conformity to His will through the grace of Christ. Salvation is a gift of grace but the acceptance of this gift requires a response of obedience which shows the genuineness of our faith. Sabbathkeeping offers us a unique opportunity to respond to God because the consecration of the Sabbath time to the Lord enables us to consecrate our life to Him.

By enjoining us to stop our work, the Sabbath makes us free and available for God's omnipotent grace to work in us. The act of resting on the Sabbath represents the acceptance of salvation by grace and not by words. It represents our renunciation of human efforts to achieve salvation and our willing acceptance of God's gracious provision of salvation. We stop our work on the Sabbath to allow God to work in us.

### **THE MOSAIC LAW IS NO LONGER THE STANDARD OF CHRISTIAN CONDUCT**

A final point I would like to address is your view that the Mosaic law is no longer the standard of Christian conduct. You wrote: "What you fail to see is that Paul does not hold the Mosaic law as a moral standard of Christian conduct. Rather, he holds up Jesus Christ, the suffering of the cross, the law of Christ, the fruit and leadership of the Holy Spirit, nature, creation and the moral principles that were generally understood throughout the gentile world as the basis of Christian ethics. He never -I repeat, never - argues that the law is the foundation of Christian ethics. Paul looks at Golgotha, not Sinai."

My immediate reaction to this statement is one of total disbelief. I cannot believe that you really believe what you wrote. Do you really believe that Paul rejects the moral principles found in the Mosaic law in favor of some hazy ethical principles derived solely from Christ, the Holy Spirit, and moral values as generally accepted in the Gentile world? Which were the moral principles of the Gentile world by which Christians were to live? If your contention were true, it would imply that the moral principles God revealed through Moses, are inadequate and inferior to those found in Christ's teaching and in the Gentile world. Is this what the New Testament teaches?



Did not Christ spend much of His ministry clarifying the spirit and intent of God's law? Did not Christ affirm that He came not to abolish but to fulfil the law (Matt 5:17), that is, to show its fuller meaning? Did not Christ teach that we break the sixth commandment not only by killing with the sword, but also by hating and insulting our brethren (Matt 5:22-23)? Did not Christ teach that we break the seventh commandment not only by committing adultery, but also by looking lustfully at a woman (Matt 5:27-28)? Did not Christ teach that Sabbathkeeping is not only rules to obey but people to love (Matt 12:8; Luke 13:10-17)? Did Christ invent these moral principles or did He clarify the moral principles of the Mosaic law?

Did Paul reject the "Mosaic law as a moral standard of Christian conduct"? If this were true, why then did Paul write that "the law is holy and just and good" (Rom 7:12) and that God sent "his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh . . . in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom 8:3-4)? Why did Paul write that "neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God" (1 Cor 7:19)?

In my previous Open Letter, Pastor Tkach, I discussed at some length how Paul rejects the law as a method of salvation but upholds it as a standard of Christian conduct. I would urge you to reread those two pages where I address this issue. If you prefer to read another author, I would recommend the chapter on "The Law" in George Eldon Ladd's book *A THEOLOGY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT*. This is a standard textbook in many theological seminaries. As you know, Prof. Ladd from Fuller Theological Seminary is one of the most respected and influential evangelical scholars of our generation. I will quote here only few paragraphs.

Ladd writes: "By fulfilling the promise given to Abraham, Christ has ended the age of the Law. . . . However, it is clear that inasmuch as Paul always regards the Law as holy and just and good, he never thinks of the Law as being abolished. It remains the expression of the will of God. This is evident from his frequent assertion that redemption in Christ enables believers in some real sense to fulfill the Law. . . . The permanence of the Law is reflected further in the fact that Paul appeals to specific commands in the Law as the norm for Christian conduct. . . . Christ has brought the Law as a way of righteousness and as a ceremonial code to its end; but the Law as the expression of the will of God is permanent; and the man indwelt by the Holy spirit and thus energized by love is enabled to fulfill the Law as men under the Law never could" (pp. 509-510).

Contrary to your contention, Pastor Tkach, that Paul, "never - I repeat, never - argues that the law is the foundation of Christian ethics," Prof. Ladd affirms: "The permanence of the Law is reflected further in the fact that Paul appeals to specific commands in the Law as the norm for Christian conduct."

Frankly, I am perplexed by your attempts to negate the validity and value for Christians of God's law in general and of the Sabbath commandment in particular. It reminds me of Marcion (about A. D. 140) who rejected the OT in general and the Sabbath in particular because he believed they were the product of an evil god. It is unfortunate that the influence of Marcion's dualism, as Adolf Harnack, the famous German church historian has pointed out, has plagued Christianity to this very day. In many ways this is reflected in the New Covenant Theology that you have adopted.

In closing this letter I feel a bit disappointed, because I was hoping to deal also with two critical texts (Col 2:14-16; Rom 14:4-5) to which you appeal in the attachment to the Open Letter to support your abrogation view of the Sabbath. I have done considerable research on these texts which I would love to share with your members. But this would double the length of this already lengthy letter. Perhaps I might be able to share this research in the next Open Letter. I trust that you will choose to reply and thus continue this dialogue which for some of your members may be the only chance to hear a scholarly response to your new theology.

Thank you, Pastor Tkach, for granting me the opportunity to dialogue with you and your members through this medium. Rest assured that our theological differences do not detract from the respect that I have for you as a person. I still hope that some day we might be able to sit down and discuss these issues in an informal setting.

May the Lord continue to richly bless your life and endeavors to understand His revealed will for yourself and your church members.

Christian regards

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D. ,  
Professor of theology and church history,  
Andrews University

#### NOTES

1. The Epistle of Barnabas 15:9.
2. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho 47.
3. Origen, Homily 23, on Numbers, Patrologica Graeca 12, 749-750.
4. Socrates Scholasticus, Ecclesiastical History 5, 22; Sozomen, Ecclesiastical History 7, 19.
5. Justin's texts are cited and analyzed in From Sabbath to Sunday (Rome, 1977), pp. 223-233.
6. Syriac Didascalia 26, ed. R. Hugh Connolly (Oxford, 1929), p. 233.
7. Ibid.

## 5. PASTOR GENERAL JOSEPH TKACH'S FINAL REPLY TO DR BACCHIOCCHI'S

June 5, 1996

Dr. Samuele Bacchiocchi  
Biblical Perspectives  
4990 Appian Way  
Berrien Springs, MI 49103

Dear Dr. Bacchiocchi,

After reading your additional open letter, I believe that further communication between us in the manner you have employed does not bring edification to anyone. I no longer will participate in such a forum. Certainly, I ask that you please forgive any lack of graciousness in my reply to your open letter. I would also note that the errors in your letter are not difficult to answer; however, this is not the way for Christians to resolve such matters.

It is not just my opinion in thinking that the cyberspace controversy you have initiated should be discontinued. Unsolicited, the leadership of your denomination have written to me and have explained that you are not a spokesperson for your denomination, that your personal methods and ethics do not represent them, and that they "regret and object" to your actions in this matter.

Perhaps there is some benefit in my advising you that in speaking with Dr. Herman Hoeh, he does not share all your views, and may not want you to speak for him. In fact, it would seem that the large part of the problem is that you feel free to speak for so many people, or at least give the impression that you are doing so.

From my conversation with the leadership of your denomination, it seems they sincerely desire that you discontinue your inappropriate communications. This is also my desire and therefore, I will no longer contribute to the open letter controversy.

In Christ's love,

Joseph Tkach

## 6. DR BACCHIOCCHI'S FINAL REPLY TO JOSEPH TKACH

June 16-1996

Pastor General Joseph Tkach  
Worldwide Church of God  
Pasadena, CA 91129

Dear Pastor Tkach:

Thank you for your letter of June 5 where you propose to discontinue our dialogue through cyberspace. On my part I am willing to comply with your proposal. Since you have posted your letter on the Web system, I will also post my reply in some news organization. But this will be my last public reply to you.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my appreciation for the opportunity you granted me to discuss some of the doctrinal changes you have introduced in your church. You feel that our public discussion "does not bring edification to anyone." I tend to disagree. Judging from the hundreds of messages that I have received from readers of our open letters, I feel that our public dialogue has helped thousands of current and former members of the Worldwide Church of God to understand some of the fallacies of your New Covenant Theology. After posting my second open letter to you, I was pleasantly surprised to receive many telephone calls from current members of the WWCG who wished to express their appreciation for the way my open letter helped them to look at issues from a different perspective.

My plan, Pastor Tkach, is to examine your New Covenant Theology much more thoroughly in a book I plan to write sometimes next year. The title of the book will be **CONTROVERSY OVER THE COVENANTS**. I am in the process of collecting material for this research project. I do have on hand several of the study papers that have been published by your office. If you were willing to mail to me a complete set of all the material you have produced, I would be most grateful for it and willing to pay for the expenses involved.

I would have liked to undertake this project immediately, in view of the live interest for it. But I have committed myself to research and write the second volume of my book on **GOD'S FESTIVALS IN SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY** dealing with the Fall Feasts of Israel. By God's grace I hope to complete this project by the end of this year. I will be sure to send you a complimentary copy as soon as the book comes out. You should find this a stimulating study which addresses questions that have been largely ignored in the literature on the Holy Days produced in the past by your WWCG.

Recently I have been invited by an Evangelist of the Church of Christ, John T. Lewis, to participate in a public debate with him in Kentucky on the Sabbath/Sunday question. I was wondering if you, Pastor Tkach, might be interested to organize a public forum where we could discuss in a friendly and respectful way, some of the issues we have addressed in our open letters. I understand that in Pasadena your WWCG has a magnificent auditorium. If you should choose to utilize this facility for such a public dialogue, that would be an ideal venue. Let me know in a private letter what you think of this proposal. Rest assured that on my part I would be most supportive of your endeavors.

Regarding the comments you have received from some Adventist church leaders that I am not a spokesperson for our church, I will simply say that I never claimed to be an official spokesman for my church. The truth of the matter is that no one can claim to speak for a nine million members church with all its diversities. I speak for myself and, with few exceptions, I have published my books, so that I do not have to accommodate the findings of my research to the views of review committees. Yet my church leaders and members do respect my scholarship. An indication is the fact

that my article on the crisis of your WWCG which you read in ADVENTISTS AFFIRM, was later reprinted in our official church paper ADVENTIST REVIEW.

Thank you again, Pastor Tkach, for the opportunity you granted me to dialogue with you. The issues we have addressed are fundamental to the understanding of the relationship of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, Law and Grace. These are areas where much confusion prevails. It is my fervent hope and prayer that the Lord will use us in helping to clarify this confusion and thus leading many to a clearer understanding of His revealed will.

Christian regards,

Samuele Bacchiocchi, Ph. D.,  
Professor of Theology,  
Andrews University