

Do You Practice the Scorched Earth Policy?

By Wesley White

General William Tecumseh Sherman is either famous or infamous (depending on whether you live in the North or South) for his March to the Sea which ended in Savannah, Georgia, in December 1864. Today, Sherman's name in history is synonymous with utter devastation. The destruction implemented by his army caused civilian suffering that lasted many decades after the end of the Civil War.

Sherman's justification for his mass destruction of civilian property was that "...until the people of the South demanded that their leaders stop the war, they were part of the equation that kept the war going" (Southern Storm, by Noah Trudeau).

Let there be no mistake. Sherman's rationalization for the scorched earth policy makes sense when it comes to achieving victory in carnal warfare.

But it is wrong when practiced by Christians!

The Sabbath-keeping Churches of God have a history of scorched earth policy. This practice has its roots in the times when a monolithic organization of men could demand obedience and discipline of its members through marking and disfellowshipping. Today, it is not as easy to practice this type of punishment within the Church, so instead we have church splits. And who would deny that the church splits we now see are completely unacceptable?

A Church Split Can Be Good!

And let's be clear: A church split is not necessarily a bad thing. I saw a Sabbath-keeping congregation split in the Dallas (Texas) area several years ago. This congregation began in the city of Grand Prairie in 1968. After about 25 years, the group had grown considerably. It was a mature, stable church. So some of the members decided leave the Grand Prairie church to form a new group in the town of Venus, about two hours away. They already had several families in the Venus area and it made sense to make church attendance easier on those folks. But, even more important, the whole group figured they could reach new people by starting a new congregation in a different city. Their plan succeeded. Today, the new Venus congregation is a well-functioning group of over 80 people.

When was the last time you saw a church split for the purpose of spreading the Gospel to new people? The Grand Prairie/Venus split succeeded because it was done in love.

If you have seen a split in recent years, chances are it was **not** done in love. Rather, it was probably done because there was a **lack** of love among those participating in the split.

And the split you saw probably involved a scorched earth policy. When the group that left departed, some of them probably did whatever they could to harm the remaining group. This is the scorched earth policy.

Conversely, there were probably many in the group that stayed who did what they could to keep the new group from succeeding. More scorched earth policy. You see, it happens in both directions.

The Most Powerful Force In the Universe

I saw a split where the following suggestions were made to the group that remained: “What if the remaining group offered to help the leaving group with a financial donation? What if the departing group was told they are welcome to come back and visit any time? What if the departing group was told that maybe everyone could get together for occasional pot lucks and high days? What if the departing group was told to make it known if they needed help with anything?”

I am sad to report that this suggestion was met with scorn **from both sides!** Yes, I was saddened, but not surprised.

While this whole group was still together and in the midst of their squabble, each side claimed it had the love of God. Not just one side, but both sides. *The truth of the matter is that one or both sides were not telling the truth.* I can say this with absolute certainty because the *love of God is the most powerful force in the universe.* **And if this powerful force had been present, the split would not have contained the acrimonious behavior that it did.** Unfortunately, there was a tremendous amount of bitterness on both sides--a bitterness that doesn't seem to diminish as time goes on.

In the past, I have asked people involved in splits, “If you could snap your fingers and make that other group just go away and cease to exist, would you?” Usually the person I ask is savvy enough to lie and deny any such a desire. But sometimes I get an honest answer. I have been told, “Yes, I would love nothing more than to make that group disappear from existence. I would love nothing more than our state government to come in and revoke their legal right to own property or have a bank account or have a board or even assemble.”

I then ask, “But don't you realize that such an occurrence would probably cause some people to completely give up on following God's ways?” I explain, “This happens many times in church wars. A church will split. Then some will become disillusioned with going to church. These people say they will start keeping the Sabbath alone at home. And, within a year or two, some of them just give up on the Sabbath. Then they discard God's Word altogether. Is this what you would like to see?”

Occasionally, a person will honestly allow his bitterness to bubble to the surface. He will say something like, “Well, none of this would happen if people weren't supporting the corrupt leadership of that group. Knowing what they know about their leadership, how can these members justify their continued support of that group?” Again, here is another warrior who looks to General Sherman for example instead of to our Savior Jesus. It's almost as though this person is paraphrasing Sherman by saying,

“Until the people of that group demand that their leaders do things my way, those people are part of the equation that keeps the war going.” This bitter person is willing to practice the scorched earth policy even if it affects the eternal life of other people! May God forgive the Church of God for what we have become.

We Need More Sabbath-Keeping Groups

We should never want a Church of God group to stop existing no matter how much we disagree with the way it is run. As Christians, we should do whatever we can to help any Church of God congregation no matter how much we disagree with its leaders. The world doesn't need **fewer** Sabbath-keeping Churches of God. The world needs **more** Sabbath-keeping Churches of God.

It is amazing how much the body of Christ today reflects the times in which we live. Scott McClellan, former White House Press Secretary for President Bush, makes some interesting observations about politics in America. And his statements are not just an indictment of Republicans. What he says also applies to the Democrats when they were in power under President Clinton. And, even more important, his observations can be helpful to us in the Church of God.

In his book, What Happened?, McClellan tries to examine and understand the poisoned political atmosphere that exists in our government. He writes, “I've tried to avoid becoming embroiled in the question...who is most responsible for the current culture of...Washington...It would be difficult if not impossible to find anyone who has lived in this destructive world of Washington...who is truly without sin...[Further] in today's partisan climate, we sometimes hear loyalty described as a paramount political virtue...This kind of loyalty often does a disservice to the American people...”

Misplaced Loyalties

In the world's politics, there is plenty of blame to go around for their problems. In the Church of God, there is plenty of blame to go around for our problems. We have developed a warped sense of loyalty where the primary concern of fellow church warriors is to each other instead of to the Church of Christ. This type of misguided loyalty can destroy a Christian. Loyalty to God is what saves us.

The problem of internecine warfare is not something that we in the Church of God are going to make go away overnight. There are too many people who are deceived into thinking they practice righteous indignation when, in reality, they are channeling Satan's hate. This problem is something that we must all pray about continually.

What gives the Church of God the right to preach Gospel repentance to the world when we haven't learned to change? What gives the Church of God the right to teach love when we don't properly show the one identifier that Jesus said the world would know us by?

And what happens to me when I have bitterness toward another person? My bitterness toward another person is as illogical as my drinking poison with the hope of killing my enemy. My bitterness will not hurt the other person. It will kill me.

Our Young People

We **must** work to overcome this problem. And we can't give up. After all these years, too many of us still haven't learned our lesson. In the meantime, we are watching the flower of our churches—our young people—walk away from us in disgust. Every war has collateral damage. Our young people are part of the collateral damage in our wars.

Think about it. When the biggest split in the Church of God movement took place in 1997, it was primarily over doctrine. It can be argued that this split took place for a good reason. Thousands of God's people said "no" to new Satanic teachings that some false shepherds attempted to saddle on the backs of the believers. And it seemed like the majority of our young people didn't abandon us after this split. Instead, most of them appeared to respect us for our stance.

But what has happened since? There have been endless squabbles. These fights were usually not over one group protecting Sabbath teachings against another that opposed God's truth. These fights have been over every imaginable twiggly doctrine and over every imaginable administrative difference. These wars have caused us to lose many more young people than did the big split in 1995.

No, we do not need to come together under one large church organization. We don't need some new, super church government. We will continue to have many diverse groups with differences in government and doctrine and liturgy. For better or worse, these variances are now a fact of life.

What we need is to stop the bitterness. We need to end the hateful attacks on each other.

Even the politicians of this world seem to better understand the importance of love more than we do. In Abraham Lincoln's first inaugural address, he said, "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection."

The Church of God needs a collective repentance of this dreadful sin of harboring bitterness and grudges. We need a movement that cuts across party lines—a movement that will eradicate this nightmare of infighting. We need this not only because it is counterproductive to our collective well-being. We also need it so we can help our brothers who are proponents of church warfare, so they won't trade their eternal lives for the lake of fire!

May God be merciful to us in our hour of need.

For more information, contact us at DynamicChristianMinistries.org.

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