

June 2021

Dear Brethren:

More than ever, a number of us are beginning to experience increasing pressures in this world which threaten our ability to live and to worship peacefully. It is a rude awakening to sense the gradual erosion of so many of our special privileges. Do you subconsciously object to the use of that term, *special privileges*, because you view them instead as "inalienable human rights"? That is certainly understandable because of our personal histories. But for perspective, understand that a dangerous and even violent living environment is nothing new on this planet. The majority of human history has been dominated by eras of tyranny, exploitation of the weak, and a blatant disregard for the principles of personal liberty and freedom of expression. Many of us have grown up in comparatively "good times," under *somewhat* democratic governance, so we are inclined to view that particular condition as being "normal." But the reality is, the majority of us have lived our lives in insulated bubbles, not really experiencing the *usual oppressions* that most human beings have endured over the last six thousand years upon this earth. Therefore, although we are slowly losing freedoms that we have come to accept as being *normal*, in reality, the world is simply moving back toward the *usual tyrannies* which are the real hallmark of human dominion. In other words, welcome to the real world!

Given that pessimistic—howbeit factual—description of our short-term outlook in this world, the very prophecies spoken by Jesus Christ in warning about the last days are ever more meaningful for the people of God:

Then shall they deliver you up to be afflicted, and shall kill you: and ye shall be hated of all nations for my name's sake. And then shall many be offended, and shall betray one another, and shall hate one another (Matthew 24:9–10).

They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor me (John 16:2–3).

If we live long enough in the flesh, this is the reality that awaits the people of God before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. That means that if you are one who is determined to live by every word of God, you are going to make yourself a target. No longer are you going to enjoy the benefits of religious freedom and personal liberties. All of those idealistic notions will be suspended for "the greater good" of *state-driven agendas*, which means in actuality that the god of this world—Satan the Devil—and by God's allowance is going to

pull out all stops to destroy those who love God, and he will stir up deceived human proxies to carry out that wrathful persecution.

Are you ready for that reality? Do you acknowledge that Jesus Christ said that this is going to happen? Are you preparing yourself to be one who can make the correct decisions under pressure? Or are you one who is still mourning the loss of your freedoms, physically, and fighting in your mind to recapture those *better times* in the flesh? God has already told us that those blessings are coming to an end. So stop pining for "the good old days," and start preparing your mind for the "new normal." Someone is going to fail, but someone else is going to be successful:

And because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold. But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved (Matthew 24:12–13).

What is it that will make the difference between those who allow tribulation to destroy their confidence vs. those who endure in genuine faith? There are many elements which make up that healthy spiritual orientation, but one overriding principle is foundational.

Personal Conviction Is Critical

If you are not one who truly believes the doctrines that we have been taught, and if you are not willing to sacrifice all else to defend those precepts in your own life, then it is only a matter of time before you will *trade it away* under pressure. What we are describing here is *personal conviction*.

An individual with *personal conviction* is convinced that something is true and is also willing to stand upon principle, regardless of the circumstances and regardless of the consequences. If you do not truly believe that something is true and valuable, you certainly will not defend it under great threat. If, in reality, you think it *a cheap thing*, you certainly will not pay a heavy price to preserve it. And even if you *really do* believe that something is true, that still does not mean that you care about it or value it enough to make the ultimate sacrifice. So, one with personal conviction is one who possesses both elements: *real belief* as well as a *love for those beliefs* that is greater than all else. We are talking about the very same attributes that the Bible calls *faith*. However, there is a reason that the concept of *personal conviction* is the terminology that we will emphasize in this particular writing. Referring just to *faith* can easily cause some to lose focus if they have a false idea about what true godly faith is all about. But referring to *personal conviction* may be a way to make the principle crystal clear and more directly meaningful.

If we are to be among those who will be successful, we must be among those whom God describes here:

And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. And they overcame him by *the blood of the Lamb*, and by *the word of their testimony*; and *they loved not their lives unto the death* (Revelation 12:10–11) [emphasis mine].

What, then, are the key ingredients to success? 1) Having our sins forgiven—being truly repentant and thereby receiving God's grace to be washed in *the blood of the Lamb*, which wipes away our guilt, 2) holding to *the word of our testimony*, which means valuing and preserving the real Word—Jesus Christ Himself, who embodied the revealed doctrine—which means accepting and defending *the faith once delivered* by that same Christ, and 3) loving that revealed Way of Life so much that we are willing to pay the ultimate physical price, because we *loved not our lives unto the death*. And how would you describe someone who has all three of these attributes? It is one who is led by a very strong sense of *personal conviction*!

If you would like to assess your own level of personal conviction, spiritually, how would you even begin to measure it? There may be a few indicators that can act as a litmus test for each one of us.

Because the Church Says So?

Why do you follow certain dos and don'ts that are part of our spiritual belief system? For instance, why do you avoid eating pork and shellfish (if you do)? Is it because the church that you attend says that it is a bad thing to do, and if they catch you eating ham or lobster, you will be ostracized from the fellowship? Or, do you avoid those meats because you believe *down deep in your heart* that they are a poison to your body, and that God's Law in Leviticus 11 is His revelation of *real physical truth* about what is good vs. bad to eat for all human beings? If you really believe that swine is not food, you will avoid eating it whether anyone sees you doing it or not. That is evidence of *personal conviction*. But if the only reason you follow that proscription concerning unclean meats is because the church says so, then that is evidence that you are *not truly convinced*—meaning that you have no *personal conviction* in the matter.

What about the original teaching of the Radio Church of God concerning health and healing? That church taught for years that modern medicine is not God's blessing to man, but a direct counterfeit by Satan to try to offer man an alternative for good health which does not require looking to God as our Physician. This is a hard saying indeed, because man has the capability to extend human life through drugs and surgeries, and choosing to avoid these therapies because the church says it is sinful is a major test for each one of us. That is nothing new for today. It was just as much a test for the brethren of God's Church decades ago. Notice this citation from the August, 1964, issue of *The Good News* magazine, in an article written by David John Hill, entitled, *When Should You Be Anointed?*:

The healing of our physical bodies is not just a doctrine of the Church of God—it is an actual, physical, real benefit and blessing. It is the way to health when we are sick. Don't be guilty along with some who have said, "My church doesn't allow me to go to doctors!" This church—the Church of God—DOES *allow you to go to doctors*—just as God *allows* you to go to doctors!

Don't blame the Church for your not going to doctors—it must be your own personal, real, faithful conviction that you as one individual are going to trust your Living Creator God to forgive your sins and heal your body! YOU YOURSELF as an individual before God—and apart from "the Church" must choose in faith to put your life in God's hands, not coerced or forced in any way but free as an individual to pursue *your* faith! You must realize that whether you live or whether you die—because death is always a possibility as long as we are physical—you belong to Jesus Christ, you are the Lord's! (Rom. 14:8).

You can go to doctors for your healing *if you want to*—the Church of God *advises you* that this is NOT the way to be healed. *It is just not within the power of another human being TO FORGIVE YOUR SIN AND HEAL YOUR BODY!* But this must be YOUR OWN PERSONAL DECISION—a matter of *your* exercising the faith of Jesus Christ—not just something you feel you have to do because you belong to the Church and this is one of the doctrines of the Church.

This quote presents *precisely* the choice that is set before each one of us, not just about the healing doctrine, but on every single teaching of the church! If you are only following certain teachings "because the church says so," you might as well just do what you want to do, because God will accept nothing except your obedience based upon personal conviction. "And he that doubteth is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of faith: for *whatsoever is not of faith is sin*" (Romans 14:23) [emphasis mine]. Yes, in many cases, even if we do the right thing, but if we do it for the wrong reason—and especially lacking real

personal conviction—God does not count that as faithful obedience at all. We may get a physical, temporary blessing for following one of God's laws (because God's laws show us how to avoid real curses), but God wants our belief *in Him* and devotion *to Him* most of all. If we are not truly convinced that the rules we have been taught are *real Laws*, then God is not satisfied with us. He wants more from each one of us. He demands more, and He deserves more!

Whose Religion?

Another very good way to test yourself is to ask, how many of these teachings have I made to be "mine"?

When you are put on the spot concerning a particular practice of true Christians which contrasts with the rest of the world, how do you explain what you are doing and why?

But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear: Having a good conscience; that, whereas they speak evil of you, as of evildoers, they may be ashamed that falsely accuse your good conversation in Christ (1 Peter 3:15–16).

If, for example, you resist having a vaccination, how do you explain that to someone else? Do you default to talking about the church that you are attending, or do you speak about it in terms of *your own personal conviction before your God*? There is a big difference! If you find yourself answering in terms of what the church teaches, it may be that you are somewhat divorced from the principle yourself and not willing to take responsibility for the choice before you. You did indeed learn much of what you know "through the church," but the question is, has that doctrine taken hold in your own mind and heart, or is it still just something you are being fed from the pulpit which you personally resist? Feel free to speak to others about the church you attend, but the truth is, when you testify of your faith, God is wanting that to be *your faith*, not just a position you are being strong-armed into accepting.

If you resist serving on a legal jury, for instance, and the court judge asks you why that is, will you tell him that you belong to a church that tells you not to do it, or will you answer based upon your own *personal conviction of heart* before your God? And by the way, which answer do you think would be a more powerful witness for Jesus Christ?

Why Are You Here?

Another question you can ask yourself—as part of the litmus test for measuring your true level of personal conviction—involves assessing your motive for being a member of this or any particular church group. Did you select personally your current affiliation because you believe above all else that God is actively communing there and feeding His people with real Truth within that configuration? Or is your physical choice for assembly based upon some other criteria?

Is the real reason that you attend Sabbath and Holy Day services with a particular group the fact that you have family, friends, or loved ones who are members? Let us ask that same question in a different way: If someone you care for greatly left the church, would you also leave, regardless of the reason the other person chose to separate? In other words, whose religion is this, really?

Perhaps you are one who would be content to attend any one of several churches, so that if your loved one is the one who is adamant about being in *one particular fellowship*, that is OK with you too. There are many who choose to accommodate a loved one for the sake of family unity, including the choice of churches. Saying so is not accusing anyone of evil. If you are not truly convicted in heart that you need to attend a particular church, then by deferring to a loved one who happens to be adamant, you are simply showing an outgoing concern for family. But the point is, please do not confuse that scenario with the idea of personal conviction. If you are just "going along," have the gumption to admit that to yourself. You owe no one else an explanation, but you do owe it to yourself to be honest about why you are doing what you are doing. Would you stay in your present group, even if everyone you are closest to decided to depart? If so, you might be one who is there out of true personal conviction. If not, it is worth asking yourself, why not?

The most dangerous state is the one in which we have deceived ourselves, thinking that we are personally convicted in religious belief, when in reality we are only pursuing a certain path as long as one or more other human beings follow that same path.

And there went great multitudes with him: and he turned, and said unto them, If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:25–27).

Jesus Christ is saying that He demands to be first in priority in our minds, bar none. Is your level of personal conviction really that strong?

If you have loved ones in the church, what would you do—really—if one of those loved ones chose to leave and go someplace else, or even to stay at home? Would you make up your own mind either to stay or to go, based upon your own personal conviction before God? Or would you allow the adamancy of that loved one to carry you along in its wake? Could you be honest with yourself in making that critical assessment? On what basis—truly—would you ever choose to go a different way from that beloved one? Not only did Jesus say that He demands to be first, He further stated that He will *intentionally allow* the circumstances that will put every one of us to the test!

Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven. Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: *I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.* He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me: and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he that taketh not his cross, and followeth after me, is not worthy of me. He that findeth his life shall lose it: and he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it (Matthew 10:32–39) [emphasis mine].

Therefore, if you are not one who is driven by a sincere personal conviction that you possess the Truth, and that you love the Truth more than anything else in your life, how will you ever pass this kind of test when it comes to your home? Christ will send it. Are you ready?

Beware of Personal Offense

One of the prophesied dangers which Jesus Christ spoke about in the last days is that *personal offense* would cause many to forsake the real Truth. We already saw that in Matthew 24:10. Personal offense always works counter to personal conviction.

What is the common source for these offenses that Jesus warned against—meaning feelings of animosity that are not legitimate in God's sight? Well, what is it that affects you most of all, emotionally, which would most tempt you greatly to become deceived into siding against Jesus Christ? Is there no such potential weakness in your life? Really? None at all? Are you so convinced in your own level of spiritual strength and integrity that you believe that it is impossible for you ever to be swayed emotionally into departing from the real

Truth? Do you believe that if you ever had "a feeling" that someone in the church did something that you did not like (or that your loved one did not like), your "feelings" can be trusted as a standard to decide whether to stay or to go? Are you truly that reliable, spiritually? Are you confident that God would always agree with you? If that is how you see yourself, you are *an offense waiting to happen*.

The wise among us will acknowledge that we are emotional, carnal beings, and by nature, we each have weak points that can be targeted by a spiritual enemy in an attempt to destroy us. Jesus Christ confirmed that one of the greatest tests for any who desire to be part of His eternal Kingdom is to fight against this insidious predilection to become offended:

And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me (Matthew 11:6).

The question, therefore, is not if you *might* be vulnerable or not, but do you have the perspicacity to recognize where your real weak points actually lie? Anyone who says he is not susceptible is the one most at risk for becoming offended. When the feeling of effrontery or indignation arises (and it will), who among us has the spiritual grounding sufficient to challenge those feelings and to look for the real possibility of an enemy influence? Who is best prepared to catch himself and to stop a snowball's tumble into the fire? It is the one who is truly and sincerely convinced in heart and mind in what the real Truth entails, where it can be found, and is resolute in letting *nothing at all* ever snatch that Truth away. In other words, the best antidote to prophesied offense in the last days is a deep and abiding *personal conviction*—conviction rooted in the revealed Truth, matched with a sincere devotion to that Way which supercedes all other loves.

The Final Test Is a Lonely Test

If you are one who envisions enduring final tests in this life side-by-side with one or more loved ones, watch out! If you are not prepared to "go it alone" if required, you are already in great danger:

For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself. But let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another. For every man shall bear his own burden (Galatians 6:3–5).

If God permits you and your dearest friends and loved ones to endure these trials in perfect unity—together physically—what a wonderful blessing that will be. But if that is not what God will choose to do (and He has already determined that path for each one of us), will

you still desire what He is offering to you? You will indeed stand alone to be judged by Him in that final day of reckoning. Will He find within you what He is looking for most of all? Will He find a sincere and heartfelt devotion to Him and to what it is that He stands for? Will He find that you have proved that devotion by making every sacrifice required in this life, physically? If so, then your future is indeed very bright.

Understand that the purpose of the church—the physical assembly of God's called ones—is not to insulate you from all trials and to protect you against adversity. In fact, some of the greatest adversity faced by a Christian is in learning to deal constructively with the weaknesses of other true Christians! Bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2) means showing longsuffering and patience toward those who are still weak and making mistakes. We cannot hope to do that if we walk around wearing our hearts on our sleeves, being easily offended. How can we pour out ourselves to help and to encourage the weak, if we are often too sensitive? We do indeed bear each others' burdens by showing love for the beloved children of God, but just understand that in the final Judgment, you will not be supported by or giving support to any other. We will each be evaluated upon the spiritual character that we either did or did not generate in our own lives through the power of the Holy Spirit.

What is the capstone Bible text that punctuates best the need for personal conviction?

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35–39).

What is it that the Apostle Paul is really describing here through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? It is a church filled with called children of God, each possessing true personal conviction in that which they are doing. You have every right and opportunity to be counted in that very *faithful* category.

With love and hope most sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jon W. Brisby". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Jon W. Brisby