

From the February 4, 2010 Issue

Our Common Witness

Pastor Doug Johannsen was recently asked to be part of a panel discussion at an inter-denominational meeting of Christians in St. Paul, MN, where he pastors New Life Christian Fellowship, the Grace Communion International (GCI) congregation in St. Paul. The theme of the day-long event was "Our Common Witness."

In his prepared remarks Doug briefly traced the Spirit's work in leading GCI to Trinitarian Theology. We are printing the text of Doug's remarks as an encouragement to everyone who loves the gospel.

Let me begin by reading some of the context of the main verse being considered here today:

Luke 24: ⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. ⁴⁶ He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. ⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹ I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

When I was asked to participate in this forum, my first thought was, "Why on earth would anyone in this group want to know what I think is our Common Witness?" Many of you here today are aware that my denomination, recently re-named Grace Communion International - formerly known as the "Worldwide Church of God" - had for many years held a number of seriously heretical views.

Some of our flawed teachings included denying the Trinity. We taught that Jesus was God – sort of a younger junior God – and we didn't know much about the Father but felt he was distant, unapproachable, mysterious – and in general, angry with humanity. You know, sort of like some of those pagan gods that were very picky and required a lot of elaborate, complicated and expensive appeasement before they'd give you the time of day – and even then you were never sure you got it "good enough" to be accepted. As to the Holy Spirit, we taught that he was not a person, but a force or power.

In the early 1990's a few years after the death of our founder, Herbert W. Armstrong, all of this started to change. As I recall, one of our ministers had written an article for our national publication, the Plain Truth, with the intent of refuting the Trinity. I believe it was a Catholic Priest who wrote to our HQ and in a very kind way told us that the article was inaccurate in many ways. Joseph Tkach Sr., who had been named by Herbert Armstrong as his successor, told some of our team in our Church Administration to go do the research, and if we were wrong, then change it. Our researchers found out we were indeed wrong. I believe that was in 1991 or 1992.

The real meltdown however, began in late December of 1994 with the full force of it pounding on us month after month in 1995 and slowly subsiding in the years afterward. During this time we lost around 80-90% of our membership and about the same percentage loss of employees. You see, we had taught that many of the practices given to ancient Israel were required by Christians today. For example, we refrained from eating foods such as pork and shellfish. We kept the Old Testament festivals and condemned the observance of Christmas and Easter as pagan.

Our house had been built on sand but now lay flattened by the winds and the waves of change. Yet when all those heretical beliefs were demolished, somehow we knew we had to focus on Jesus - Jesus had to be the answer. It was the same question Saul asked when being struck down on the road to Damascus, "Who are you Lord?" (Acts 9:5) The Apostle Paul's question was now our question.

The answer had to be found in the faithful witness preserved by the Church in the scriptures concerning the birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. This faithful witness is also what the early Church Fathers fought so hard to preserve in their battles against heretical movements in the first centuries of Christian history.

All this attention on Jesus eventually led us to see the Father in a whole new light. We see in the scriptures that Philip had also struggled with wanting to know about the Father. He had come to know Jesus, but the Father was still mysterious – perhaps even frightening...so the faithful witness of scripture records Jesus saying to Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Having a clearer understanding of and enjoying our newfound relationship with the Father and Son led us to the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, who in turn re-directed our attention back to Jesus and a great appreciation for the Holy Trinity.

Let me read II Corinthians 3:12-18 to you. It is especially precious to my denomination as it clearly portrays one of the veils that had to be removed from our eyes:

II Corinthians 3: ¹²Therefore, since we have such a hope, we are very bold. ¹³We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to keep the Israelites from gazing at it while the radiance was fading away. ¹⁴But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. ¹⁶But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. ¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have not been idle these last two thousand years, but have been constantly at work in the Church despite our differences and disagreements. The Church is, after all, His Body. I believe that the pattern for resolving these differences is already written in the Common Witness we all share and that He will undoubtedly lead us all towards a unity and love for one another that goes far beyond mere academic consensus.

My contribution to this panel discussion is simply to affirm that by focusing on our Common Witness (that is, JESUS), transformation of not just an individual, but an entire community, and an entire denomination is indeed possible. The written witness is nearly 2,000 years old, but the One of whom it testifies is ageless and His power is not diminished.

In proclaiming this message to this world, we have all found there are many different veils covering many hearts, making many minds dull. Those veils, whatever they may be, are only

removed when people or communities turn to Jesus. And when the center of human worship – individual as well as corporate – is Jesus, then the body is transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory.

In Jesus' name - AMEN

~ *Doug Johannsen*