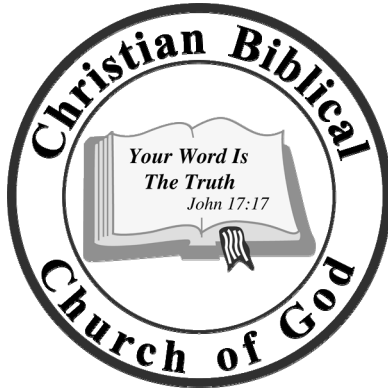


Is the Ministry God's Government?



by
Fred R. Coulter

Have you been impacted by strict authoritarian rule through a Church of God organization?

Did you know that this kind of control was gained through the SLEIGHT OF HAND?

Read this booklet to learn about this great and subtle deception.

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Fred R. Coulter
Christian Biblical Church of God
P.O Box 1442
Hollister, CA 95024-1442*

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Many of the people that I associate with have, like myself, come out of a tightly controlled Church of God. The experience of being under strict authority has left a long and lingering impact upon us. Anyone who has experienced this can relate to what I am saying.

Have you personally been impacted by a Church of God? Was the impact good or bad? Does it still impact your life?

Let's cover some very basic ways in which we were impacted. Some of these things were very subtle and damaging, and unfortunately left many people with wounds upon their souls.

How Do Jesus Christ and God the Father View the Church of God?

All of the scriptures that I will be covering have been used to prove human Church hierarchical authority -- such as the Catholic Church. But, when you examine them carefully they are the exact opposite.

“And I say unto you that you are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church...” (Matthew 16:18).

We know the rock refers to Christ not to Peter or any man. We know that Jesus said, “I will build My church.” Those who are called by Jesus are called “My sheep,” and “My brethren.” I want to emphasize that Jesus was saying “My Church.”

“I will build My Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

The word *hell* is not referring to the place of ever

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burning fire, but is from the Greek word *hades*, meaning *the grave*. In other words, the Church of which Christ is the head would not die out.

Baptism into Jesus Christ

Jesus commanded: *“Go you therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world”* (Matthew 28:19-20).

The end of the world means the end of the age. The church age will close at the first resurrection. The age of the kingdom of heaven will start when the seven last plagues begin.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached: *“Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”* (Acts 2:38).

The Holy Spirit comes from God the Father. We were told that the Church is the bride of Christ and that the Church is the mother of us all—the Church is the Body of Christ. We were also told that all of the different churches in the world could not be the Body of Christ.

The Apostle Paul wrote: *“For as the body is one, and has many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit [Spirit of God, from God the Father] we are all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit”* (1 Corinthians 12:12).

Each of us was baptized into God's Church after repenting of our sins (the transgressions of God's holy, righteous and perfect law). We also accepted Jesus Christ as our Lord and Master, our High Priest in heaven, and the soon coming king in the world tomorrow. We were not baptized into any sect or denomination of this world (or

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any organization of men), but into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of our sins. We were completely immersed into water, then raised out of that watery grave. We were prayed over with the laying on of hands in order to receive the Holy Spirit.

We were told that the Church of God is a spiritual organization. True. It is likened to the body of Christ, and Christ is the head of the Church. True. Next, we were told that the corporate church organization we were in was the only true church. This was a SLEIGHT OF HAND.

Is Church Authority the Government of God?

What happened after baptism? Then we assembled together with other baptized believers in various congregations, and then we were introduced to the government of God/Church authority, which was a SLEIGHT OF HAND. We were told that the ministers had rule over our lives. As time went on, that rule became more and more stifling. Why was it so hard for people to re-adjust once they left an authoritarian Church of God? It was partly because they had allowed the ministers to think for them. But it ran deeper than that. We were told that if we left the authoritarian rule of the Church, we would lose our salvation.

We were originally told that the Church was a spiritual organism. We were also told it was possible that there could be people sitting in the one true Church of God who did not have the Spirit of God. Therefore, these people were not truly a part of God's Church. Even though an individual might be a member of a congregation of the Church of God, he must have the Holy Spirit of God to truly be in the Church of God.

But the change came. We were then ruled over by the church government, meaning the whole ministry, with authority from the top down. We were told that the minis-

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try was the government of God. Why was this a SLEIGHT OF HAND? Those in authority twisted the scriptures to uphold their own authority. The truth is: The ministry is NOT the government of God. They are supposed to be the servants of the people, not overlords and dictators.

What Is the True Government of God?

The true government of God is the rule of God in our lives as we are led by the Holy Spirit. Also it is going to be the rule of Christ through the Kingdom of God on the earth when He returns. The ministry usurped God's own authority and contrary to scripture made it their own. This concept and use of authority becomes devastating, because the leadership took upon themselves the government of God. With that very act, they supplanted God! They may not have fully comprehended what they did.

In doing this they took advantage of the membership. But each one of us has said to God, "You will rule my life." In other words, we are dedicated to God—NOT to an overlording Ministry, who usurped the Authority of Christ to themselves.

Love Toward God Transferred to Men

The next SLEIGHT OF HAND was the taking of the love, loyalty and faith that we give to God and to the brethren and transferring it to men. They then exercised hierarchical lordship and authority over the brethren. Such rule is contrary to Jesus Christ's direct command.

"And there was also a strife among them, which of these should be accounted the greatest. And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship [Greek, kata-kurieuo] over them; and they that exercise authority [Greek, kata- exousiazō] upon them are called benefactors" (Luke 22:24-25).

"Kata-kurieuo" means to exercise lordship down-

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ward from the top. Likewise, “*kata-exousiazō*” means to exercise authority from the top down.

Weren't the ministers called our benefactors as they leveraged this authority to themselves? Yes, they were, but Christ does not want the love, dedication, faith and loyalty that belongs to God and to Christ given to a man.

Why does God not want that leveraged to a man? Because people are then worshipping a man, who becomes an idol in the place of God. Now we are getting to the crux of the issue. Why is it that God does not want the ministry to leverage that love, faith, loyalty and dedication that you give toward God? Because men take God's place. And when they take God's place, what happens? You serve man and you have created a pope, a person in the place of God on earth. We had abusive ministerial authority exercised over us. We were told that these men were our benefactors. Having what belonged to God leveraged subtly into the hands of men was devastating to the people, because they had committed themselves to God, not men.

God Is a Jealous God

This was a tremendous sin against the people and against God. God says we are to have no other gods before Him. He is a jealous God. What does God want from you?

“And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength: this is the first commandment” (Mark 12:30).

When that love, which should only go to God, is leveraged to a human being or organization, it causes you to love God less because they have diverted the love that should be directed only to God unto men and their corporate organizations. Then the vanity of the ministry becomes involved, as evidenced by the authority exercised

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upon the members. Now then, let's take this a step further. Once you allow someone to take part of Mark 12:30 away from God and take it for themselves, what happens? An organization of men steals part of your love of God. Your love and loyalty goes to them instead of to God. God is a jealous God. He called you, and Christ died for you. He doesn't want anything or anyone interfering with that love.

What happens when men receive this love and devotion? They organize it. This became very clear to me when I attended a secular business conference. The meeting was very much like the ministerial conferences that I had attended in the past. The corporate leaders had all of their people in attendance. The corporation was divided into regions, with all the national and international leadership. I was sitting in the middle of it when all of a sudden the church experience became CRYSTAL CLEAR! Through the use of the organization of a modern corporation, the church had assigned to the corporation the prerogatives, loyalty and love of God. All of these should have gone only to God. So, by super-imposing the business corporate structure upon the church, they corrupted the way of God. But, God is not going to let anyone take that from Him without a penalty. This was a SLEIGHT OF HAND!

The statement that there is only one Church on the face of the earth is a true statement. But the claim that "Our Church of God, this organization, is the only true Church of God" is false. It may be a Church of God, but not the only Church of God. As time went on, the threat was implied that if you left this church organization, you left God. This would be a true statement if you left God the Father and Jesus Christ. But not if you left an organization of men. This is how these prerogatives of God were leveraged to the corporate church organization. Isn't it subtle? "If you leave this Church of God you have left God." The fear of church authority and the ministry replaced the fear and love of God and a corporate idol was created. The realization dawned on me while I was sitting,

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listening to the business conference—I had heard this before.

The Intimidation of Fear Religion

With the exercise of control and authority over you, your freedom of thought disappeared. People became fearful and were intimidated as the ministry exercised “lordship” and “authority” over them.

Do you remember what those in authority said? We were told not to criticize the ministry. Essentially, we were told, our only duty was to pray and to pay. But when we bring an offering or a tithe to God, should it not be from the heart instead of motivated by fear through the authority and intimidation of men?

When it reached the point that all these things had been leveraged to men and had become the focal point of all that was done, it became clear that the ministry had taken upon themselves the prerogatives of God. (If you were to say anything against a minister, you were considered to be on the verge of committing the “unpardonable sin.”) We were also told that if we said anything against Headquarters or the ministers, who were “the government of God,” we were then saying it against God. They had fully put themselves in the place of God—**THE SLEIGHT OF HAND.**

This is what held the people in that Church of God in such absolute fear. You feared the minister and you feared leaving the Church. You couldn't trust yourself; you couldn't trust your own thoughts; you couldn't trust God.

Many members who left that Church of God organization were told that they had lost their salvation. They were told that if they were going to get into the Kingdom of God, they would have to go through the horror of the tribulation—**SLEIGHT OF HAND.** The threat of loss of life and salvation is devastating and fearful.

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A Main Appeal of Evangelism

How were people drawn to this Church of God? One of the main appeals of the evangelistic outreach was showing a way to escape the Great Tribulation. One of the primary articles was "There is a Way of Escape."

Think about it: Doesn't everyone want to save his or her own skin? When you were told there was a way of escape, didn't you want to escape? And when you came into the Church, one of the first sermons that really captured your imagination featured the following:

"...Pray always that you may be accounted worthy to escape all these things..." (Luke 21:36).

Then the minister would give a detailed sermon on a place of safety, understood to be in Petra. And if you got to Petra, you had it made—salvation was assured.

The promise of personal escape was another SLEIGHT OF HAND. God will provide a way of escape, because God does the calling; and for those who truly repent, and love God, keep his commandments, and live his way of life, they will be given spiritual salvation.

What was another SLEIGHT OF HAND that took place at this point? You were told that if you left this corporate structure, you were not going to escape the Great Tribulation.

This became another hook which was put into you by the ministry. Do you see how subtly these things were done? Another hook was presented as the solution to your financial problems: tithing—first, second, third, and generous offerings.

But an escape from the Great Tribulation does not balance logically with the statement that says we're going to suffer for Christ. The message that was preached was, in effect: If you tithe faithfully and give abundant offerings to the Church, you could buy a way of escape and salvation. These were not the exact words. But it was implied that if you didn't tithe, and if you didn't give all you could, you surely wouldn't be protected.

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There are still people who are locked into this fear-induced mindset. They are so locked into it that they are afraid to think for themselves. In other words, they have left their brains at the door of the church, and have never picked them up again.

How Dangerous Can this Fear Be?

I remember when a famous traveling evangelist came out to our local church area. The service was held in a local YMCA on a hot summer evening, with no air conditioning and the windows open. While the evangelist was preaching, there was a loud screeching of tires and a crashing sound. There had been a collision right outside the window.

Due to natural reaction, everyone turned to look at the accident. Maybe someone had been hurt. Maybe we could have helped. But the evangelist said, "How dare you look at the wreck, what I am saying is more important. You listen to what I have to say. Don't any of you dare look out there." The brethren were fearful; they sat obediently looking forward with their eyes wide open. He said "Brethren, with all this church trouble we have been having, I want to tell you that our church leader may be 95% wrong and you may be 95% right, but God is going to uphold him and not you! You will be cast into the lake of fire for rebelling against God's Government."

Fear Destroys Truth

Now do you understand the problems that occurred when these prerogatives were subtly leveraged to the ministers? I hope so. But worst of all, most didn't realize it was happening.

The brethren knew they had to obey the ministers, and that they had better attend Church. If they didn't they would get a phone call asking, "Where have you been and

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what have you been doing?" (Attendance was secretly taken each week.)

To keep everyone involved, some congregations had so many activities that all of the free time of the members was spent at church activities. In addition to Sabbath Services there were sports on Sunday, Bible Study on Wednesday, Spokesman Club one night of the week, and many other obligations. It often amounted to seven days a week. In addition, deacons and local church elders had many other meetings to attend.

Because the people were fearful of losing salvation, they would end up being fully involved in the Church. But how is the Church of God supposed to be held together? Is it to be held together with command and control tactics exercised by the ministers and organized activities? The scriptures show that the Church is to be knit together in love. Instead the ministry held the Church together by authority and fear. And then one day it may have dawned on some to ask, "God, why am I so miserable in this Church?"

The answer is, that the leadership violated the very first commandment because they leveraged the love of God to themselves. It was so subtle. Then they replaced God's love with their own authority.

Correct Church Structure

What is the correct organizational structure for the Church? The only structure needed is one that meets the needs of the congregations such as: finding a place to meet, printing booklets and magazines, distribution and mailing, etc.

The organization should never take to itself the love of God. It should never allow into its structure the ability to leverage the prerogatives of God to the corporation or to an individual leader.

There also was a problem at the Church college. Not everyone who attended was taken into "The Work" or

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into the "Ministry." If a person wasn't hired by the Church after graduation, they were looked upon as an outcast. This is because the goal of working for the Church had been so pounded into everyone's minds.

If a certain person was not proficient in doing a certain task, they should have been released from that position with love and God's blessing. It should not have been forced upon them as a do or die situation.

Some graduates would leave the Church college feeling like whipped dogs. They were people with ability, but made to feel like failures. This was due to the fear of and the authority of the ministry, and because the opportunity for a person to be a part of "The Work" was put on entirely the wrong level. It was put on the level of salvation, when it should have been on the level of individual aptitude for a specific job.

Structure By Committee Did Not Solve The Problem

When the constitution and by-laws for another Church of God in which I was involved was set up, we signed our own death warrant. A very rapid one, because we hadn't learned anything from our prior history. We hadn't learned the lesson we have just covered. We started out loving God, and doing what we should, but when we organized to the point that the corporation and the structure took us away from loving and serving God, it went down the tubes very rapidly. We failed even more than our former affiliation had, partially because we were smaller, but also because we had created committees. Instead of having a dictatorship of one man, we had dictatorship by committees, with men who believed they sat in the seat of God. They then made judgments, not only for things that they considered right or wrong, but on whether one's heart was right with God or not. Who knows whose heart is right with God? Only God knows.

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How would you feel if you had deeply repented in your mind and your heart, and you were told it was unacceptable? This is exactly what these committees did, sitting in the seat of God.

Wrong Answer to the Problems

The greatest mistake in that other Church of God was this: We believed that the problems in our former corporate church were structure related. We believed that by changing the structure from a one-man rule to rule-by-committee the problems would be eliminated. But we failed to learn that the structure of an organization does not change human nature.

Our biggest problem is human nature. We couldn't eliminate the problems of our former church of God by changing to a different type of structure. The only way to solve the problem is to get back to the first commandment of loving God and structure everything to that, according to the function.

Our former Church of God became a movement because we wanted to do a work for God, rather than letting God show us what work we should do. We used our own devices and our own thoughts. When you create a movement, you have created a monument instead of loving and serving God. Therefore, it was doomed to destruction. I am grateful for the mercy of God that He did not destroy us physically.

What Does God Want?

Now we can see for the first time what God wants us to do. We are not to create anything of our own devising that will keep people from loving God. Remembering this is the key. Any organizational structure should be set up to accomplish whatever tasks need to be done, but the task is not a matter of salvation! Is typing a matter of salvation? No. Is writing a matter of salvation? No. Is where

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you live a matter of salvation? No. Is what you do for your job a matter of salvation? No, not as long as you are able to love God and keep his commandments. So, the job is not a part of salvation.

Our former church made a person's job a part of salvation. That was then incorporated into the hierarchical, ministerial structure. It should have never been done!

Before it fell into complete apostasy, God allowed our former affiliations to preach the basics. Many people have left that church organization, but they do not understand what went wrong. As a result, many brethren are wandering about like wounded, battered, scattered sheep.

What a shame that our former Churches have gotten themselves into such a mess. However, in order for us to learn the love of God, it seems that we must come into a Church of God, and then go out of a Church of God, so that we can meet with brethren who truly love God and each other.

Purpose For The Church

The apostle Paul was inspired to clearly define the purpose of the Church and ministry:

“And he gave some, apostles: and some, prophets: and some, evangelists, and some, pastors and teachers” (Ephesians 4:11).

The key is in verse 12, please look at the words very carefully. Does it say for the ruling of the government of God over the brethren? It doesn't say that, does it?

Notice it says: *“For the perfecting of the saints, ...”* [To do what? **To make the disciple as the teacher...**] *“For the work of the ministry, ...”* And actually that means for the work of the service.

Ministry is a service. *“For edifying...”* [The meaning of edify is: to teach and up-build in love.] *“For the edifying of the body of Christ: (v13) Til we all...”*

Who is all? Whoever are apostles, and prophets, and evangelists, and pastors, and teachers, and brethren,

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we, all together... “...come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God...”

When human beings take the prerogatives of God to themselves, they reject the true purpose of the ministry and destroy the knowledge of the Son of God. We can comprehend a great deal more if we are looking directly to Jesus Christ and God the Father, rather than to men or an organization.

“And of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man...” [or unto a spiritually mature Christian.]
“Unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

This is a huge job, that can't be done when the prerogatives of God have been leveraged to human beings, or to human authority, or to a corporate church organization.

(v14): *“That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro...”* Isn't that what has happened in our former affiliation? The members are tossed to and fro by the authorities in the Church. *“And carried about with every wind of doctrine by the SLEIGHT OF MEN, and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive.”*

But isn't it something that the deception was so clever and the SLEIGHT OF HAND so subtle that even those who did it, didn't know what they were doing. However, here is what Christ wants:

(v15-16): *“But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, which makes increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.”*

Now, that's the correct church structure. Do not allow the structure of the administration to interfere with the first commandment of loving God with all your heart, mind, soul and being, so that you may come to the full knowledge and measure in the stature of Christ.

Background to this booklet

The source of this booklet was a sermon tape entitled *Sleight of Hand* by Fred R. Coulter. Fred Coulter was ordained a minister of Jesus Christ in 1965. He has pastored Churches of God all over the western United States. Currently he is a pastor, teacher, lecturer and scholar for the Christian Biblical Church of God with headquarters in Hollister, California.

If you have felt that others have tried to change your foundational beliefs please write for the book—*Lord, What Should I Do?*

If you have benefited from this booklet, we recommend you request Fred Coulter's sermon tapes: "*Invisible Idol/Visible Man,*" and "*Why God Hates Hierarchy.*"

Christian Biblical Church of God Offices:

Australia
GPO 1574
Sydney 2001
Australia

Canada
Post Office Box 125
Brockville, Ontario K6V 5V2
Canada

New Zealand
Post Office Box 242
Waihi 2981
New Zealand

Republic of South Africa
Post Office Box 2624
Wilrow Park
1731
Rep. of South Africa

United Kingdom
Post Office Box 8224
Witham CM8 1WZ
United Kingdom

United States
Post Office Box 1442
Hollister, California 95024-1442

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