

Systems

Let's Talk About It

A SPECIAL MESSAGE FROM THE DESK OF THE
GENERAL OVERSEER



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A SPIRIT-EMPOWERED DENOMINATION

The Church of God is a Spirit-empowered denomination rich in history and heritage. From its humble birth in 1886 to becoming a movement of global influence, the Church has nurtured many spiritual sons and daughters. I am one of those sons.

When I was 17 years old, the Church of God embraced me as a minister of the Gospel and provided a platform that launched a thousand dreams that have been fulfilled again and again. The Church of God brought the Gospel to my father, who in turn taught me to honor its biblical doctrines and adhere to its foundational principles for living. I have found friendship with many wonderful and admired church denominations and fellowships around the world, but when I think of home, my heart returns to the Church of God—its songs and sermons; its camp meetings and conventions; its altar calls and prayer lines; its fiery evangelists and statesmen-like pastors; its seemingly “bigger than life” leaders. But the values I consider most important are its core values, including prayer and the proclamation of God’s Word in the spirit and power of Pentecost.

Make no mistake . . . we have always walked hand-in-hand but we haven’t always seen eye to eye. The church has honored me during my life’s journey and at times solemnly corrected my course. The church has been generous with praise and affirmation, but just as generous with caution and warning. I have rejoiced in the church’s triumphs and wept in the church’s frailties. The church is neither exempt from struggle nor absolved from criticism, but it has been preserved for what should be its finest hour, reaching more than 7 million constituents and adherents in 183 nations.

The church found me as a child, nourished me through my youth, and accompanied me into my maturity. For all of this, I am thankful.

SYSTEMATIC DIAGNOSIS

But hear my heart:

I will most readily admit that while the organism called the church is alive, sometimes the organization of the church can become ill. It's not hard to know when it happens, because vision becomes blurred and budgets become bloated. Hearing gets dull and the harvest is hindered. Outreach is withered and revival flatlines as slow, continual bleeding saps the church of her strength and ability to be effective. When this happens, prayer surrenders to manipulation, commitment yields to compromise, and what was fervent evangelism erodes to the low-grade fever of half-hearted and listless programs. Soon, as with the church of Laodicea written about in Revelation 3, Jesus stands outside the door of the church knocking and longing to be allowed in. We think we have need of nothing and do not realize that we are wretched, miserable, poor, and blind. In a word, the church in general, and as many know it, is ill and in decline in much of America.

When visiting a physician, regardless of the reason, two things are typically submitted for analysis and diagnosis. Those two things are System and Structure. Everything that may be wrong or right will be classified under one of those categories. Structure has to do with the frame around which systems function. Though not always, a person's structure (skeletal frame) can be fundamentally sound while their system can be contaminated with sickness. Interestingly enough, an ill or weakened system can be allowed to deteriorate within a structure designed to uphold and carry around a healthy being.

Systems often become ill when outside elements are introduced into a structure designed for health and mobility. Bad diets, alcohol, smoking, drug use, promiscuous living, and a host of other things are contaminants or even poison to someone's system. As a result, existence is miserable and life can be shortened. Make no mistake, a skeletal structure is just as subject to pain, aches and breaks, making adjustments and even replacement often necessary.

But more often than
not, a

person's health problem stem from physically systemic malfunctions brought on by outside interference and even intrusion.

Sometimes an ill system is due to another individual's cough or sneeze somewhere nearby and you "caught" what was being hurled into the air by a careless expulsion. Sometimes an ill system is due to an availing of oneself to elements not necessarily meant to harm, but because of overuse or overexposure to them it brings on sickness. We all need sun, rain, cold and heat in their season but good elements mixed with bad timing seldom bring great results. Antibiotics were made to fend off and even kill infection, but there is a reason we take them according to a "timed" prescription from a doctor. Possibly the most difficult and even tragic diagnosis comes when it is discovered that a system is ill due to defects from within, forcing major treatment and the possible excising of the affected area. While systems of the human body can be specifically defined and monitored, it is not always that simple with what we call the "system" of an organization.

THE REALITY OF SYSTEMS

As it relates to the church, ever since my entry into ministry at 17, I've heard the word "system." I don't honestly know that any of us know what that thing is. I was told once that I couldn't be a State Youth Director of a particular region because I wasn't in the "System." A State Overseer once told me I couldn't go to a certain church because I wasn't in that "bracket." Except for the stated authority of an Overseer, there wasn't a law or anything in the Minutes of the General Assembly that dictated that I couldn't do those things, but there was a "System." Even as a Pastor of a strong church and later as a State and Regional Leader, I would be met with what everyone just knew to be – and to call – the "System."

Now that I'm General Overseer of the Church of God, for the life of me, I can't find any real tangible thing huddled in some corner anywhere in Cleveland, Tennessee that I can touch and say "Aha, there it is ...the System." There is no notebook anywhere around here called "System." It doesn't have a parking space, desk or

secretary. But I would be a fool to say to you that a system doesn't exist. Sure it does. It's invisible ... yet present. It's has no hands ... but it can have a grip. It has no feet ... but believe me it gets around.

But know this also, whatever this thing called "System" is, it's not denominationally exclusive nor loyal. There's been a system in every TV network I've ever appeared on. Those gospel music venues and conventions I've hung around for years? Yes, there's a "system." And trust me, all of those interdenominational and non-denominational meetings I go to and often speak at ... you got it, there's a "system"... a system that is often well meaning, but just as often, faulty, inadequate and partial to those who helped create it. "Systems" are everywhere because people are everywhere.

In John 17:15 there was a "system" that Jesus even acknowledged and prayed that the Father would somehow help the disciples find a way, that while working "in" it they would not be "of" it. And that's the posture that I think we all must have. God is not surprised, shaken or diminished by the fact that systems, wherever and whatever they are, exist. I suppose there are good systems and bad systems and one's view of them is affected by their experience with them.

Sometimes systems just happen. Intentionally or otherwise, they exist. I acknowledge it but choose not to focus all of my time dwelling on it. I would rather give my time to working with and working on viable, functioning, and honorable structures that hold systems in check and call them, real or imagined, into accountability.

A SOUND STRUCTURE

The Church of God has a sound structure. Is it perfect? Of course not. The fact that we have a General Assembly every two years is proof that none of us believe it's perfect. However, we must be willing to continually address and adjust structural challenges and even structural deficiencies in order for us to be a part of finishing the Great Commission. We have to be willing to admit our needs and then we must be willing to be at and stay at the

table dealing with them and adjusting them regularly as needed. We must respect one another. We must make room at the table for the voices of men and women of past, present and next generations. While we spend time asking “What’s wrong with the church,” we must also celebrate “what’s right” with the church and allow the “right” with it to impact the culture we find ourselves in today. Most of all, and above all, we must not lose our Pentecostal distinctive in the process. I am convinced that our “systemic” challenges, visible and invisible, can be remedied but only if our structure is sound and remains strong.

Our structure must be strong enough to:

- Guard against “judging ourselves, by ourselves,” 2 Corinthians 10:12;
- Observe trends but resist fads and then chart a clear and God-honoring course that leads to Kingdom expansion;
- Honor heritage and preserve scriptural distinctive while measuring traditions against God’s Word to determine what stands or falls;
- And much, much more...

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CLOSING

But for today:

Keep your eyes on Jesus and not a system. Guard your integrity, cherish your friendships, and pray without ceasing.

There's too much in my heart today but for now, I'll end with this:

I'll never forget the time when as a child while playing "Superman," I jumped off of a high porch and broke my right arm. I really messed up a very needed part of my structure. I've always appreciated the fact that my parents got me to a doctor who with great insight made a decision that to this day I am grateful for. He chose to repair the break rather than amputate the arm. He saw that an adjusted and repaired arm still had a huge role to play for my body. Neither my father nor my mother made me the subject of neighborhood ridicule because of my leap into the wind. Rather, they sought help and addressed the need – they helped get my structure repaired. To this day, I still use that arm.

I choose to use it today to embrace and not resist.

I look forward to locking that arm with yours as we race toward the FINISH line together.

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