

Mr. Robin Webber

Sermon Transcript

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Preaching the Gospel, Preparing A People

As I mentioned, during this conference the theme of this General Conference 2001 was the theme of urgency. And that was what it was about, that we as Christians, tools in God's hands, need to have urgency in all that we do and all that we are about, and to recognize the precious times and the powerful times that you and I live in today. We don't want to be like the people of old, the religious community that was extant at the time of Jesus Christ. Some of their leaders were actually chided by Jesus Christ when he said that, you know you guys can look at a sunset and you can kind of say how the weather is going to be the next day. And yet you cannot understand the really important matters at hand. In fact, it's right in front of you, God's agent is on earth, and what I am doing, and what I am about.

We don't want to be like those people of old. We want to be active, living tools within God's hands. As you and I have been called into the body of Christ, we have been called in a very, very unique time, brethren. Frankly, some of the most troubling times in all of human history. Paul comments on this over in **2 Timothy**, if you will join me there. We don't always think of the Apostle Paul as a prophet. We normally think of him as an evangelist. But indeed, he did, under the inspiration of God's Spirit, supply some of the prophecy that we find in the New Testament.

In **2 Timothy 3**, starting in **verse 1**, the Apostle Paul talks about the very, very times that you and I are going through today. *But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come. For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, hty, and lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God. And notice in this condemnation, having a form of godliness, but denying its power. And from such people, turn away.*

Friends, I do not think that it takes a rocket scientist to figure out that what Paul is saying here fits the times that you and I live in. It epitomizes the very country that we live in. It is amazing that in the United States of America, and it is such a paradox that in one sense perhaps one of the most "religious" countries on earth still compared to even other countries of western civilization, where we even have *In God We Trust* on our coins, and nonetheless we can just look out the window, look on television, read our newspapers, go to the movies, see where the family is, see where the children are, and recognize that this chapter describes the very world that you and I are in. And yet it's the world that God keeps us in. Remember what Jesus said on that last night when he was betrayed. He said, *Father, I pray that you will watch over them.* He didn't pray to get them out of there. He said, *Keep them.* Where you call them, keep them. And one of the things that we are supposed to keep, no matter where we are being called, no matter where God has given us invitation, is that we are to keep the culture of God. Predominant and above the culture that is around us.

Now, may I share a thought with you? That is extremely difficult to do. When you and I go to the book of Revelation, we go through Revelation 2, we go through Revelation 3, and we see how the angel speaks to the different churches of Revelation. We recognize, whether it be Philadelphia, Thyatira, Sardis, Pergamos, and you name the rest of them...we recognize that these people in their cities were affected by the history of that city. The culture of that city, some of the physiodynamics of that city, whether it be the water supply, whether it be the earthquakes that were extant in that area, whether it was the certain manufacturing that they did, it really affects from the outside in to a degree what Christians experience in their lifetimes. But nonetheless, brethren, God knows what he is doing, and he knows what he is doing with you. And that is what I would like to talk about. Let's just ask ourselves a couple of questions. I think it is good that we do this. How urgent, how urgent is God? Does God have a sense of urgency? I think we could state that. You know, I didn't mention that this morning in Bakersfield, but come with me to **Isaiah 62** for just a second while it is on my mind. Join me over in Isaiah 62, and let's notice this to answer that question with a scripture. In **Isaiah 62:1** *For Zion's sake I will not hold my peace, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as the lamp that burns. So the Gentiles shall see your righteousness, and all kings your glory. And you shall be called by my name.* God is not resting much.

Because not all of these things have been fulfilled. So we understand that God has a sense of urgency.

Question: Does Jesus Christ have a sense of urgency? Yes, my friends, he does. In **John 5:17-18** he says, *My Father works, and so do I.* So the question then comes down to, if the Godhead has a sense of urgency, how about you and me? Do we have a sense of urgency? How urgent are we? Would you please join me

over in **Matthew 24:46**. I want to share a scripture here with you. And there's a reason why I do this. You will probably see this sooner or later. And it was really neat when I was at the conference, because we have some of these corporate, if I can use that word, corporate memo pads. And on that corporate memo pad now it has that little globe at the top that we are kind of familiar with now, that is a globe of the world. And at the top it says to preach the gospel. Underneath it says to prepare a people. And it says United Church of God. But then there is a little line across underneath that, and then there is a little verse right underneath that. Now you talk about every time you're looking at a memo pad to be reminded of what you believe, it's right there. There's the verse. It's right there. There's the verse. Matthew 24, and here it is, verse 46. Where it says, *Blessed is that servant whom his master when he comes will find so doing*. More importantly than being on that memo pad, it is right here in your Bible.

The question that I would like to share with you today, my friends here in Los Angeles, is simply this. The question is, doing what? What are we supposed to be doing as members of the body of Christ? The United Church of God an organization has established a dual focus, which we sincerely believe encapsulates the thrust of the gospel. Now you and I recognize that the gospel or the good news message is like a jewel, and it has many, many facets. But for many years we have always looked at **Matthew 24:14** as far as *Go you therefore into all the world. Preach the gospel unto all nations, and then comes the end*. And/or we go to **Matthew 28**, sometimes called the great commission. It is not called the great commission in the Bible. It is a commission though. It says in Matthew 28 that we are to *go you therefore into all the world. Preach the gospel, make disciples, etc., etc.* Then we have added another verse which ultimately says to feed the flock. So we are to preach the gospel, we are to make disciples, we are to feed the flock. The United Church of God, in a sense, has brought this down to a two-edged focus. We are to preach the gospel, and we are to prepare a people. The most important thing that I can share with you in this study is to recognize that we are going to come to see, if we do not already see today, that both of these mutually exist to support the other. To preach the gospel we have got to be prepared as a people. A prepared people preach the gospel. It is not and/or. It is not either/thus. It is both. It is both in a larger framework that we need to come to understand. Today I want to focus with you on just one of these. And that is the subject of preparing a people. And I want today to discuss the church's responsibility, my pastoral responsibility, and your personal responsibility in preparing the bride of Christ. I hope you just heard me. It takes all three. It is the church's responsibility. It is a pastoral responsibility. But you know what, it is your responsibility just as well, because the Bible itself says that we are to work out our own salvation with fear and with trembling. And we are going to come to see that this aspect of preparing a people is as much part of the work of the church and the work of Jesus Christ as anything else that he might do or that we might do. It really comes down to understanding, my friends, that it is not simply what we know. It is not simply worshipping God in truth, and what we know. But more

so, who am I? What resides in me? What am I about? Why do I do what I do? What do I do with what I know? And how can we work together? I said we are going to talk about the bride of Christ. The question is, what is the bride to become? And how does the bride become that way? That is what we are going to talk about.

The first point that I would like to share with you in preparing a people and preparing the bride of Christ, first of all let's come to focus on God's purpose for the church. What is God's ultimate purpose for the church? To understand this we need to go over to **Romans 8**, if you will join me there. Let's look at scripture, presented by the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Paul. And let's notice where the finish line is. One thing we want to make sure as Christians and spirit-led individuals is that we have the same finish line as God does. Can you imagine somebody thinking that they are running a mile race, and they stop at the 880 mark? And they are all excited, I won! And then somebody points out, but the finish line is down there. But I thought I was finished! I thought this was it! This is what I paced myself for! Only to find that finish line is down the line. I think that as we look around over the years that is what a lot of people have done, brethren. They haven't had the same finish line that God has. And like Yogi Berra used to say, it's not over until it's over. But you have to know when it's over. And then recognize that even when you get to over, it's really just the beginning of eternity.

Come with me to **Romans 8:18**. *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is going to be revealed in us.* Now notice **verse 19**. *For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope. Because the creation itself also is going to be delivered from the of decay or corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. And because of this we know that the whole creation groans, and it labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption, of our body. For we were saved in this hope.* What is this telling us? This is what the whole plan of God waits for, brethren. It is the glorious, the wonderful appearance of the sons of God. Individuals that were initially physically created, infused with the Spirit of God, imitating the example and the life of Jesus Christ, and ultimately resurrected into glory. And that God is going to declare that spiritual generation, and that this is what creation, unwittingly even, is longing for. And what God is longing for. This is it. This is the event. This is the showstopper. This is what the gospel is all about. This is the good news. This is more than nations simply appearing, and rising up in Europe. And then the Eurasian landmass, of which they will. This is more than the appearance of an individual known as the beast. This is more than the appearance of an individual known as the false prophet. This is more than walking together and creating the chaos that they are going to create in the future, as the different books of the Bible bring out. And yes, those things are

going to occur. But brethren, I assure you that is not where God wants our ultimate focus.

Because if that is our ultimate focus, we are going to run up short on the race of life, of eternal life. There is more. This is what God ultimately wants us to focus on. This is the finish line. This is what Jesus Christ died for. This is what he envisioned for in the beginning when he said *I will build my church*. He didn't just simply build his church to be a bunch of statisticians and getting into a whole bunch of things that maybe they don't fully realize or know, that God is going to reveal to them when they need to know it. But this is what he is aiming his people toward. There is going to come a moment in the future when God is going to be so excited that he is going to reveal his ultimate creation, the glorious sons of God. And you and I have a part in being there, and to be doing that.

Come with me to **Revelation 19:6**. Let's notice this. We notice here some words of Jesus Christ through John. *And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters, and as the sound of mighty thundering, saying Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigns. Let us be glad and rejoice, and give him glory, for the marriage, the wedding supper, the marriage of the lamb has come. And his wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen and clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And then he said to me, write. Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the lamb.* God declares this spiritual generation of firstfruits and says, blessed are those that are going to be there. A bride that has prepared itself, and made itself to be ready. These individuals that are going to be the leaders under Jesus Christ, the ones that have gone before just as Jesus Christ went before us as the captain of our salvation. Christ is going to use this beautiful, beautiful bride to revolutionize the world. Those of you who have been going with me on the journey to the book of Luke recognize that Jesus Christ came to spiritually, to morally, to emotionally, and economically revolutionize the world, to bring a new world order, to bring a new way of thinking. And Jesus Christ asks of us, get a mind that fits it. A bride that has prepared itself.

You and I know that when we hearken back to our wedding days, we recognize how beautiful it is when a bride prepares herself for that wedding. It is a remarkable, remarkable thing in life. And so many of you ladies have been through that and recognize what that is like. You know, I have married probably scores of brides by now. I haven't married them personally. But I have married individuals and brides, and you know what, I have seen brides come in all shapes, all sizes, all forms, I won't go into that, all sizes, shapes, and forms, etc., etc., but you know what, I have never seen anything but a beautiful, beautiful bride. There is just something about a woman on that day. Let's all look around...when that door opens, the wedding doesn't even really begin until the bride comes. Everything else is just show. But let's all look back there. Turn

around. Go ahead. That door, what happens, you get all of this fuss and muss up here, and all of the music, but the bride is not here. You know, without a bride there is not a wedding, is there? There is not a wedding. And all of a sudden you are waiting, women will make you wait, you are waiting, and then you have the doors open. The bride reels around, normally on the arm of her father or a loved one. The poor guy appears about to faint looking at the bride. You know how that goes. And she is just walking down radiant and beautiful and coming to her groom. But God put that all in the human framework so that we would understand...so that we would understand the importance of preparing a people. So that we would come to understand what the wedding supper is going to be like, and how much God wants us to come to him, and then what he has in store for us. That's what it is all about.

Revelation 21:2. Come with me please. Speaking of that bride. *Then I, John, saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down of the heavens from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, behold, the tabernacle of God is with men. And he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them and be their God.* And then we see all of the wonderful things that are going to happen, that the bride of Christ is going to be able to share with God in doing and performing a work of wiping away tears, eradicating death, no more sorrow, no more pain, no more crying. Those very famous verses. What I want you to understand, friends here in Los Angeles, is this and this alone. This is it. This is the big picture. This is the finish line. This describes where Christ is going. He is not stuck in the United States. He is not simply stuck in problems, your problems, at this time, for this moment. He envisioned this from the beginning. These final words of God tell us in some detail the bride of Christ and the place that she is going to have in God's rule forever in his kingdom.

This is the vision that God, Jesus Christ, have of his bride, the church, before anything began. When he said that I am going to build a church. God sees things as if they are already done, and this is what he saw. He saw you and me in this fabric of the bride, a part of that program, a part of that spectacle in the future that is going to awe humanity. That is what humanity and the creation are waiting for and groaning for with expectation, even when they don't fully understand it. God by his grace has called you and me to be a part of that. That is wonderful. And that is why it is vital, friends, it is vital that you know where you are going as an individual. It is vital that we share and remain in this focus as a congregation and the church as a whole. Otherwise we are riding off on a bad tangent. And we are not fully focused, because we have shortened the great picture of what God intends. It is always important to consider the end, because we are here looking at Revelation, Jesus Christ is telling us exactly where he wants us to go. Now if I were to ask any of you what do you want to do and what are your goals, you would probably say, coming back with **Matthew 6:33** and say, *Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all of these things shall be added.* And yes, indeed, you

would be right. But also, the question then comes, what must you do to get there? What does it mean to seek first the kingdom of God? How do you define this? Jesus Christ defined what it takes to enter the kingdom of God. And if you are brave enough and courageous enough you will turn to those scriptures with me here in the next couple of minutes and understand the goal that is ahead of us. Join me if you would for a moment in **Matthew 5:19**. In Matthew 5:19 Jesus Christ gives a stunning revelation about what it takes to be in the kingdom of God.

Matthew 5:19-20. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches me so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven. But whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees, you are by no means going to enter the kingdom of God. That is a stunning statement. Anybody that has at any time studied into the scribes and the Pharisees recognizes the discipline, recognizes the focus, recognizes the sacrifice, recognizes their ability and willingness to stand out even under scrutiny. And Jesus Christ says, your righteousness has got to exceed that. That means you have got to be serious about what you are doing. And we recognize that the Pharisees, while in a sense going down the wrong street, nonetheless were very sincere. But as Mr. Armstrong always used to say, there's a lot of sin in sincere. So you want to make sure you're sincere about the right thing.

Let's notice another verse here. **Matthew 18:3**. We notice what it says here when it says, Jesus Christ began speaking, *Surely I say you, unless you are converted and become as little children you will by no means, you will not, that's how strong it is, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven unless you are like one of these children.*

Now, are you with me a second, friends? I could have just said, (soft, slow voice) assuredly I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. I don't think that is how Jesus Christ said it. I think he was very serious. You and I must understand that the ministry of Jesus Christ on this earth was not about lowering the bar. He raised the bar. He raised it to a new level. Jesus Christ did not come to do away with his Father's law. He did not come to minimize sin.

He did not come to tell his people to run away from sin, but to conquer sin by recognizing the force of sin which is the heart. That it is not the outside of the cup, but the inside that gets you. Wow! That is kind of making it tough. Is there any hope? Absolutely! And Christ gives us that hope, and that is what the rest of the sermon is about. And that's why we need to discuss these things. By focusing on these scriptures we are going to come to realize that that is why Jesus Christ came, to show us those qualities.

You know I was talking earlier about our friends, our brethren in the Remnant Church of God, and how childlike they are. And in no way is that condescending. That is a beautiful quality. I think of our two granddaughters. Many of you know that we have a couple of our granddaughters living with us. And those little girls are so cute. But if I can show you for a moment, and all of you either as grandparents or parents will know that after they have at least fallen once or twice, and it takes a few, maybe a hundred times, to get the point.

Just teasing. But you know, I will be with, or Susan will be with either Megan or Kalen, and you know just as they come up the steps they don't even look at me. Maybe they shouldn't. But they don't even look at me, and that little hand just goes right up. Because they expect my hand to be there. And God willing, my hand is always going to be there.

There is such trust. Such trust, and such confidence that Grandpa is not going to do anything that is going to harm them. And if Grandpa doesn't, then surely Grandma won't. So there's that trust, and there's not always that checking with the eyes. There's just a natural motion, it's so cute to just see that little hand go up. And that's what God says, that we have got to be like those little children.

Now how are we going to do that friends? That goes to point number two. Once we understand what the purpose of God is, number two, to this end Christ has given his ministry an awesome task. God has given his ministry an awesome task. Join me over in **Ephesians 4**, if you will come there with me please. I ask you to come over, let's explore it together. **Ephesians 4:11**. As we turn to Ephesians 4:11, if you are not there already, let's understand this. There can be no more specific statement of what we must do as a ministry, or more correctly stated, what we must become, either as a steward of God's mysteries and/or as you as an individual, it's all within this set of scripture, realize what the big picture is all about. The goal is here, and it must be reached by every person. I as the minister have a responsibility. You as an individual do, too, have a responsibility. Let's read it. Let's let the power of the verse speak for itself. *And he himself*, that's speaking of Jesus Christ, *gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors, and teachers*. It says that when Jesus Christ went to heaven it says that he gave men gifts. In part, these are the gifts that he gave men, these gifts of teaching, of evangelizing. For what purpose? To serve themselves? No. *For the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, and for the edifying of the body of Christ*. That means edifying, that comes from the Greek word with the same base as edifice. That means for the building up, for the building up of the body of Christ. Till what? *Till we all come to the unity of faith, and of the knowledge of the son of God, to the perfect man. A perfect man. And to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ*. This is ageless, brethren. This is ageless. You as an individual do not need to have an identity crisis as a Christian. Our congregation in L.A. never needs to have an identity crisis as to what we are to speak about, what we are to be about, what we are to preach

about, what we are to go into the community about. It is here. This is the goal. This is the way...*to the stature of the fullness of Christ, that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men and the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting.* When we get our minds and our eyes off of the boss, off of the head of the church, this is what happens. When doctrine - and doctrine is extremely important, absolutely - but when we get lost and lose our rudder and look at doctrine for doctrine alone, rather than keeping God in the picture, what God is doing, you are going to have this problem.

Most people have left the body of Christ not over Christ. They have left the body of Christ over doctrine. And they have left the body of Christ over men. They didn't have the right finish line. They had eyes. They had a heart, but they lost focus. I always tell people that when I counsel them. When we talk about counting the cost, nine out of ten people that I have ever met that have left the body of Christ at this point, and God knows who are his, I don't mean to take it in a final statement or final judgment, I think you understand that, don't you? But those that are not in our fellowship for one reason or another, nine out of ten don't go over out of a love affair with Jesus Christ. They go over and out over an argument and a quarrel with a brother, with a pastor, inister, with an issue in the church that has derailed them. Because they have not come to recognize the ultimate plan of what God is doing. That he wants to equip every member of the church to the measure of the fullness of Jesus Christ. And you cannot know what that is until you get your mind and you get your heart into the book, brethren, and start reading the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You want a congregation that is empowered by the spirit of God, that is full of wisdom, that is full of the Holy Spirit, that is full of love, that is reaching out to one another? I think I am already describing us, but I think we can go a whole lot further. Then you start reading Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And just when you think you've read it, go back and read Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. You must understand who you are becoming married to. Hopefully you would never marry somebody that you don't know. It has happened. Stranger things have happened. There are people who marry people that they do not know. And we are moving towards marriage with Jesus Christ. And when you take on somebody's name, you had better know what they are about. That means you need to date.

The bottom line of marriage counseling is date, date, date again. Date in all circumstances. And just when you think you know the person, date some more. When you start reading the gospels, when you start reading Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, and John, and when you start going into the writings of Paul and understand the fullness and the depth and the breadth of the love and the wisdom of him that God the Father has given us, you come to really know the individual that you are espoused to. You not only kind of know him, but you know him in every fashion as to how he would handle situations. And then you can have all the more confidence of being able to apply his name to your life as a

Christian. We notice here then in Ephesians 4:11 then, what the role of the ministry is about. *It is to speak the truth, verse 15, in love.* We need to learn to do that more, brethren, in our sermonettes, in our sermons, in our publications in the United Church of God. We need to learn to speak the truth, increasingly in love and meaning and depth. As I said earlier in the announcements, it is not enough to say what is wrong. We have to tell them what is right. For every paragraph that we give of gloom and doom, we need to give a paragraph of encouragement, in the kingdom of God, and the millennium, and what is around the corner. I would like to encourage you. You want something to do, something specific to pray about? We have a lot of dedicated men and women that are writing. Ask God to inspire them in that vein. Ask them to plummet the depths of the scripture. And there is a time, yes, to cry aloud and spare not. And all of you have heard me. I can raise my voice with the best of them on Isaiah there, and cry aloud.

And there is also a time, as it says in **Isaiah 40**, *Comfort ye, comfort ye my people.* The spirit of God, the wisdom of God, and the balance of God's Spirit speaking with faith and love, will supply that. And as we become more like that, as we become more Christ-like that way, the more convincing we are going to be, the more convicting our messages here in our congregation will be. The more convicting our literature will be. The more convicting you will be as a mate to your mate, a spouse to spouse, a parent to child. That what they see is Christ in you, and that you have that measure of understanding and love. That is very important.

Why is this important that we do this? You and I know that over the years within the Church of God culture that at times we have been seemingly very good at pointing out things, using timelines and timetables, but not all of them have necessarily come to pass. Dealing with somebody else, be it a beast or a false prophet, amazingly as gruesome as their reality is, is sometimes easier than dealing with our day to day problems. There is a beast and there is a false prophet. And we are going to be talking about that this summer. I want to encourage you to be here this summer. Don't get too lazy in the summertime, because that is when we go into prophecy. I will be giving you three or four sermons in a series on prophecy. We will be going through that at that time. But sometimes it is easier to deal with timelines and datelines and prophecies about an individual that we don't even know who he is yet, rather than dealing with ourselves. Why is it so much easier to deal with others than ourselves, and to recognize that one way we maintain a sense of urgency is to recognize that we need to be urgent about the right matters. So often we get caught up in dates and times. And let's understand something. Think about it this way.

Time and eternity have nothing in common. Time and eternity have nothing in common. And yet so often we get caught up in time warps. The reason why this is important is that the urgency that we need to have is about our eternal choices that we are making in our lives today. Eternal choices. The urgency is about

eternal character. Urgency about not the when, but the what I am and why I am doing it. You say, but wait a minute Mr. Webber, it says in **Luke 21:36** *pray and watch always*. Absolutely. I have no difficulty with that verse. But that's a verse. This is another thought. Let me share a thought with you, that we do sometimes as Christians. Have you ever seen a scriptural halfback? What is a halfback? Can somebody tell me what a halfback does out there? Who is a football guy out here? What does a halfback do? I know it has been a long time since the Rams have been in Los Angeles. This is embarrassing. You see, we have forgotten about football. What does the halfback do? Am I talking to an American audience, or what? Steve? He runs the ball. And he blocks, but he runs with that ball. He gets the old ball and the quarterback will jam it right in his gut, and the halfback takes off, runs around the block, etc.

This is what we need to be careful about sometimes as Christians, is we play a little football with the Bible. We will take one verse, like it has just been jammed right up our heart, jammed up our gut if I can use that phrase for a moment. We will grab a hold of it, and we run like crazy, and we run like we're dizzy, and we are not going to let go of that football for love or money or anything else. We have got to recognize in that sometimes, that sometimes we think we have a real good play going, but it is going in a deadline. And you better ask yourselves sometimes, okay, I've got this ball. But does energy, and motion, and enthusiasm have anything really to do with the work of God? Otherwise we are back in that hamster cage with Pete the hamster, and Pete the hamster can think he is going someplace, but he is really standing still. And sometimes this is what has occurred in the past. We will just kind of get scripture. This is the scripture. This is the only scripture. This is it. And all of a sudden this light is supposed to come down from heaven, and it is like all the thousands and thousands and thousands of other scriptures aren't in the Bible. But this is the scripture. What did Mr. Armstrong always teach us? The Bible interprets the Bible. Here a little. There a little. Line upon line. Precept upon precept. Etc., etc. We have got to be very careful about just simply getting locked into any one thing. It is very, very important.

Let's go to **Romans 8:29**. We notice another verse here, so that we have no mistake about what our role and what our goal is in this Christian experience. In **Romans 8:29**, *For whom he foreknew he also predestined to, notice, be conformed to the image of his son. That he might be the firstborn of many brethren.* So that he might be the firstborn, speaking of Jesus Christ, of many brethren. It is put in this way so that there can be no mistakes. The purpose of God is for us to be conformed in the image of Jesus Christ, so that he would become the firstborn of many brethren. This is telling us, the reader, the serious Bible student, that he won't be the firstborn among many brethren if we do not conform to his image. That is the identity. That is the role. That is the goal. That is what we are working towards.

Let me go to point number three. What is Christ's vision for we who are in the church? What is Christ's vision for us? What is Jesus Christ and God the Father, his Father, going to accept for entrance into the kingdom? Some of these verses that we have already shared about righteousness exceeding the Pharisees, about being like a little child, and the other verses that we have mentioned, do you perhaps get the impression that God the Father knows exactly what he wants in the bride of Christ for his Son, and how important it is that he achieves this, and will, brethren, really settle for nothing less? For the kingdom of God to succeed, he knows that it must become one with Christ, just as Jesus Christ is one with the Father. And I don't get any kind of impression that the Father is going to compromise with what he intends to present to Christ. If, in a sense, when those doors open and there is the bride, God has no qualms here. He knows what he wants. It almost takes you back to that this, in a sense, is going to be like an arranged marriage. He knows exactly what he wants for his Son. The reason why we have to understand this, brethren, is let me put it in the context of our dear sister in Christ, Reiman, who died yesterday. Susan and I have seen either once or twice this week, as others of you perhaps had. And I was struck by the suddenness of her death, to recognize how true it is the saying, here today and gone tomorrow. And sometimes, here today and gone today. And we do not know how long we have. And that is why it is very important to get our minds and hearts in the Bible, to read the words of Christ. We have wonderful literature, and wonderful articles, and wonderful booklets. I write some of them, so I'm all for all the booklets and all the literature in the United Church of God. But there is, brethren, simply no substitute for reading the Bible, and allowing the Bible to read you, and to go one on one with God's word. Jesus Christ states that very famous parable about the unfruitful tree. And he speaks of the master that comes along, and the master says, get rid of that tree. There is no fruit on that tree. And the helping hand says, no, no, no. Wait a minute. Poor little tree. Let's give it a chance. Give it a little bit more time and let's see what happens. Then later on it doesn't produce fruit, and the tree is gone. Within that one little parable comes a story, a two-fold manifesto of what the gospel is. We come to recognize that the gospel is indeed the good news of another opportunity, and God is gracious, and God is merciful, and God does often grant us more opportunity to equip ourselves into the full, the full measure of Jesus Christ. At the same time, that very parable, are you with me, that very parable also defines that there does come finally no opportunity and only judgment. Only judgment. My question to you is, where does God's mercy end and judgment begin? What is that crossover period? Do you know? Do you know? I don't know.

That is why scripture says, blessed is my servant who doesn't even get into those kind of questions. *Blessed is my servant whom I find so doing.* Doing what? Coming to the full measure of Jesus Christ. As you come to the full measure of Jesus Christ, you are going to be able to relate with your God. You are going to be able to relate with your mate. You are going to be able to relate with your

coworker on the job, your children. You are going to be able to be prepared and equipped for whatever comes in the future. You are not only going to be watching, as it says in Luke 21:36, but like Luke 21:36 says too, you are going to pray. Because when you pray, that kind of gives you the right lens to look at prophecy in. Otherwise you are just looking at prophecy by yourself. And so this is very, very important, what I encourage all of us to do.

Let's understand something here. And it is important to think about this. And to recognize that it is important, brethren, that we simply do not simply know the message. We must indeed know the messenger. We must know the messenger. That's extremely important. Again and again during this General Conference it became apparent, and it's on everybody's mind that the messenger complements the message. And the message is about the messenger. Our own mission statement in the United Church of God says that our mission is to teach the gospel of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God. Conclusive. The total package. Jesus Christ is going to be the king of the World Tomorrow. He is the perfect man. We are to grow up in his measurement as we understand the messenger, as we understand how he would face things. We read his story. We equip ourselves with the lessons that he provided us in his lifetime. We will learn to tell a better story of the gospel. We will be more convicting when people come and join us in our congregation. We will be more compelling because we have increased love of God and warmth. And much like Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ so often thought of things ahead of time because of the love and the concern that he had for his disciples, for a village, or for a person. We will read the stories of how sensitive he was. When even somebody would touch him in the midst of a crowd he felt the touch. We would come to understand that he was very touchable. We would come to understand that he would often touch people that were untouchable. He often forgave people that were unforgivable. He often loved people that were unlovable. He always, most assuredly, offered dignity to those that repented, and those that wanted to follow him with all of their heart. These are the things that we learn when we come to understand what it means to equip ourselves with the full measure of Jesus Christ. You and I learn that when we are focused on this, that we are understanding him, that we are to marry in the future at the wedding supper, we learn to act like him.

We learn to love like him. We learn to live like him. We learn that there is a time to warn an evil generation of the things to come. And yes, indeed, there is a warning message of the gospel that this church and the body of Christ must get out to this world. And as much as we warn this world of the things that are to come, that are going to come out of Europe, that are coming out of Europe if you are reading your newspaper, we must equally give them the encouragement that as they repent the wonderful news that lies ahead of them, the wonderful world tomorrow, the wedding supper to come, and what can happen when you get that new mind, and you desire that new world order to come, it is both.

Jesus Christ always left his audience amazed. One moment he was saying that he could count the hairs on your head. Another moment he was overturning tables. One moment he had a widow in his arms. The next moment he was almost shaking a fist to the Pharisees. One moment he was talking about a sparrow that falls. Another moment he was talking about an entire system collapsing. There is a vitality, there is a versatility, there is a flexibility that, brethren, we as people must have as we prepare to be members of the body of Christ. That is very, very important.

Have you ever asked yourself a question? We look in the spiritual scrapbook of the Bible, and you might call that the book of Acts. Why were those individuals able to do what they did? This makes my mouth drop open sometimes and just keeps it there, hanging. Why did it happen as we think about it, as we come up to the Day of Pentecost? The reason why those men had those wonderful things happen to them is that they were filled with the Holy Spirit, and they were filled with him that they had known for 3 ½ years. Why did he do it through them? Because he knew that they were not going to go anywhere else without him. They simply believed him. May we talk? I know today that oftentimes people looking throughout the Church of God, and the Diaspora that has spread out will say oftentimes, well we don't have an apostle today. We perhaps don't have one individual that stands out. I beg to differ. We have the perfect man that stands out. It is his measure and his fullness that we match, and he will supply our every need. And he will raise up that which he needs to do. When you get your mind and your heart into the book, you recognize how often God did extraordinary things with very ordinary people. Shepherds like Amos. Little boys that had bread and fish. It is very interesting that when you read the account in the book of Luke of the 70 that he sent out, have you ever recognized that not one of those 70 is mentioned by name? Not one! Not one! Those 70 were divided down into teams of two, and they were sent out to do what? Number one, to preach the gospel is the first thing they did. Number two, he gave them a little line of how to do it. Number three he said you're going to run into some trouble along the way. And number four, by the way, get back, be accountable, and let me know what is going on. He didn't write manuals about it. He didn't write manuals. Not a whole lot of dia . What we understand when he did that was that he was personally while on earth empowering his followers message. He had confidence that those 70, not the 12 but the 70, he gave the same instructions to the 12 too. But those 70 had been trained, had seen enough, and now it was time for them to have their wings spread and to fly. And there is not a name of any of those 70. And you know what? The rest is history.

I think that is a very important lesson for all of us. You know, even when you go to **Matthew 10** and its counterpart, **Luke 12**, you know when Jesus Christ chose the twelve, you know how much biography he gives on those twelve? About a paragraph and a half. Now if you and I were running any kind of a business, you know that is no way to run a business. These guys only have a paragraph and

there are twelve of them, and they have about a paragraph and a half between all of them. And it is almost as if God was saying, look, I want you to get it, that I am going to take twelve ordinary men, and I am going to show you what I can do with them. It is not going to be by your might. It is not going to be by your power. It is not going to be by the personality of simply one individual. It is going to be by the head of the church. You and I can look at ourselves today and yes, I think today more than ever we can conclude that God is with us. Obviously by you being here at this worship service, you also want to be with God. We would not be here with the successes that we have had as a church without Christ making them possible. But I want to share a thought with you as we come up to Pentecost. If we honestly look at the book of Acts, and at what the apostles did and what their spiritual leaders in the early church did, yes we see a likeness. But to be honest, we still see a chasm separating the degree of their faith and ours, their work and ours. Christ's leadership among them, and Christ's leadership among us. Christ's works he did through them, and Christ's works that he is doing through us today. Has that ever been a dilemma in your mind, brethren? It is a chasm that needs to be narrowed, and one that needs to be filled. We all long for Christ's unmistakable leadership in our lives, in our congregation, and in our church. And I have always stated as a pastor, and my responsibility is to equip the saints of God, is to recognize that in our congregation when we come to worship God, you should always hear more about God, and you should always hear more about Jesus Christ than you hear about man and/or organization. If while I am here as your pastor you ever hear that reversed, you have my permission just to get up and go. And you should get up and go. You should walk out. Because it is not what we are doing. It is what God is doing. God is equipping the saints. The Holy Spirit is working within us. This is the work of God. This is not the work of men. And over the years in the United Church of God we have become very good at bylaws and constitutional flow, and this and that. But that is nothing, brethren. That is nothing unless we are centered on the big picture of preparing a people, preaching the gospel, and preparing ourselves to be the bride of Christ. Let us say again that the image of Christ must be clear, never muddied, because there is the conflict in what we say, what we do, or what we are. Now, where do we go from here? Where do we go from here? Let's conclude with just a few thoughts. We have just come from a conference, the General Conference of the United Church of God, an International Association. What does that mean to you and me, we here that are out in Los Angeles. Let's understand that our organization is not of itself the spiritual body of Christ, but our organization has been raised up to serve the spiritual body of Christ. It was not established for the spiritual body of Christ to simply serve it. Let's understand fully that any organization of humans can only be blessed by God the Father if it has in its foremost purpose to construct the household for God, and not simply for ourselves. And the extent that we relentlessly, and I do use that word carefully, relentlessly pursue that end will be the extent that we have Jesus Christ dwelling in our house, be it an organization, or be it a congregation, or be it our own domiciles. A house that has

lasted for centuries, for nearly 2000 years, has not been an organization but has been the spiritual body of Christ. For any organization to have this as its key, to serve the body of Christ is the key to survival and the key to the ability to continue to serve the body of Christ. Because the body of Christ is always going to exist.

Organizations will come and go. And they go much quicker when they become self-serving. That is why let's look at **Galatians 4:17**. A thought that Paul shared. *They zealously court you, speaking of other teachers, but for no good. Yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them.*

A shepherd has a tremendous role, brethren. We are to guard the flock, and we are to feed the flock jealously, like a good shepherd. Paul speaks of shepherds here that come in to fleece the flock, to turn your attention, to turn your eyes and hearts away from the measure of the full man and to talk about lesser things. Paul knew what he was talking about.

We have a tremendous job today, to recognize as I come from this conference, to recognize that yes, there is stability within the United Church of God, and I come back with a good report and say there is growing unity and growing maturity and understanding. Yes, the weightier matters of what the Bible is about. And the gospel being preached with the numbers you will read in what you pick up this afternoon, it is astoundingly marvelous how God has worked a wonderful miracle. And brethren you are a part of it. It could not happen without you and your faith and your confidence in Jesus Christ being the head of the church, your tithes, your offerings, your prayers, your support, and all those things that you do. Well let's recognize the warning that Haggai gives in **Haggai 1:2**. You can turn over there. It's on page 1277 in my Bible. I don't know where it is in your Bible. Haggai is not one of those that we always run to immediately for comfort. But in Haggai 1:2 it says, speaking of this people, *the time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built. And then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet saying, Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, and this temple to lie in ruins? Now therefore thus saith the Lord of hosts, consider your way. And that is kind of like a jolt of electricity. Consider your ways. Things are going all right for you, in other words, is what the message comes to Haggai. We have got a wonderful congregation here in Los Angeles, brethren. It is warm. It is growing. It is budding. You have grown so much in these last three years. You are taking off. You are an instrument in God's hands. We have peace. We hear the things of God. Our men and our women are growing in service in church and out of church. I think Los Angeles is known by and large as being a wonderful congregation, but we can't stop there. It is not enough that our house is taken care of. It is not enough that we can just simply come to a nice and simple and safe place. The temple of God is the spiritual household of God today, not just simply a building on a hill in the least. And we recognize what has happened to the church of God the last 15 years. We also recognize what is happening out in this world today and that this world needs to have the message of the kingdom of*

God. Of the millennium, of the wonderful world tomorrow, of the opportunity that they have to be there, to be prepared to be the bride of Christ. And those that have never won anything in their life, even a cakewalk at a social, have the opportunity to be invited by God to be at the most glorious, wonderful spectacle that the universe will ever witness. This is the message. This is what we are about. This is where we are going as an organization, as a congregation, hopefully as an individual. But we can only do this, we can only do this, brethren, if we ourselves remember who we are espoused to, and what we are about, and what we are preparing for. That is what is most, most important.

I had a story here I wanted to share with you at the end. And I cannot find it. That may mean that it's not the inspired portion of the sermon. Or maybe the sermon has gone too long. Who's translating in the booth? You've got page seven of my notes. Thank you. Isn't that nice to know that our interpreter was not asleep. Hector is always on the job. This is called the interactive portion of church. Gracias. Thank you. Thank you, Hector. What am I saying? I am going to conclude in two minutes. But I want to share this wonderful story with you. It really inspired me at the conference. So what am I saying? To effectively preach the gospel, dear brethren, we must be effectively preparing ourselves from the inside out. That's what it is all about. And preparing to be the bride of Christ. What I have tried to share with you this afternoon is to help each and every one of us to understand that Christ is never going to deviate from his purpose in preparing a bride for himself. And we must do all that we can to cooperate with Christ to accomplish this purpose. With that thought in mind, let me conclude with this story by sharing a story off of the scripture. It is the scripture of **Malachi 3:3**, where it simply speaking of God says that *he will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver*. Let me share this story. I conclude.

Sometime ago, a few ladies met to study the scriptures. And while reading the third chapter of Malachi they came upon a remarkable statement which I have just read. Malachi 3:3. Look it up later please. *He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver*. One lady decided to visit a silversmith and report to the others on what he said about the subject. She went accordingly, and without telling the silversmith the reason for her visit, begged him to tell her about the process of refining silver. Well, after he had fully described it to her she asked, sir, do you watch while the work of refining is going on? On, yes ma'am, replied the silversmith. I must sit, and I must watch the furnace constantly, for if the time necessary for refining is exceeded in the slightest degree, the silver will be injured. Well, the lady at once saw the beauty and the comfort of the statement, *he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver*. God sees it as necessary to put his children at times - you know that, and I know that, we've been there - in the furnace. But his eyes steadily intent on the work of purifying, and his wisdom and love are both engaged in the best manner for us. Our trials do not, then, come simply at random. And he will not let us be tested beyond that which we can handle. Before she left, and with this thought I leave you, before she left the

lady asked one final question. That's what is so important, brethren, that a part of the work of the gospel is preparing a people to be the bride of Christ. Before she left, the lady asked one final question. How do you know when the process is finished? Oh, that's quite simple, replied the silversmith. When I see my own image in the silver, the refining process is complete. Jesus Christ is not going to marry anyone in which he does not recognize himself and see himself. That is a warning, but most importantly, it is a tremendous encouragement for those of you that take this challenge day by day, with the power of the Holy Spirit, love your God, love your Lord, walk justly, walk humbly, walk mercifully, to recognize that we are a work in progress, and to recognize simply this, and that is that he will sit as a refiner and purify the silver. That's you. That's me.