



1362 US Highway 395 N Ste 102-200

Gardnerville, NV 89410

E-mail: bill@liferesource.org

Website: www.liferesource.org

Presentation Transcript
Old Time Religion – Pentecost
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It's Pentecost! The birthday of the Church of God! Since it *is* Pentecost, and since it's the birthday of the church, I want to ask you a question. How did call you into His church? Were you born into it? If so, what keeps you there? What's your story? And, if you learned about it later in your life and came to it as an adult, what's *your* story?

Well, today I'm going to tell you part of my story. Now I've told this story before – I do it every so often – and one reason I do that is that it helps *me* remember my roots with God and what's really important. What we're going to see is, in some ways, it will be like your story, and, in other ways, it will be completely different. And what we can learn from this is how creative, and how intelligent, and how loving God is – how effective He is at working with each of us in the way that's best for us. So here's my story.

1951 – little Billy was walking home from kindergarten. He had no idea that in a few minutes, when he got home, a life-changing event would be his. When he arrived he opened the front door and there it was in the living room! It took him completely by surprise. There sitting in the Jacobs' living room was a brand new Philco radio/phonograph. It was in a large mahogany cabinet. It had two doors. Behind was space for record storage and behind the other, on the right, there was a radio with a lighted dial and a bank of large knobs about the size of walnuts. Below the radio, there was the phonograph. It had knobs and levers and lights and buttons. It had a spindle and a turntable. You could put a stack of records on the spindle and the machine would play them one after another. It was love at first sight. Little Billy was all over that record player in an instant. At least, that's how I remember it 70 years later.

Soon after, my mother began buying me some new style LP records. They were a Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, Peter Pan, Long John Silver, narrated by the renowned Basil Rathbone, and many more. I loved to listen to these records over and over. But there was one set of records my mother would *not* let me play. She would play them *for* me, but she watched over them carefully, because she prized them deeply and didn't want to see them damaged by five-year-old hands. This set was in a book-like album with sleeved pages to hold five records. They were a bit

smaller than the LPs. My mother called them 78s. And on these records were songs sung, my mother informed me, by a lady named Dorothy Minor. She told me that the songs were religious songs and that some of them were over a hundred years old. After all this time, I remember only a very few of the titles. One was *Go Tell It On the Mountain*. Some of the words, I remember, are *Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born*. Another song was *Deep River*. It was about crossing the Jordan River – crossing over into eternal life – a clever metaphor right out of the Bible.

Now this lady, Dorothy Minor, she could sing! She had a powerful beautiful voice. In my five-year-old way, I thought she was the very best singer in the whole world. I could remember sitting and listening to those songs with my mother and being transported by the timeless beauty of the words and the richness of her extraordinary voice. As you can tell, that music made a life-long impression on me.

There was one song, however, that stands out to me more than all the rest. One verse goes like that: *Give me that old-time religion. It was good for the Hebrew children, it's good enough for me*. Now it loses something without the music, and it would lose even more if I tried to sing it, but another verse went like this: *It was good for the prophet Danie, it's good enough for me*. Another was: *If it was good for Paul and Silas, it's good enough for me*. So there we go into the New Testament.

Have you ever wondered how God first began to call you? When did He plant the first seed? Well, I know you all have story to tell. And I know, for some of you who are younger, the story is still being written in your life. And, if you're aware of it, that's exciting and mysterious for you. I wasn't aware of it at that point, however.

I think this song, *Old-Time Religion*, may have been God's very first spiritual overture to me. I remember, when I was in the sixth grade, I went to confirmation classes in the Episcopal Church. The minister was teaching us about our denomination's beliefs. And after class, I went home and asked my parents why we went to church on Sunday when, in the old days, they went on the seventh day. So, without realizing it at the time, God had planted a little laser-guided, heat-seeking missile in me that homing in on the original religion of Jesus. He put that in me before I even knew what the true religion was. But I knew it was important to do what it said in the Book.

When I was thirteen, I happened to hear a man on the radio who talked about the very things I was looking for. When people ask me when God called me, I usually start with hearing that radio program, but it seems obvious, in hindsight, to me that God laid the groundwork for my calling in my heart long before I ever heard the radio program. Through the song, God had focused my attention on the importance of the religion lived by the apostles and the New Testament church and Jesus when He was a human.

So that's a little about how God called me. I mention it so that you can understand where I'm coming from as you hear this message. All my life, since my conversion, I have come to the church with that concept in my mind – *old-time religion*. The original way was not only the best, it was the *only* way.

Now the first point I want to bring to you is this: The original religion of Jesus is a great spiritual anchor. We all know many who have forsaken the right way. The Christianity we see in the New Testament, can save our eternal life. It can stabilize our faith if we follow it faithfully. So it's important.

So I want you to look at three scriptures with me – pivotal scriptures to our understanding. One is 2 Peter 2:15. Here Peter is talking about some people who had left the true and pure religion of Jesus, and he says in verse 15:

2 Peter 2:15 – *They have forsaken the right way and have gone astray, following the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved the wages of unrighteousness.*

So, first of all, we learn from this that there *is* a right way. Have you ever heard people say, “It's all about being a good person?” Well, being a good person is what happens to you if you follow the right way. Not only that, but there's more to it than that. It's just not that simple.

I've met many people who are, in some cases I think, have more character than I have, and who are more honest, and more caring than a lot of the people I know in our church. I'm not faulting that.

The second scripture is Jude 1:3. This next scripture identifies what the right way is.

Jude 1:3 – *Beloved* – Jude says – *while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.* Who delivered it? Well, Jesus did, didn't He?

So Jude is speaking here about the right way – the pure religion, delivered by Jesus to the apostles in the early New Testament Church. And he says it was delivered *once for all*. It didn't need to be delivered in an ongoing fashion, or again. It was complete and it was perfect. No need to update it over time to match society. No need to add to it or take away from it. No need to change anything, because the way Jesus brought it, it was *perfect*.

And here's the third scripture in 2 Timothy 2:1.

2 Timothy 2:1-2 – *You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Jesus Christ. And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who are able to teach others also.*

So this model – this way of life, this right way, this old-time religion – was to be passed along a human chain through time. It's not only something we learn, it's something we transmit by example. We're not the first to follow it, and we're not the last. We're links in a chain. I'm still a Sabbatarian today because when the storm of heresy assailed me, I knew there was a right way, that the right way was found in the original, pure and old-time religion found in the New Testament church, and that I am responsible to pass it on.

So, to wrap up this point, if we know the right way, we have an *anchor* to keep us in the right place, no matter what kind of troubles come along, no matter what lies people are espousing. It's an anchor. And, if it was good for Paul and Silas, then it's good enough for me.

All right. Let's move on to the second main point then. The model of Christianity we find in the New Testament is not only a model for our faith – that's point one – it's also a model for our *practice*, which is the point we're on now – point two. It's a pattern. It defines Christianity. The people who follow the model Jesus gave are His followers – Christians, right? That's what they called the people that followed Jesus. Of course, we're talking about all the usual things – salvation, the Sabbath, the holy days, the millennium, the resurrection, the truth about heaven and hell, the truth about the holidays, the truth about the law of God, clean and unclean foods – all that and more. So these are all part of the model we see in the New Testament. We want to maintain these. However, if we merely review these in this message, we won't learn much. So what I would like to do is to examine something in the New Testament that is *not* so well-known among our Sabbatarian body, but is still a part of that old-time religion.

When I was a student at Ambassador College, I was told that, if I tried to talk to others about my religion, it would only turn them off – lowly freshman that I was, I would just botch it up. I ought to leave talking to people outside the church to the spiritual giants. Well, that was okay with me, because I felt uncomfortable talking to others about my religion anyway. I would rather just slip by in anonymity. So I paid my tithes with the comforting expectation that they would be used to preach the gospel electronically, and in that way, I was meeting my responsibility to God. So I was a happy guy. It felt good to think that way, because it was so easy. However, in re-reading the New Testament, I have had to make some drastic changes in my personal faith and practice. Let me show you what I found.

In the Gospels, I learned that Jesus sent the disciples out on their own to plant seeds for the gospel. Then I saw that He sent out seventy men in teams of two, trained but unsupervised, to learn how to spread the word on their own. It was called *leaning by doing* – the most effective way to learn, isn't it? And then I read a scripture in Acts 8, verse 27. This is about Philip.

Acts 8:27-31 – *So he arose and went. And behold – that's Philip – a man of Ethiopia, a eunuch of great authority under Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who had charge of all her treasure and had come to Jerusalem to worship.* So he was a follower of the true God. And it's interesting he came from Africa. There are many Christians in north Africa, because it spread out of Judah

down into Africa, through Egypt. He *was returning and he sat in his chariot and was reading Isaiah the prophet – verse 28. Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go near and overtake this chariot.” So Philip ran to him and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said to him, “Do you understand what you’re reading?” And the man said, “How can I unless someone guides me?” And he asked Philip to come up and sit with him.*

It’s interesting to kind of just break this down a little and think about this. How did Philip know to ask that question? Well, I think it was because, as a good Jew, he thought he knew the Bible, and yet when he met Jesus and the church, he realized he didn’t know that much about it. And so he understood what it was like to read the Bible and not get it. He uses his own experience to craft that question – Do you understand what you’re reading? It wasn’t a put-down. It was just a question. He didn’t say, “You dummy, let me explain this to you. I’m the spiritual giant here.” Do you understand what you’re reading?

Now who was Philip? Well, he was a deacon. So here’s a man, who’s not a minister, he’s engaging someone outside the church in a discussion on religion. Philip, obviously, had not been taught that he ought to leave the seed-sowing to the spiritual giants – the apostles. He was not disengaged from the work, but engaged in it. He could hardly help himself once the Spirit told him what to do. He knew he was supposed to get involved, in fact. And he was told to do so by Christ Himself through the Spirit.

And then I read another scripture that smacked me between the eyes as well. It’s in Acts 8:3.

Acts 8:3 – *As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. People who were in the church back then could be thrown in prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word.*

Paul actually helped the church evangelize by terrifying them so much they ran away from him. And everywhere they went, they went preaching the word. It was the lay members who were scattered and preached the gospel to the Samaritans. Rather than sneaking off in fear, they went all over the place spreading the word. They just couldn’t not talk about it. They just engaged people everywhere they went. They were so excited about it.

As I continued through the New Testament, I read where the ministry was to equip the members to do God’s work. I saw where everyone was supposed to study so they could give answers to the questions people would ask them. It was an expectation of the ministry that the members could and would do this. This expectation was woven into the very fabric of the New Testament.

Did you know that God gave lay members the gift of speaking in tongues, and that they would participate in reaching out to new people? It’s in there! Just read Acts 2 and 3. God provided a way to engage people in spite of the language barrier.

But the worst news of all that I found was in Mark 8:38, where Jesus said:

Mark 8:38 – *For whoever is ashamed of Me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of man will also be ashamed when He comes in His glory of His Father with the holy angels.*

In fact, as I read the New Testament, it became obvious that each person believed he was a carrier of the message.

I was talking to an Orthodox monk that I know. I asked him how it was the Orthodox Church sprang to life immediately after Communism crumbled in the Soviet Union. And he said it was because the church there was an organic organization. Each one of them contained the model of the church – sort of like each cell in our bodies contains the model of our whole being – the DNA that we have. So each person contains the model of the church – the DNA – which is the Holy Spirit. “So,” he said, “to wipe out the church, the communists would have had to kill every last one of us.” And this is what we see in the New Testament. Eventually, persecutors killed off all the apostles, but Christ lived in all of them, so the message went out.

I asked an acquaintance of mine, who had contact with the Ukrainian Sabbatarians, how they did evangelism without money. And he told me that the way they think about it completely different than people in the United States. Each Ukrainian Sabbatarian – Sabbath keeper – believes he is commissioned to spread the word. It goes so far as a young couple, when they have a baby, see that as a way to extend their faith. They see that as a vital part of their calling.

All of these insights took me into a new personal crisis. All my life I tried to follow the old-time religion – or so I told myself. Now I see that I ought to be doing differently than I had done in the past. And it was something I really didn’t want to do. I was afraid of it. So I had to decide, was I going to continue with my past experience, comfortably believing it was the true religion? Or, was I going to really follow the New Testament religion of Paul and Silas – uncomfortable as that might be? The latter was going to require a change in my thinking and a terrifying change in my behavior. I was going to have to learn to talk to people about the hope that lies within me. It was also not just an anchor, not just a pattern, it was also a message. Even though I’d been in the church for quite a while, I was still a neophyte in this area.

But I had a few exciting insights. The concept of old-time religion is a potent vehicle to engage people with the truth of God. It’s a message. So, besides being an anchor, or a model, the original religion of Jesus is also a message.

When I started, I was afraid of being obnoxious to people. I know many of you face the same fear. You don’t want to be pushy about your religion because you know how it turns you off when others are pushy to you. Do you think Philip’s question, “Do you understand what you read?” felt pushy? I don’t think so. Has anyone ever converted you to their way of thinking on

any subject by being over bearing, obnoxious, pushy or dogmatic? Those ways are obviously not the way to do it. So you can relax about that. No door-to-door for us. No overtly religious tone or manner. No super sentimentality. Those signs that say, "Repent, the world ends tomorrow!" None of those things I was afraid I was going to have to do are effective evangelism.

The second fear I had was to face the fear of being seen as weird or strange to others. So let me set your mind at ease here too. If we keep the Sabbath and the holy days, and only eat clean meats, they already think we're weird. On the contrary, the process of talking to people about our faith is one of helping them see that we're *not* weird. Here's what happens, as I've observed it. If you're a good Christian, you're casting favorable light on all you meet. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Right? They will see that you are a kind, fair, hardworking, honest person. They like us because we try to be humble and considerate of others. These traits draw people to us. As they get to know us, they see that we do what appears to be weird things, And because they see something good about us, they are curious about all the strange things we do. They wonder if this weird stuff has any connection with the goodness they see in us. And sometimes, they ask us questions. So here's where the concept of the New Testament model comes in. Let me show you how this works.

I have this friend, Bob – he's not in the church. We became friends when he was my instructor in a counseling practicum. And, as our friendship has progressed, Bob has gradually learned what we should do. He has learned that I keep the Sabbath. And he noted that it must require a great commitment to observe the Sabbath as I observed it. I can't even go to the Analytical Society meetings with him. I can't go flying with him on Sabbath. He's a pilot. But I do this for reasons that I consider important. That's what I told him. And then I stopped. And he said, "What reasons?" See that's the wind-up. Now here comes the pitch. I said, "I believe that, if one is to worship God, we must assume that He's greater than we are." And he's nodding his head. "Otherwise, why else would we worship Him? And when He tells us *how* He wants us to worship Him, it's necessary that we follow His instruction. So the pure religion that Jesus delivered to the church is the model of worship. They all observed the seventh day and so do I." So you see what's happening here? I gave him a logical reason why I'm weird. And that makes it seem not so weird. It was the same reason he heard at church. He thought the Methodists followed the original model. So now he's *really* curious.

We were at lunch one day and I was admiring a leather jacket his wife had given him for Christmas. And after a bit, he said, "What did Santa bring to you?" And I said, "Santa didn't stop at my place." And he said, "He didn't? Don't tell me you don't believe in Christmas." And I said, "Afraid not, Bob." He says, "Why not?" See, I only give him enough information that he has to ask another question. And I said, "Well, you remember that I told you I was intent on following the New Testament model?" And he said, "Yeah." I said, "Well, that's why." He said, "What about the magi?" I said, "They came, they saw, they left. Through the following sixty years of recorded church history recorded in the Bible, not one mention is made of Jesus' birthday. We

don't even know when it is." And I said, "Just trying to do it the way they did it back then." So you see, when we are serious about that way, it becomes our anchor, like I said.

I went backpacking with Bob once. I took him with a group of college-aged kids and we all went together. That's where Bob learned that we don't eat pork. That happened when the pizza came with pepperoni on it, and he was the only one eating it. He wanted to know why? One of the kids said, "We don't eat pork." "Why don't you?" See the kids knew how to about it too. They just gave him enough to make him ask another question. "God promises to keep us healthy if we obey His laws." And then another jumped in, and explained that keeping this visible laws is also our way of showing our commitment to Him. And he said, "So it's an identifier." He said, "It's just another symbol." And I said, "Exactly. Sort of like people wearing a team logo." And he said, "Or, like wearing a crucifix." "It is a practice followed in the Old and New Testaments," I told him. After that trip, Bob asked me if he could receive some of our literature, so I signed him up for the *Good News*. It's been an interesting experience – pretty scary at first. Did you ever see the movie, *Top Gun*. "Maverick, engage, engage, engage!" Or, *O Brother, Where Aren't Thou?* "Come on in, boys, the water's fine!"

Also, I learned this when I started talking to people: Most of the people I encounter in the world consider themselves to be Christians, but they don't go to church. When you ask them, "Why not?" they'll give you answers like, "Too much control and politics," "Form without substance," "Way off from spirituality." And I could agree with all of those. And if they know the reason that we go to church is follow the original model for worship, and that we're very serious about that, we're talking to them where they live. We have something they want and don't have.

One Saturday morning, a new person called me, and he commented that it seemed to him that not many churches were willing to truly follow Christ. And I said, "Like the druggist watering down the cancer patient's chemo chemicals." And he said, "What?" And I said, "Well, the Christianity practiced in the world today is simply a watered down version of the Christianity Jesus brought. We're trying, with all our might, to follow the original, pure, full-strength religion of Jesus." And he said, "That sounds really good to me."

So the concept of old-time religion is an anchor to our faith. It's a pattern to our behavior. It's a message. And it's also a powerful way to talk to people around us. And it's one more thing: it's the model of the pure religion, and that's a link to the past and the future. Let's look in Hebrews 11:32. Paul has been preaching about the faith of the patriarchs. And here he begins to generalize about all the people of the Old Testament who are faithful to that right way, and he goes on for quite a good bit about it. And then, in one sentence, in verse 40, he does something extraordinary. He says:

Hebrews 11:40 – *God having provided some better thing for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.*

Now the brethren in the church at that time were quite discouraged. Heretics had drawn off large numbers of the original church with doctrinal novelties and unsupportable odd-ball ideas. Many of their leaders had been in prison, and the faith of some was crumbling. Paul also knows his time is coming to an end. If the truth is to go forward, it will be carried by the few faithful men and women who remain. And he's getting them ready to step up to their calling – to carry the truth to all the world. So Paul takes some effort to build a large cloud of faces and names in the minds of the New Testament church – God's heroes. And then, in one sentence, Paul binds the church in his day with all these great biblical heroes and moves people from the past and the people of his day into the future to that time when we will all be resurrected and rewarded together. He's telling them that they're heroes too.

Do you know who else will be there on that great day? Do you know who else is bound inexorably to the heroes of the New Testament church? All those of our age who follow the old-time religion that they followed will be there. So will we step up to our calling and engage people with the truth as God provides opportunity? If we do, then we will be following the example of the New Testament church – that old-time religion – and we can take our place in the history's heroes as well.

So, to wrap this up, the old-time religion and the New Testament way is an anchor. It warns us off of additions and changes, and keeps us moving the right way. It's a pattern that shows us a model to follow so we can be close to God. It is a message – that is, a way to fulfill our responsibility to do the awesome work of God in our personal lives and together. And fourth, it's a link that, by following the model, we're connected to the roots of the great church Jesus Himself founded. And in that, by following the model, we're connected to the church of the future, which will be established all over the earth in the world to come.

There are many advances humanity has produced. When it comes to cars, the good old days are now. CD players make much better music than my old Philco phonograph. A trip to the dentist is much less painful now than it was years ago. But when it comes to church, don't show me trinitarian theology. Don't show me holidays that are not in the Bible. Don't show me a day of worship that was implemented hundreds of years after Christ died. Give me that old-time religion. If it was good for Paul and Silas, then it's good enough for me.