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The Purpose for Fellowship Groups/Congregations

All of us are refugees from one of the various churches of God. Most of these organizations have sprung up as a result of the apostatizing, scattering and destruction of the Worldwide Church of God. We have all seen and experienced what it is like to "play church, play politics, play socials, play deacon/deaconess" or "play elder, with command and control tactics." Whether we were part of the playing, or victims of the playing, we have all come out of those hypocritical practices. Moreover, it is also clearly evident that God the Father and Jesus Christ, Who is the Head of the Church, are most displeased with many of the various spin-off church of God organizations because they continue to use the same old corporate, carnal methods of operation—business as usual. Unless there is deep repentance of these practices God will continue to scatter the brethren and will bring down those organizations.

In order for us to gain a better perspective, perhaps we need to begin to understand what our true spiritual condition really was. The truth is that although we had the Holy Spirit of God, the church organization itself and the ministry were conducted as a human, hierarchical, corporate organization. Whereas, it should have been conducted as a part of the true body of Jesus Christ by following the scriptural instructions of the New Testament. Yes, we had the Bible. Yes, we understood about the commandments of God, the Sabbath, the holy days, and everything else we learned to a certain degree. The appearance was given that the Word of God was consulted. However, instead of following it, we did that which seemed right in our own eyes after the manner of a worldly, business corporation. But by all outward appearances those activities appeared religious. Consequently, we assumed that everything was great and we were right with Jesus Christ. But we were not! We did not see our true, spiritual condition because our eyes were blinded to the spiritual reality of the gross, carnal depths into which we had sunk.

The scriptural, spiritual truth is that we were all Laodiceans and have been from day one, but we didn't know it! Now then, what we are all seeing and experiencing at this time is the correction of God! Let us read the message of Jesus Christ to the church of the Laodiceans. But each one of us needs to take these words of Jesus Christ to heart personally, realizing that He is speaking directly to each one of us. He is not speaking about somebody else to whom, in our opinion, we may think these words apply.

"And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write: These things says the Amen [meaning Christ as the finisher of the plan of salvation. He is the final Authority and no man!]. The faithful and true witness, the Beginner of the creation of God. I know your works [no one can hide from God], that YOU [not somebody else—you-me] are neither cold or hot! I would [the Greek verb *οφειλω*, *opheiloo*, means "you must be" or "you are obligated"] that you were cold or hot.

"Therefore, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold or hot, I am vomiting you out of My mouth. Because you say [they have the gall to talk back to Christ, and proudly proclaim], 'I am rich and have grown rich and have need of nothing, [that self-satisfied condition is best expressed this way: 'It couldn't get any better than this. Just look at all that we have.'] and you do not understand that you are wretched, and miserable, and poor and blind and naked" (Rev. 3:14-17, AT).

Notice! They are lukewarm because they do not love God with all their hearts and minds and beings. Here is a good description of the Laodicean's lukewarm comfort zone—"be balanced, get along, go along, don't rock the boat" and "always be politically correct." Although a Laodicean is half-hearted in his relationship to God, he attaches the name of God to his religious activities. This way he feels good and appears religious and righteous in his own eyes. But this is not how God sees things.

Furthermore, the Laodicean is convinced that physical blessings equal spiritual strength and right standing with God the Father and Jesus Christ. But they don't. The truth is that spiritual things are never accomplished through physical, carnal means! Therefore, Christ is removing all the physical things that we trusted in—which were really idols before God! He is taking away lands, buildings, colleges, feast sites, radio and television programs, magazines, books, booklets, jobs, cars, busses, and the veneer of security which all those physical things seem to provide. These physical things did not produce the deep spiritual love of God and zeal to serve Him. Rather, spiritual apathy developed and trust in those physical things replaced faith in God. Social fellowship with one another replaced spiritual fellowship with God the Father and Jesus Christ. Various activities replaced prayer and Bible Study. The truth is that the church leaders kept the ministers and members so busy that they did not have any time to think for themselves, to think about God and develop a close, personal, loving relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Even the evangelistic outreach to the world on radio and television was changed. The messages were softened, made lukewarm and politically correct. Instead of the blazing gospel of repentance and faith in God, we preached a gospel of psychology, which expounded humanistic doctrines of "get along, go along, be happy" and "feel good." The literature was likewise changed! Worst of all the basic doctrines were changed! Instead of being taught the strong spiritual meat of God's Word, we were fed the sing-song pablum of psychological platitudes served up with warm skim milk. All these things appealed to our lukewarm Laodicean comfort zone. But these repugnant practices reached Jesus Christ's vomit zone, as He said, "I am vomiting you out of My mouth."

Jesus Christ is now correcting His people because of these sins! He is removing all these artificial comfort zones. This is why the people of God are being scattered and re-scattered and re-scattered! Furthermore, Christ will continue to scatter and re-scatter until God the Father and Jesus Christ have the undivided attention of each one. He is making each one of us to stand alone. He is destroying all our idols, and all the religious/social nonsense we called "church," so that we may find Him. Because in Christ alone is salvation! He is leading us to repentance because He loves us! Notice what He says to the Laodicean: "I counsel you to buy from Me gold purified by fire, that you may be rich; and white garments that you may be clothed, and that the shame of your nakedness does not appear; and anoint your eyes with eye-salve that you may see. As many as I LOVE, I rebuke and chasten! Be zealous, therefore and repent!" (Verses 18-19).

Here is a composite of what we have all been through, as told by more than one person. "I did not understand what was happening to the church, nor to me. Everything was crazy and upside down. Christ was cast out of the church! Every doctrine was changed! Then the world came in, lock-stock and barrel! I cried out to God, 'Help me to understand what on earth is going on!' He answered that prayer only after I realized that I was a piece of vomit! I came to see that nothing was wrong with God, but everything was wrong with me and my church. I began to see that I myself was a Laodicean rather than everyone else who I thought were Laodiceans. I was the one who was putrid, ugly, blind and naked—nothing but a stinking piece of spiritual vomit and swill. Then, I came to myself and I began to truly repent! Wow! What a revelation! I had built my spiritual house out of wood, hay and stubble. I realized that it was all burning to the ground and the ashes were being blown away. There I was standing like a nearly starved-to-death holocaust victim—nothing but a burned out hulk of skin and bones—spiritually starving and standing alone and empty. But God the Father and Jesus Christ are loving and merciful. Now, I am being restored and made alive again with God's Word and His Spirit with zeal and dedication—I thank God for His great love and mercy." Brethren, what a vivid description of the state of too many us and the various churches of God. But God the Father and Jesus Christ are calling us out of this!

Notice what else Christ says to the Laodicean: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hear My voice and open the door [of your heart and mind] I will come into him and sup with him and he with Me. He that overcomes, I will give to him to sit down with Me in My throne, as I also overcame, and am sat down with My Father in His throne. He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (Verses 20-22).

May God the Father and Jesus Christ grant all of us true, deep repentance, ears willing to hear, and zealous love to serve them with all our hearts and beings! This is a vital spiritual lesson God wants us to learn from all this! Remember, God the Father and Jesus Christ have personally called us to salvation and eternal life—the greatest and most awesome calling and blessing of all.

Although we may have repented of many of our personal sins and spiritual lacks, we still have many things to learn about the purpose of a local fellowship group or congregation. Since God has been scattering the brethren, we have seen many, many local fellowship groups and congregations of the various spin-off organizations destroyed. The brethren were hurt and disillusioned again. Some brethren have experienced this three or four times. But why does this continue to happen—over and over again?

I think a very wise woman stated it most accurately. She said, "You can get the person out of a church organization, but you can't get the church organization out of the person." Well said! How true that statement is! This is a cause of a great many troubles in fellowship groups and congregations. In spite of the fact that everyone desires to do what is right, the truth is that it is all too easy to carry over the same old, wrong ways and habits into our current fellowship, because that is all we have ever known.

Nearly all of the fellowship groups of the Christian Biblical Church of God have had peace and harmony for the most part. But we have experienced some difficulties as well. When we corrected those problems the causes became apparent. The truth is that most of those troubles could be traced back to doing things in the same old ways as they were done in the various churches where they attended before! However, I am happy to report that nearly all of the problems which some of the Christian Biblical Church of God fellowship groups have experienced have been solved. We used and applied the scriptural instructions of Jesus Christ in Matthew 18.

At the present time God is sending more and more brethren to associate and fellowship with the Christian Biblical Church of God. We are steadily adding more and more brethren to our mailing list. We have had six new fellowship groups start since February of this year.

As the need for additional fellowship groups continues to grow, we must have a clear understanding of the purpose for fellowship groups and local church congregations. We need to understand from the Scriptures how they should be conducted. We cannot carry over the methods of operation from our past church organizations, thereby recreating the same old problems all over again.

The Problems in Corinth

During his ministry, the apostle Paul experienced many of the same problems with the church at Corinth that we have experienced in the various churches of God. Too many of the brethren in the Corinthian congregations were self-centered, rather than Christ-centered. This resulted in carnal strife and divisions, heresies, drunkenness, fornication and false doctrines because they were carnal babes in Christ while thinking that they were spiritual. Paul even lamented that he could not speak to them as spiritual, but as carnal. "And I brethren, was not able to speak to you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal—as babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, and not meat, because you were not able to *handle meat*. But neither are you now able; because you are yet carnal. For whereas *there are* envyings and strife and divisions! Are you not carnal? Are you not walking according to man's way [instead of God's way]?" (I Cor. 3:1-3, *AT*.)

Notice what he wrote concerning their church meetings. It was a religious zoo! It was anything but spiritual. It was anything but edifying. It was anything but loving! He wrote, "And when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse" (I Cor. 11:17). How many church meetings have you attended where you may have come with a reasonably decent attitude, hoping to be edified by the Word of God and to fellowship with the brethren, only to come away distraught and depressed?

Well, that is what the church at Corinth was like, but even worse. Some of the most self-centered, self-serving brethren were babbling in tongues in a vain display of foolishness. It was so

had that Paul had to write, "If therefore the church come together in one place and all should speak with tongues, and the uninstructed or unbeliever come in, will they not say that you are crazy?" (I Cor. 14:23, *AT*).

They had vain competition among themselves as to who was the greatest. Sabbath services became a knock-down, drag-out, unending hassle. Yet, they considered themselves spiritual. Notice what Paul had to write: "What then is it? When you come together each one of you has a psalm, has a doctrine, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be for edification [not for the self-centered, carnal, self-serving, chaotic church meetings you now have]" (I Cor. 14:26, *AT*).

Now you know why Paul wrote what he did about love. A short summary of First Corinthians 13 is this: "If you do not have the love of God, nothing you do will serve God's eternal purpose. It is all vain and will all self-destruct." Brethren, that is exactly what we have been doing to ourselves in the various churches of God! We have been destroying each other. I am sure we are all sick and tired of going through this over and over again. If we are sick and tired of it, we can know that God the Father and Jesus Christ are not pleased either.

The Wrong Kind of Fellowship Takes You Away From God

Another major reason that God's correction is upon the churches of God is because of the wrong kind of fellowship. How did that happen in the first place? It began by seeking the approval and friendship of the world. In order to receive that approval and friendship, everything—the colleges, the television, the literature and worst of all the doctrines of Jesus Christ—was changed and made "user-friendly" for the world.

Very few realized that these changes, gradually implemented over the years, were actually spiritual adultery before God! Notice what the apostle James wrote, "You adulterers and adulteresses, don't you know that friendship with the world is *at* enmity with God? Therefore, whoever desires to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4, *AT*).

Along with making friends with the world, a wrong kind of fellowship also developed. Paul wrote this warning to the church at Ephesus: "Do not let anyone deceive you with vain words; because on account of these very things [all the works of the world and the flesh] the wrath of God comes upon the children of disobedience. Therefore do not become joint-partakers with them! For you were once darkness, but now *you are* light in *the* Lord; walk as *the* children of light....And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather, also expose them!" (Eph. 5:6-11, *AT*).

Once this kind of human, carnal fellowship is established, then in nearly every case, it goes to the next level—fellowship with demons. The apostle Paul also warned the church at Corinth of that very thing. "But I say that whatever the Gentiles sacrifice [to idols], they sacrifice to demons, and not to God. But I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink *the* cup of *the* Lord and the cup of demons! You cannot partake of *the* table of *the* Lord and *the* table of demons" (I Cor. 10:20-21, *AT*).

The leaders and ministers of the churches of God have led the brethren right back into the world by making friends with the world and seeking their approval. The next step in that process is fellowship with demons. And that is beginning to happen. Furthermore, they are blinded by their own intellect. Instead of being led by the Holy Spirit, trusting in the Word of God, they are relying on their own wisdom and seeking the approbation of men and the world.

For many of those organizations it may be too late to stop it and reverse course. But we need to understand how to stop it in our own personal lives! The wrong methods of fellowship can be stopped! The wrong kind of fellowship can be stopped! But only if we turn to God with all our hearts and minds and quite playing church and social club. Then we can learn what true, Christian fellowship really is and how to maintain it.

It All Begins With True Repentance

The first thing we need to realize is that Jesus Christ is leading us to repentance. Repentance means a complete change of heart and mind—a complete change of direction—from carnal to spiritual, from lukewarm to zealous. We must return to God the Father and Jesus Christ with all our hearts and minds. Superficial change, cosmetic reorganization or restructuring is not true repentance and is doomed to failure. Yet nearly all the various spin-off church organizations have reorganized or restructured instead of repenting! So therefore nothing has changed! This is why the heavy hand of Christ's correction will continue to come swiftly upon them.

We need to understand that human wisdom and methods, regardless of how good and right they appear in our eyes, change nothing. The most that human psychological changes can accomplish is to only sublimate and redirect the same old carnal efforts in another direction. All the worldly, carnal success formulas employ these methods of positive redirection. But that is not godly repentance! This kind of sorrow or redirection is only carnal remorse. Our repentance must come from the depth of our beings! It is not enough to be intellectually convinced of things right and wrong. We must have repentance unto conversion of the heart and mind.

Notice how God pleads with His people to repent and turn to Him, "Therefore also now, says the Lord, Turn you even to Me, with all your heart and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning: **And rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God:** For He is gracious, and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and repents Him of the evil" (Joel 2:12-13).

True, deep, heart-rending repentance brings us back to God, through His grace and forgiveness. Godly repentance leads to conversion and a changed nature. God then imparts His love and we can grow in grace and knowledge to have the mind of Christ. When that happens we can view things through the eyes of God's Word, as led by the Holy Spirit. Then we will no longer view things for the self or carnal purposes. Once the love of God becomes the craving desire and burning focus of your life, then you will begin to understand. God will lead you by His Holy Spirit. As a result your whole perspective will change, not only on an individual level, but for everyone in a fellowship group or congregation as a whole. This is why we need to understand the purpose of true godly fellowship.

What is True, Christian Fellowship in the First Place?

The true meaning of Christian fellowship is not solely related to social interaction with each other. There is a deeper, more profound foundation upon which true Christian fellowship is built. The apostle Paul makes it clear that Jesus Christ is the only foundation on which to build your Christian life. "For no one is able to lay any other foundation than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ" (I Cor. 3:11, *AT*). That is the one and only foundation for everything we are and do as Christians!

Likewise, our fellowship begins with Jesus Christ. "Faithful is God, through Whom you were called into **the FELLOWSHIP of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord**" (I Cor. 1:9, *AT*). The English word, "fellowship" comes from the Greek word *κοινωνία*, *koinoonia* and means, "fellowship [with someone], a close relationship, communion, association, participation and sharing" (Arndt & Gingrich). Moreover, we need to realize that we have not been called into a social club, or a religion, or a church organization. **But we have been called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ!**

We have been called, chosen and selected by God the Father through Jesus Christ; and He has given us His Holy Spirit. That is the power of our fellowship—not human, social relationships. Our fellowship is based on God's love and grace, as Paul wrote to close the second epistle to the Corinthians, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. AMEN." (II Cor. 13:13) It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can have godly fellowship based on God's love and grace.

The apostle John reveals more about this true, godly fellowship. He also begins with Jesus Christ, Who is the foundation of our fellowship. "That which was from the beginning, that which we

have heard, that which we have seen with our very own eyes, that which we observed for ourselves and our very own hands have handled, concerning the Word of Life; (And the Life was manifested, and we have seen, and are bearing witness, and are reporting to you the eternal Life, which was with the Father, and was manifested to us;) that which we have seen and have heard, we are reporting to you, in order that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly the fellowship—namely our fellowship—**IS WITH THE FATHER AND WITH HIS OWN SON, JESUS CHRIST**" (1 John 1:1-3, AT).

Brethren, this is the true, scriptural, spiritual fellowship! It is first and always with God the Father and Jesus Christ. This fellowship must come first before any fellowship with each other! Why? Because God the Father and Jesus Christ have called us into a deep personal spiritual relationship with them! We have been called to become the very sons and daughters of God the Father for all eternity! So our true fellowship begins **FIRST WITH GOD THE FATHER AND JESUS CHRIST**. This fellowship can only be maintained by prayer, study and a deep loving devotion to God the Father and Jesus Christ. To further sustain this spiritual relationship we need to also meditate and fast.

Next, we need to understand a church, that is the assembling of brethren in a congregation or fellowship group, is not a social function, or an organizational function. It is a spiritual function! This is why John wrote that it is "**THE FELLOWSHIP!**" This special, particular fellowship begins with God the Father and Jesus Christ. Then it becomes "our fellowship" with each other based on "the true fellowship" with God the Father and Jesus Christ grounded in love and grace.

Jesus Christ instructed His disciples the night of His last Passover that this close personal relationship is all based on the love of God. These words which the apostle John was inspired to write are some of the most, if not the most, profound words of the New Testament. "If you are loving Me, the commandments, namely My commandments, you will be keeping...The one who has My commandments and who is keeping them, that is the one who is loving Me; and the one who is loving Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will be loving him and will be manifesting Myself to him...If anyone is loving Me, he will be keeping My word, and My Father will be loving him; and We will come to him and We will make our abode with him" (John 14: 15, 22, 23, AT).

Brethren, this is absolutely wonderful, that through the power of the Holy Spirit, both God the Father and Jesus Christ are in us! No wonder that John wrote, "...Truly the fellowship—namely our fellowship—is with the Father and with His own son, Jesus Christ."

We must have this fellowship first, through the power of the Holy Spirit of God, through prayer, study and by living in grace and the love of God! This is our primary fellowship. We must love God the Father and Jesus Christ and receive the love of God the Father and Jesus Christ back to us. This is how we can fulfill the new commandment that Jesus Christ gave to His disciples. Then we will truly have the fellowship that God the Father and Jesus Christ want us to have with each other. "A new commandment I am giving to you, that you should love one another; in the same way as I have loved you, that *is the way* you are to love one another. By this *love* everyone shall know that you are My disciples...As the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; live in My love! If you keep My commandments, you shall live in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and live in His love! If you keep My commandments, you shall live in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commandments and live in His love. I have spoken these things to you, in order that My joy may live in you, and *that* your joy may be full. This is the commandment, namely Mine, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34-35; 15:9-12, AT).

When we assemble together for Sabbath and holy day services, this is how God the Father and Jesus Christ desire our fellowship to be. Paul, knowing that he would soon die, wrote to the Philippians from the depths of his heart. He so desired that they remain in the love and fellowship of Christ. He encouraged them with these words, "If then *there be* any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any deep, innermost feelings and compassion, fulfill my joy, that you may be of the same mind, having the same love, joined in soul, *all be* minding the one thing [attaining to the kingdom of God]. *Let* nothing be done through strife, or vain glory, but

in humility *be* esteeming one another above yourselves, each one considering the things of others" (Phil. 2:1-4, AT).

What the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians is the godly, spiritual standard for our fellowship and personal relationships with each other. No strife, no tension, no vain-glorying, no self-serving here. But quite the opposite is to happen. We are to grow into the mind of Jesus Christ! He finished this section of Scripture by admonishing the Philippians to do just that. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Verse 5).

This is the entire approach and attitude we need to have. May God grant us His grace and love, so that we may likewise develop this kind of loving fellowship in the fellowship groups and congregations of the Christian Biblical Church of God! If we do these things, then we can end the strife and hassles we have all experienced and truly grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

What the Mind of Christ in Us Will Do

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians he added more to the instructions that he gave to the Philippians. Notice what he wrote: "Therefore, I, the prisoner of *the* Lord, exhort you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith you were called, with all humility and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. *For there is one body and one Spirit, even as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, Who is over all, and through all, and in you all.* But to each one of us was given the grace according to the measure of the gift of God." (Eph. 4:1-7, AT).

Brethren, just think how much more spiritually profitable our Sabbath services and fellowshiping will be, if we diligently seek to have this kind of atmosphere in our assemblies. Do you not think that God the Father and Jesus Christ will be pleased to fellowship with us each Sabbath by the power of the Holy Spirit? Don't you think that God the Father and Jesus Christ will bless us with greater grace and understanding? Can we not do the things that please God? If we practice those things, then we can please God. "And whatever we ask, we receive from Him because we practice those things which are pleasing in the sight of God" (1 John 3:22, AT). Isn't that far better than all the strife and contentions we have all experienced in the past and some are still experiencing at this time? Can we all stop our self-serving, carnal behavior which provokes Christ to anger and correction?

As a minister and teacher, my focus and goal is to help each one of you to grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Everything I do to serve the brethren must be based on the love of God. I believe that what Jesus admonished Peter is the standard for every minister and teacher of God's Word. Here is the account in John 21: "Therefore, after they had dined, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of Jonas, do you love Me [Greek, αγαπω, *agapao*, divine godly love] more than these?' He said to Him, 'Lord, You know that I love You [Greek, φιλω, *philo*, brotherly love].' He said to him, 'Feed My lambs!' He said to him again a second time, 'Simon son of Jonas, do you love Me [Greek, αγαπω, *agapao*, divine godly love]?' He said to Him, 'Yes, Lord! You know that I love You [Greek, φιλω, *philo*, brotherly love].' He said to him, 'Shepherd My sheep!' *Then* He said to him a third time, 'Simon son of Jonas, 'Do you love Me [Greek, φιλω, *philo*, brotherly love]?' Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, 'Do you love Me?' and he said to Him, 'Lord, You know all things! You know that I love You [Greek, φιλω, *philo*, brotherly love].' Jesus said to him, 'Feed My sheep!' (Verses 15-17, AT). If the love of God is our foundation, then we will also love the brethren and will serve them as Christ would have us do.

To love Christ first is the foundation for all ministers and teachers to feed the Flock of God. The apostle Paul then gave the ultimate goal of all Christian teachings. "And He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some shepherds and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints; for the work of the service, for the upbuilding of the body of Christ; until we may all arrive at the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man [spiritually mature], unto the measure of *the* stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be infants, being tossed and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men, in craftiness with a

view to the systematizing of *the* error. But holding the truth in love, *that* we may grow up into Him in all things, who is the Head, *even* Christ" (Eph. 4:11-15, *AT*).

Brethren, I want you to know that what I have just quoted from Scripture is my heart's desire, so that each of you, by the love and grace of God, may be in the kingdom of God to live forever as the Father's sons and daughters in full glory with the highest reward possible.

The Importance of the Grace and the Love of God

It is absolutely vital that we all know and continue to grow in the *grace and love of God* in our lives. This is the whole purpose of our calling! We need the grace and love of God in order to have the mind of Jesus Christ. To have the kind of fellowship and love within our fellowship groups or congregations, it is imperative that each one thoroughly study the series on the *Grace of God*, with the literature on grace; and study the series on *The Love of God*, which is part of the series on *The Epistles of John*. The grace series has 6 audio tapes and the love series has 15 tapes, in addition to the verse by verse study of the Epistles of John. I think that it is true, as one man said, "I did not understand the purpose of a fellowship group, until I studied the grace series and the love series. If you miss that you have missed everything! Now I know why we were so miserable and carnal in our former church. Please tell the brethren that it is vitally necessary for them to study those series, especially if they are able to attend a local fellowship group." He felt so strongly about this that he even recommended that it should be mandatory for each new person, who began to attend a fellowship group, to study those tapes as soon as possible.

In discussing this with others, I received the same reaction and recommendation. So if you do not have these series, by all means please write us immediately and we will send you the series on grace and love as soon as possible.

A summary of the purpose of Fellowship

True Fellowship means to:

- 1) Fellowship first with God the Father and Jesus Christ.
- 2) Let Christ in you by the Spirit of God to lead you.
- 3) Receive the comfort of the Holy Spirit, with the fruits of the Holy Spirit.
- 4) Fellowship with each other in the grace and love of God.
- 5) Learn of God the Father and Jesus Christ.
- 6) Grow in grace and knowledge. Not head knowledge, but heart changing spiritual knowledge.
- 7) Develop the mind of Christ.
- 8) Become fully mature Christians.
- 9) Develop godly character for all eternity.

Things Not to Do

- 1) Do not judge each other and impute motives as though you could read one's mind.
- 2) Do not judge from your own selfish, hurt feelings and emotions.
- 3) Do not judge on appearances; judge righteous judgment based on truth and the evident fruits.
- 4) Do not focus on faults and mistakes--we all have them--but love each other.
- 5) Do not insist on your rights, rather take a wrong in forbearance.

Parameters for Sabbath Services

Nearly all of us have been used to having church services organized to begin with 1) three opening songs, 2) an opening prayer, 3) a sermonette, 4) announcements, 5) another hymn, 6) special music, 7) sermon, 8) closing hymn, 9) closing prayer.

Most of us have gotten so used to this that it almost became accepted as divinely inspired. But that format was not divinely inspired. While this format, of itself, is not wrong, it is not the only format for services. The format for services can vary. Having music is not a requirement for every Sabbath.

Since I serve two small congregations, each Sabbath, I bring two messages, but I conduct the services more like a host than an authoritative figure. I may or may not bring the same message in both locations. In one location we do not have music. But in the other location we do have congregational hymns, normally only two hymns to open and one to close. Most of the time we do not have sermonettes and occasionally we do have special music. Most of the time we do have a discussion period before the main Sabbath study. This can vary from Bible questions, to world news, to requests for prayer for other brethren, or we may discuss a variety of short topics.

So we are not stuck in a rut. On a good many occasions, the brethren give added input during our study. This is done by raising a hand so I can put the tape recorder on pause and listen to the question or comment and then I respond with a comment or Scripture to answer the question or add to their comment. If it fits in with what I am teaching, then I add it to the recorded Bible study so all the brethren who receive the tapes can benefit. Women can ask questions as well, but if there are Scriptures to be read, I read them or another man reads them rather than the woman. This way we do not violate the Scriptures which forbid women to teach in the church assembly. However for a woman to ask a question is not teaching. It all works very well, we have no problems at all.

In the outlying fellowship groups or congregations, if there are enough men who attend, it would be good to rotate the host from Sabbath to Sabbath. All the men who have the ability to host should be given the opportunity to do so, if they desire.

Likewise with sermonettes. If there are men who can bring good sermonettes, they can give them. Since a sermonette is given to edify the brethren, we should always study and pray about what we are going to speak on, asking God the Father and Jesus Christ to inspire us to bring something that is going to edify, or up build the brethren. Whenever we are speaking to the brethren we should always speak and teach from the Scriptures. Sermonettes can be very helpful and informative, if they are properly presented. They are meant to be short messages with one, or two main points. It should be only 12-15 minutes long--no longer--and should only have a few Scriptures. Sermonettes should not run 20-35 minutes in length.

Also, it is not necessary to have a sermonette each week. Perhaps once or twice a month would work just fine, especially if the brethren have been sermonetted to death by poorly prepared and poorly presented sermonettes. The fellowship group or congregation should discuss the use of sermonettes.

Soon we hope to have a weekly news summary which we can send by e-mail to each location. This can be used for news discussions, prophecy updates, etc. We will let you know more about this later when we get it perfected.

I would recommend that the Sabbath format be varied. Perhaps one week there might be a sermonette in addition to the taped Bible Study you receive each week. The second week there might be a news discussion before or after services. The third week there might be a Bible study discussion after the study tape. The fourth week there might be another sermonette. This way there can be a variety and we don't get stuck in the same old routine and format.

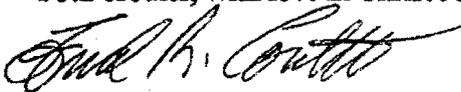
Sabbath services are meant to be a joy, not a burden. They are to teach and edify, not depress and discourage. They are meant to build peace and the love of God the Father and Jesus Christ and each other, not to give opportunity to nit-pick or to be self-serving in a display of vanity.

Brethren, if we can use the weekly Sabbath and the assembling of ourselves together to grow in grace and knowledge, grow in the love of God and each other, then we can put aside all of the petty, carnal problems which have plagued us in the past.

I am convinced that as mature Christians, motivated by the Spirit and love of God the Father and Jesus Christ that we can have edifying, inspiring Sabbath services and put the hassles behind us. I will close with the words of the apostle Paul. "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. AMEN."

May God's love, grace and blessing be with you in everything.

Your brother, with love in Christ Jesus,



Fred R. Coulter
FRC