

FELLOWSHIP & UNITY OF THE ORGANIC BODY



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FELLOWSHIP AND UNITY OF THE ORGANIC BODY

Some time ago I was staying overnight with a good preacher in the country of Namibia. In the early morning hours I secured my morning coffee and went outside to experience the awesome mornings of the Namibian sunrise. My host had the day before warned me about the barking dogs and was concerned that they might awake me in the early morning. But I have a habit of waking before dogs and birds, so I enjoyed the early morning quietness and tranquility while sipping on my fresh coffee.

My host had five dogs of his own, of various sizes, shapes and colors, none of which I am sure had any similarity with any other dogs. I supposed at the time that each was the beginning of some new species of dogs. Nevertheless, there were two other dogs in the neighbor's backyard, just across the fence that separated the two packs. The fence was somewhat ragged, but sufficient, I believed, to keep the two packs of dogs out of fellowship with one another.

As I sat there and enjoyed the tranquility of the early morning, all the dogs arose, stretched and then proceeded toward their respective side of the fence. And then all chaos broke out. The dogs on both sides of the fence just went after one another. You need to understand that the barking was fierce. They glared through the fence at one another with

their eyes, their teeth were showing as they salivated from their mouths in their vicious rage of fierce barking at one another. Their noses were right up against the fence as five on one side and two on the other, just barked with savagery at one another. I thought that if that fence were not there, these dogs would tear one another apart, limb by limb. It was really a terrifying scene to behold. Just pure animal savagery.

After the dogs had wasted themselves by going at one another across the fence, they quieted down and eventually wandered a short distance from the fence and laid down. I relaxed and everyone seemed to calm down after the storm. As I began to turn around and watch the continued sunrise, I stiffened as I looked out of the corner of my eye and saw one of the two dogs on the neighbor's side of the fence come through a hole in the fence that I had not before noticed. He stepped through the hole in the fence and I was terrified that I was about to witness the next level of this savagery as the five dogs would proceed to tear this poor dog limb from limb.

The other five dogs of my host got up, walked toward the intruder, and then something wonderful happened. Would you believe that those dogs acted like long-lost friends with one another? They all sniffed one another as dogs do, mak-

ing sure that no one's hinder parts went without a sniff. One of my host's five dogs was a little female, and she made a special effort to rub up against the visitor, making sure that he felt welcomed.

After all the warm dog fellowship, the visiting dog proceeded to return through the hole in the fence in order to go back to his side. And then something quite interested happened again. The little female dog sat in front of the hole in the fence. She just sat there and would not move. It was as if she were thinking, "Don't go back on your side of the fence because I know what will happen." But the visitor was persistent and she finally relinquished to his desires. She stepped aside and he returned to his side of the fence. And you guessed it. As soon as he stepped through that hole to his side of the fence, the mortal "biting and devouring" through the gnashing of teeth and savage barking commenced again. They just went after one another with viciousness as they starred at one another through that fence. As I witnessed this phenomenon, all I could think of was, "Preachers." And then I thought, if we could only tear down that fence, all of us could sleep in peace.

In the past several years we have had the wonderful opportunity of accepting the invitation to visit hundreds of church leaders and speak for hundreds of churches that are struggling to come out of mainline denominational religiosity. It seems that in all of these independent religious groups with which we have had contact that there is a deep-seated concern to work together in order to stand

against the work of Satan in our communities. Our work has focused on helping these independent churches come to a greater knowledge of the word of God.

The rise of the independent church movement is truly an exciting phenomenon of these times, for millions of people have realized that the cold, formal religiosity of traditional religious institutions has worked against the spirit of the human being to have a deep and personal relationship with others in their journey to have the same with their Savior. Many have discovered that they were preaching church and not Christ. They discovered that they were preaching the promotion of their own denomination. In their preaching, they discovered that we cannot understand church without first understanding Christ. As a result, their refocus on Christ has led them away from denominational structures in order to restore the simply ekklesia of the New Testament.

As thousands of these people break away from organized institutional monstrosities in order to capture the spirit of Christ, in their independence they have realized that they must truly be dependent on one another in order to be successful in fighting against the wiles of the devil in their communities. And thus there has risen a renewed thirst for the word of God and a thirst for fellowshiping one another. We are in good times in the restoration of the true oneness and fellowship that God intended that we have in Christ.

There is much talk about unity among these groups. Churches are dis-

covering that the church unions of the past were simply dysfunctional religious organizations of man. Church groups seek more than unions. They seek unity. Unity is a blessing from God, and to have this unity we must rehearse again the fellowship that God intended His people should have in Christ. A study of unity is certainly lacking if we do not understand fellowship. So because of the great emphasis and desire on the part of many to be united, we have sought in this book to first study what God intended fellowship should be among His people. Once we understand fellowship, and imple-

ment such in our lives, then the unity of the New Testament church becomes a realized serendipity. There can be no disunity among those who truly understand and practice the fellowship of the New Testament church. It just cannot happen. If there is disunity, then we have failed to implement in our lives the spirit of fellowship that was characteristic with the early church. In order to answer any problems concerning unity, therefore, we must first begin by restoring the fellowship that God intended that all believers in Christ should enjoy.

Chapter 1

The Curse Of Circle Drawing

When we discuss the subject of fellowship among disciples, each person seems to have a pen in his hand ready to draw his own circle of fellowship, within which are those with whom he would fellowship. Those outside the man-made circles are considered either rebels or heretics, those against whom slanderous remarks are justified and shunning from one's fellowship is rationalized. But those who are moved by love and mercy also draw circles. They draw circles of fellowship to include and take in those with whom they might often disagree. It is their thinking to include first, rather than exclude.

Those who have established a legal basis upon which to establish their religiosity are always drawing small circles of fellowship. Unfortunately, their circles

become progressively smaller as they cocoon within their own legal theology. Eventually, they crystallize within their small realm of fellowship those they would consider "faithful" according to their legal or traditional measurements. Unfortunately, these folks wake up one day and find only themselves within their theological circle, slanderously parading against whomever on the basis of "contending for the faith." This does not mean that circles of fellowship should not be drawn. In our discussions concerning fellowship for the sake of unity, circles must be drawn. But who has the authority to draw the circle, ourselves or God? When we study fellowship and unity of the family of God, most people are quite astonished to discover that our circles of fellowship are almost always smaller

than those drawn by God.

What should be frightening to us is the possibility that we might exclude from our circle of fellowship someone whom God would include. Steeped in our sectarian attitudes, we seek to be theologically safe. We are almost terrified of the possibility of fellowshiping someone who could possibly be in “error.” But in setting ourselves up as professional judges and lawgivers in circle drawing, we could possibly exclude from our fellowship someone, after the coming of the Lord, with whom we might stand face to face in the presence of God in eternal heaven. Who would have the red face then? Would it not be best to err on the side of drawing a circle too large, rather than one too small?

For the sake of all small circle drawers we would remind them of what the Holy Spirit said through James. *“For judgment will be without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy”* (Jas 2:13). You can be assured that if your circle of fellowship is smaller than God’s, then you have erred on the side of having less mercy than God. Self-made judges and legalistic lawgivers are not known for drawing large circles.

We must always remember what God reveals, *“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity”* (Ps 133:1). It is our mission to allow God to determine who our brothers are, brothers that He would have us include in our fellowship. If we identify ourselves as exclusionist circle drawers, then we could be the one about whom Proverbs 6:19 speaks. The Lord hates

the one *“who sows discord among brothers.”* Or, we could apply the statement to mean, “The Lord hates the one who takes it upon himself to draw small circles of fellowship that excludes those whom God would receive.”

The foundational nature of true fellowship is love. It is this loving fellowship that identifies the true disciples of Jesus. True fellowship in Christ is this way because of what Jesus commanded, and thus established as the signal of His disciples. *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this will all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another”* (Jn 13:34,35). The fellowship of the disciples of Jesus is based on loving cooperation, partnership, sharing, unity in diversity of opinions, mercy and grace. The community of our Lord Jesus Christ is a fellowship of Christ-minded and centered comrades in the faith. It is into this fellowship that God calls all men. *“God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”* (1 Co 1:9). We have been called into a community of mutual respect, sharing of one another’s possessions, participating in works and needs, and forbearance of one another’s faults (Ph 4:5).

The ekklesia (church) of Christ is first defined by its function as a loving fellowship of people. As a participatory family of those who have come into the Christ of a common salvation, the members of the body organically function in a community of mutual relationships.

The members function organically in their separation from the world. *“Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers, for what fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness? And what fellowship has light with darkness?”* (2 Co 6:14).

Our fellowship with one another is often defined by what we are not to fellowship. There can be no fellowship between righteousness and evil. There can be no fellowship between truth and error that defines fundamental teaching. The nature of being Christian prohibits the ekklesia of Christ from partnering with that which is contrary to the definition of what it means to be a Christian. And to be Christian means that we are “of Christ.” We are “of Christ” because we have obediently submitted to and walk in the word of Christ. *“If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1 Jn 1:6,7).

It is quite difficult for one with a sectarian view of fellowship to understand the true nature of fellowship that Christians have with one another. Reli-

gious sectarians are always drawing their small circles that are either based on the traditions of their heritage or the elevation of opinions to the status of law. There is a theology of exclusion and isolation.

With obedient believers it is different. Upon obedience to the gospel through the waters of baptism, obedient believers are added by God to a spiritual community. It is a community that is defined by organic oneness where each member functions in unity with one another. Members do not pass their time seeking to dismember the body through circle drawing, but in encouraging one another unto love and good works (See Hb 10:24,25). Their organic function is not as a legal organization, but as a participatory body that seeks to include and fellowship (See 1 Co 12:12-31). It is simply not the nature of the fellowship of this organic body to bite and devour itself. It is not a body that seeks to disfellowship members on the basis of opinions and trivia. On the contrary, it is a family of unlimited patience and forbearance in a pool of inexhaustible love and mercy, the same that was shown each member through Jesus Christ.

Chapter 2

A Sharing Partnership In Christ

Fellowship is one’s total dedication to others in service for Jesus. Fellowship is not simply unity in teaching. Since the family of God is identified before the world with the signal of love (Jn

13:34,35), love first is the foundation of fellowship, and then teaching. In the New Testament, the Greek word that is commonly used to define this relationship is the Greek word *koinonia*. This

word has been translated different ways throughout the New Testament because of its various meanings. These variations in translation have resulted in some confusion in defining fellowship. However, regardless of all the translations, and the contexts in which various forms of the word are used, the concept of mutual sharing in a participatory relationship is the fundamental meaning that is embedded within all uses of the word throughout the New Testament.

Fellowship defines the salvational relationship that Christians have with God and the unity that exists among the members of the body. In order to emphasize our fellowship with God and the unity Christians have in Christ, the New Testament writers exhorted us not to be in fellowship with the world. *“And have no **fellowship** with the unfruitful works of darkness ...”* (Ep 5:11). Christians have no fellowship with darkness because they have been called into fellowship with Jesus in the light. *“God is faithful, through whom you were called into **fellowship** of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”* (1 Co 1:9). Because Christians are called into fellowship with Jesus, they walk in the light of truth. *“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have **fellowship** with one another and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”* (1 Jn 1:7). Christians must have (1) no fellowship with darkness, (2) because they have been called into fellowship with Jesus, and thus, (3) they are in fellowship with one another as they walk together in the light of truth.

Discipleship means that we have

been called into fellowship with the Son of God, and thus, we are to have no fellowship with those things that are contrary to the light. Our fellowship within the light calls for an active walk with Jesus in the truth. This common walk in the truth brings disciples into fellowship with one another (1 Jn 1:3). In order to define the nature of this fellowship, there are at least six uses of the Greek word *koinonia* that must be examined. Each of these forms of the word in some way explains the disciples’ relationship with one another and God. The commonly used English word to translate *koinonia* is “fellowship.” But there is actually no single word in the English language that adequately translates the complete meaning of *koinonia*. *Koinonia* is simply one of those majestic words of the Greek language that is filled with a multiplicity of meanings. We would only conclude that the basic meaning of the word deals with fundamental principles of relationships between God and man, and man and man. The foundational meaning of the word would thus be a joint participation between those who have come into unity with one another.

In the Christian community, Christians have fellowship with one another in benevolence (Rm 12:13; 15:26,27; 2 Co 8:4; 9:1; 1 Tm 6:18), in the Lord’s Supper (1 Co 10:16), in glory (1 Pt 5:11), in the divine nature (2 Pt 1:4), in preaching the gospel (Gl 2:9; 6:6; Ph 1:5), and in sufferings (2 Co 1:7; Ph 3:10; 4:14; Hb 10:33; 1 Pt 4:13). Christians participate in these relational functions with one another by walking together in the light.

Our fellowship in these areas of discipleship are brought out in the following uses of the various forms of *koinonia*:

A. Sharing:

The use of the word *koinonia* refers to Christians partnering with one another in reference to contributions (*koinonia*) for the poor (Rm 15:26). *Koinonia* is also used when Christians fellowship with the blood and body of Jesus in the Lord's Supper (1 Co 10:16). It is used in reference to submitting to the instructions of those who teach the word of God (At 2:42). The noun form of the word is used throughout the New Testament in reference to our relational partnership with one another as we walk in the light (See also the use of the word in 1 Co 1:9; 2 Co 6:14; 8:4; 9:13; 13:14; Gl 2:9; Ph 1:5; 2:1; 3:10; Pl 6; Hb 13:16; 1 Jn 1:3,6,7).

B. Giving:

The adjective form of the word *koinonia* is *koinonikos* which is used in reference to those who participate in the lives of others. In reference to Paul's exhortation to the rich, he wrote in 1 Timothy 6:18 that the rich "*be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to share [koinonikos].*"

C. Partnering:

Koinonos is a noun form of *koinonia* which suggests the idea of partnership. "*James and John, the sons of*

Zebedee, who were partners [koinonos] with Simon" (Lk 5:10). Consider also Matthew 23:30. "*If we had been in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partakers [koinonos] with them in the blood of the prophets.*" The definition of partnership is also emphasized in Paul's statement concerning his relationship with Titus. "*As for Titus, he is my partner [koinonos] and fellow worker concerning you*" (2 Co 8:23). The same definition of the word was used by Paul in his relationship with Philemon. "*If you count me a partner [koinonos], receive him as you would me*" (Pl 17; see also the use of the word in 1 Co 10:18,20; 2 Co 1:7; Hb 10:33; 1 Pt 5:1; 2 Pt 1:4).

D. Sharing responsibility:

The word *koinoneo* refers to sharing something with others. Emphasis is on taking part in something with others. Paul used this word when he referred to the Philippians who took part in his ministry of evangelism when he left Philippi and went to Thessalonica. "*Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel when I departed from Macedonia, no church shared [koinoneo] with me concerning giving and receiving but you only*" (Ph 4:15). Paul used the word in reference to the financial support of the teacher by the one who is taught. "*Let him who is taught the word share [koinoneo] in all good things with the one who teaches*" (Gl 6:6; see also the use of the word in Rm 12:13; 15:27; 1 Tm 5:22; Hb 2:14; 1 Pt 4:13; 2 Jn 11).

E. Joint participation:

Another use of the word *koinonia* that closely relates to the preceding definition is a noun form of the word, *sunkoinonos*. This word also carries with it the meaning of being a joint partner in participating in the work and life of others. Paul wrote, “*And this I do for the sake of the gospel so that I might be a partaker [sunkoinonos] of it*” (1 Co 9:23). John also wrote, “*I, John, your brother and companion [sunkoinonos] in the tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ ...*” (Rv 1:9; see also the use of the word in Rm 11:17; Ph 1:7).

F. Partaking together:

The Greek word *sunkoinoneo* means to partake together with others, or to have fellowship with something that two parties have in common. This word was used by Paul when he wrote to the Philippian church in reference to their sharing with him in his suffering through their contribution. “*Nevertheless, you have done well that you shared [sunkoinoneo] in my affliction*” (Ph

4:14). The word is also used in reference to not partaking of the unrighteousness of this world. “*And have no fellowship [sunkoinoneo] with the unfruitful works of darkness ...*” (Ep 5:11). John wrote in reference to the sinfulness of fallen “Babylon,” “*Come out of her, my people, so that you do not partake [sunkoinoneo] of her sins ...*” (Rv 18:4).

Koinonia and all its derivatives are used in different contexts of meaning in the New Testament. However, they all have the basic meaning of a relational partnering, sharing and fellowship in our work together for God. When it is used in reference to the disciples’ relationship with one another, the fundamental meaning is that the community of God is a sharing and participatory fellowship of people. Our task in studying this subject, therefore, is to determine the nature of how we are to participate in one another’s lives, as well as what the Bible says about the breaking of this participation. Since the disciples of Jesus are to be into one another’s lives, then when and how can this fellowship be dissolved? But first, we must explore the extent to which fellowship must be extended.

Chapter 3

Bible Basis For Fellowship

The one organic body of Christ is unified because of the common obedience to the gospel of all its members. One statement of Paul clarifies and establishes this fact. “*For you are all sons of God*

through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek. There is neither bondservant nor free. There is neither male nor fe-

male. For you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gl 3:26-28). This is the fellowship of the saints in Christ. The saints thus seek to maintain the unity of the faith in the bond that they enjoy in Christ (Ep 4:3). Here is how that unity is preserved:

A. Common desire for a unified body:

Those who have been baptized into the one body (1 Co 12:13), naturally seek to function as members of the one body. Members of the body naturally seek to work together, not against one another. Since they are members of the body of Christ, they seek to follow the mandates for unified function of the body that originates from the head, Jesus Christ. Jesus said, *“I do not pray for these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be one in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me”* (Jn 17:20,21). The one Head assumes oneness of the body. If one would claim to be a member of the body with his focus clearly on the Head, then it is his natural desire to preserve and walk in the united fellowship with all the members of the body.

B. Common authority for unified organic function:

There can be no unity among the members of the body if the members do not agree upon a common standard by which they will function as the body. Jesus said, *“If you love Me you will keep*

My commandments” (Jn 14:15). *“He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me”* (Jn 14:21). Jesus has all authority (Mt 28:18). Upon the foundation of what He commands, the members of His body maintain their unity. The unity and fellowship of the members, therefore, is based on the obedience of the members to His word, not on a negotiated agreement of codes, creeds and earthly authorities agreed upon by the members. Neither is unity determined by all members working in the same way or assembling according to an established ritual of assembly.

There can be no fellowship, and thus no unity, if those who claim to be Christian do not organically function with the word of Christ as the foundation of their faith (See Rm 10:17). This means that one’s religious heritage or traditions can never be allowed to be a common foundation upon which unity and fellowship is based. All religious people have their favorite religious traditions, and all people come into Christ from different religious heritages. When one comes into the fellowship of the saints through obedience to the gospel, however, he must be willing to sacrifice any tradition that must be sacrificed in order to preserve the unity of the body. At the same time, one must be given the freedom to retain any tradition that does not conflict with the word of God. Unity has nothing to do with accepting and agreeing upon a common creed of traditions that we would use to identify our fellowship.

Every baptized disciple has religious traditions that came as baggage

with him into Christ. However, these traditions cannot be made factors to determine his fellowship with others who have a heritage of different traditions. Unity between two people with different traditional baggage can happen only if both parties agree that their unique traditions can never be the standard by which they will determine their fellowship with one another. One may not feel good about the traditions of others, but as long as those with different religious traditions do not bind their traditions as law, then one is bound by love to accept into fellowship those with different religious traditions that they do not bind as law.

We must keep in mind that we might not feel comfortable with someone's religious traditions or method of work and assembly. But if the traditions or methods do not conflict with the word of Christ, nor become a religious law to be bound on others, then our personal feelings can never be used as "the law" to judge someone's religious traditional methods of work as wrong. Love is proven by one's acceptance of another's traditional function about which we might not feel comfortable.

C. **Respect for the silence of the Scriptures:**

In view of the preceding principle, the concept of the "silence of the Scriptures" has been a most misunderstood and misapplied principle of biblical interpretation. This misunderstanding has led many to misapply the statement that was made by Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:6. In

the context of the Corinthian problem of exalting what one personality above another, Paul wrote, "*Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, **that in us you might learn not to think above what is written, that none of you take pride in one against another.***" Keep in mind that this statement is made in the context of verse 5, which says, "*Therefore, judge nothing before the time until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and will manifest **the motives of the hearts,** and then will everyone have praise of God.*" The context of 1 Corinthians 4:6 is **personalities**, not teaching. The Corinthians had denominated over listening to what certain personalities said (1 Co 1:12,13). The context is talking about hearts and motives in reference to exalting one personality said which was not inspired Scripture. Paul exhorts the Corinthians not to "take pride in one against another." They must not take pride in being called after Apollos, Cephas or Paul. From their hearts, they must be called after Christ alone and what He says. Therefore, when Paul mentions that we not go beyond that which is written, he is not referring to our lack of biblical authority for things we do that are not in the word of God. He is focusing on following Jesus for who He is as the Christ. We must not add to His teaching the uninspired teaching of either Paul, Cephas or Apollos.

Silence of the Scriptures gives freedom. It is true that we must not go beyond that which is written in a way that

would contradict that which is written. We must not go beyond in binding where God has not bound (See Rv 22:18,19). 1 Peter 4:11 is a concept that applies here. *“If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God.”* Now if the oracles of God say nothing in reference to what we might want to do, then there must be freedom. There is freedom if what we want to do does not contradict or work against the Scriptures. And everyone does numerous things religiously about which the New Testament says nothing. In our religious behavior, all of us go beyond what the Scriptures say in practicing our faith. Using the phrase “unbiblical,” therefore, can be an erroneous statement. Simply because one has a campaign, or crusade, which things are not mentioned in the New Testament, he is not doing something that is “unbiblical.” Only when one does something that contravenes Scripture is he doing something that is “unbiblical.” The rest of the time, “unbiblical” actions are in the area of freedom.

Now think for a moment. If one builds a building for the assembly of the saints, has he gone beyond the teaching of Christ because doing such would have no authority in the word of God, for there is no mention of church buildings in the New Testament. Is his church building therefore “unbiblical”? There were no “church buildings” in the 1st century, thus there is no scripture to which we can go that would “authorize” a church building. Has one violated the “silence of the Scriptures” by building a building for the assembly of the saints? What if one seeks

to rent a public hall for preaching the gospel? Since there is silence in the Scriptures for doing this, has one gone beyond the teaching of Christ? Certainly not. “Silence of the Scriptures” simply means that one has freedom when nothing is said in the Scriptures. One has freedom if his actions do not bring him into conflict with other clearly understood teachings of the Scriptures.

In order to maintain the unity of the fellowship of the disciples, therefore, disciples must learn to guard one another’s freedom in areas of the silence of the Scriptures. As long as one does not violate Scriptures in his methods of work, then there is freedom, not restriction. Silence simply allows freedom for individual judgment. God has given the principle of assembly. We have the freedom to build, or rent, or do whatever in order to bring saints together in one place.

D. Respect God’s boundaries:

In order that the ekklesia of Christ exist, there must be boundaries that define and differentiate the ekklesia from all man-made religions. The church would have no distinctiveness if there were no boundaries by which to identify her existence. Since the church belongs to Christ, then only Christ can determine these boundaries. And since Christ only can determine the boundaries of the ekklesia, then it is only in His word that we find these boundaries.

The fundamental boundaries by which we identify those who are the church of Christ are not difficult to dis-

cover. They are not hidden in figurative language, nor do they come to us through human reasoning. For example, in 1 Corinthians Paul argues against the Corinthians being divided over calling themselves after certain men. “*Now I say this, that each one of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I am of Apollos,’ and ‘I am of Cephas,’ and ‘I am of Christ.’*” (1 Co 1:12). Now the name “Christian” means to be “of Christ.” So Paul brings this meaning into the context of answering the divisive practices of the Corinthians. In verse 13 he answers, “*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you **baptized** in the name of Paul?*” We all know that Christ was crucified for the Corinthians. No question about this. So in order for one to be “of Paul,” Paul first had to have been crucified for the individual, and secondly, the Paulite had to have been “*baptized in the name of Paul.*” The same would hold true in being “of Christ,” or being Christian. Is this a boundary? Only those who have been “*baptized in the name of Christ*” are Christians. They are the only ones who are “of Christ.”

The Thessalonians had some problems with certain disciples quitting their jobs and living off other brothers. In 2 Thessalonians 3 Paul referred to this as walking disorderly. And in reference to those who walked disorderly, Paul wrote, “*Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, **that you withdraw yourselves from every brother who walks disorderly and not after the tradition that he received from us***” (2 Th 3:6). The tradition that Paul had left with

the Thessalonian disciples was, “*For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we did not behave ourselves disorderly among you, nor did we eat any man’s bread without paying for it. But we worked with labor and hardship night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you*” (2 Th 3:7,8). So there is a boundary here in reference to fellowship. “*And if anyone does not obey our word in this letter, note that man **and have no company with him** so that he may be ashamed*” (2 Th 3:14). If you do not work when there is work, then you cannot eat off the church (2 Th 3:10). This is a clear boundary of fellowship.

In reference to morals, there are also boundaries in our fellowship with one another. “*But now I have written to you not to associate with anyone who is called a brother if he is a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolater, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner. With such a person do not eat*” (1 Co 5:11). This is another boundary of fellowship.

In reference to the legal oriented brother who was binding where God had not bound, Paul wrote of this person, “*Now I urge you, brethren, mark those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching you have learned, and **turn away from them***” (Rm 16:17). If someone seeks to bind that which is contrary to the teaching of the New Testament, then he is binding where God has not bound, and by doing such he is sowing division among the brethren. Such a person is to be identified and shunned. This boundary was also explained to Titus. “*But avoid foolish controversies*

*and genealogies and contentions and strivings about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. **Reject a factious man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned***" (Ti 3:9-11; see 2 Tm 2:23).

There are moral and doctrinal boundaries to fellowship that must be identified in the New Testament and maintained in order to preserve the identity of God's people. If such boundaries are not honored, then there will be no distinctiveness to the people of God in a world of religious people. All Christians are religious, but not all religious people are Christians. So unless one discovers in the word of God that which identifies one as a Christian, then he will not be able to determine if one is simply religious, or is a Christian whose life is "of Christ." (More on this later.)

We must conclude that those who are in fellowship with one another have no other creed but Christ. And when one is baptized into Christ, he comes into this fellowship by the induction of God (At 2:47). Thus it is not our responsibility to receive one into fellowship when he obeys the gospel. We receive all baptized believers because they are added to our fellowship by God. We receive one into fellowship because God received

him. We are the ekklesia (church) regardless of our prejudices, ignorance or lack of understanding concerning God's worldwide fellowship of baptized believers.

Fellowship and unity in Christ, are not something about which men negotiate in order to accomplish. Negotiated unity is only union, for such is the product of men. Fellowship in Christ is the gift of God. Our fellowship is not a success story of negotiation, but the result of individuals who have joined themselves to Christ as their head. Therefore, fellowship is first vertical, and then it is horizontal. We first connect to Christ through obedience to His death, burial and resurrection. Then we are brought into fellowship with one another through this common salvation. If our fellowship was the product of theological negotiations, then it would simply be based on each one's conformity to a set of man-made rules. The fact is that when we were baptized, we were brought into a covenant relationship with God and into fellowship with every other baptized believer throughout the world who is also in a covenant relationship with God. We may not recognize or appreciate our fellowship with the worldwide family of God, but we have it regardless of our recognition and appreciation.

Chapter 4

Organic Fellowship

Fellowship involves how one's life touches another, and that life another. In the community of God, fellowship is one

life touching another to the point that lives are forever changed for the better. This motivation was in the mind of Paul

when he wrote to the Roman disciples, “... *making request, if by any means now at length I might have a successful journey by the will of God to come to you. For I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, to the end that you may be established*” (Rm 1:10,11).

The concept of the organic church is that lives affect lives for the better. And unless lives affect and change lives, then our faith becomes a stagnant codification of legal actions whereby we convince ourselves that we will somehow be rewarded with eternal life. Though the preceding statement of Paul was in the context of carrying out his apostolic responsibility of imparting the miraculous gifts to the Roman brethren (At 8:18), what he could do as an apostle was to bless others to the extent of his abilities, or as in this case, his apostolic responsibilities. It is nothing less for us. Our lives must be a blessing to others

When we talk about total commitment to Christ, we really mean total touching of others. One disciple seeks to totally touch another disciple to the point that lives are changed for the better. In order to carry out this ministry, disciples must eat together, work together, pray and study the word of God together. Christians “*rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep*” (Rm 12:15). We jokingly correct ourselves for reducing the concept of fellowship to having a good meal with the brothers and sisters. But keep in mind that “fellowship meals” are an opportunity for the sisters to minister to others

with their good cooking. Sometimes sisters are limited in what they can do. But they can cook. And in their cooking they can be a blessing to others. And sometimes the beltline of some brethren is evidence that our sisters have done well. We would urge church groups to restore the love feast of the New Testament church. Eating together as the body of Christ is a function of the organic church at work in the kitchen.

But we must be cautious about relegating our fellowship to food alone. Fellowship is more than a social gathering to eat. Fellowship can never be defined by external, and often communal gatherings around food. When Christians love one another from the heart, the love feast happens. Love feasts without love, however, are simply occasions for indigestion. It is as Walter Chrylser said, “The real secret of success is for people to do things because they want to and not because they have to.” When people put a loving heart into their service of one another, fantastic things happen.

Here is an example. In 1 Timothy 4:13 Paul exhorted Timothy, “*Until I come, give heed to reading, to exhortation, to teaching.*” Long before we were able to individually listen to the reading of the Scriptures on our own personal DVD players, our religious heritage fellowshipped in the reading of the Scriptures as a group. Farming families in a region would come together for several days, bringing their Bibles and their food. They would conduct what was called “Bible Readings” in the farming regions of central Kansas, a middle state in

America. Readers would take turns reading aloud the Bible from beginning to end before the multitude of gathered listeners. They would read the entire Bible and no one would go home before the last verse was read in Revelation. That was fellowship over the Scriptures.

Interactive and participatory fellowship always results in happier lives. After washing the disciples' feet, Jesus, our Creator (Cl 1:16), made a profound statement concerning how He created us. "*If you know these things, happy are you if you do them*" (Jn 13:17). When we serve others we are happy. Jesus made us this way. It is the created nature of the human spirit. Happiness is a by-product of a serving fellowship. And thus, fellowship is never defined by people simply gathering together in an assembly. Spectator religiosity has never produced happy spectators. Church buildings are filled with unhappy people who have no relational fellowship with anyone else. The greatest failure of the church in these modern times is that we have convinced ourselves that the "fellowship" we orchestrate in assemblies will somehow make us happy people. This is a devil's lie. One may disguise his unhappiness in a concert-oriented assembly that excites the spirit. However, the day after the emotional experience is gone, we are still unhappy people.

Jesus' words in John 13:17 are still true. Happiness comes by touching lives, not focusing on a concert placebo where we forget our sorrows for a moment during an energetic experiential assembly. The fact that church houses are full of

unhappy people should give us some impetus to search our Bibles in order to understand what Jesus demonstrated in "foot-washing fellowship" that should be characteristic of His disciples.

Our quest to understand true fellowship should begin with one phrase that is used throughout the New Testament. It is the phrase "one another." In the context of our fellowship with one another, the phrase is used over and over in reference to something that is being done. Jesus said, "... *happy are you if you do them.*" True fellowship in washing one another's feet results in happiness. If one wants to be happy, therefore, he needs to take a towel and look for dirty feet. The New Testament is saturated with ways we can wash one another's feet:

Care for one another (1 Co 12:25)

Forgive one another (Ep 4:32)

Be kind to one another (Ep 4:32)

Be hospitable to one another (1 Pt 4:9)

Teach and admonish one another (Cl 3:16)

Submit to one another's service (1 Co 16:15,16)

Serve one another (Gl 5:13)

Submit to one another (Ep 5:21)

Bear one another's burdens (Gl 6:2)

Love one another (Jn 13:34,35)

Comfort one another (1 Th 4:18; 5:11)

Encourage one another (Hb 10:25)

Confess our faults to one another (Js 5:16)

Give honor to one another (Rm 12:10)

We could go on, but we get the point of what the Holy Spirit is trying to say in reference to true fellowship among the saints. No isolated Christian by himself can fully understand fellowship. Fellow-

ship involves two or more people interacting and touching one another's lives. Therefore, the less we participate in the lives of others, the less we understand the nature of the fellowship that identifies the organic body of Christ.

The organic fellowship of the body of Christ is not a one-way street. It can never be. In other words, one cannot complain about the lack of fellowship in his or her life by saying, "Why doesn't anyone come and visit me?" "The preacher doesn't love me because he never comes and visits me." These complaints of a warped concept of fellowship are introverted, self-centered, and sometimes on a deeper psychotic level, narcissistic. Those who have this narcissistic concept of the Christian community have missed entirely the nature of the fellowship that God would have us enjoy. When Jesus said "love one another" (Jn 13:34,35), He did not place the responsibility to love on the shoulders of just one party. The "one another" statement means that all individuals must express love in order for the magic of fellowship to happen. True Christian fellowship is based on two or more parties putting into the fellowship pool all they have to give to one another. No one can stand on the sidelines and cry out for fellowship when he does not get involved in the lives of other people. Hermits never understand fellowship.

From the preceding illustrations of "one another," the concept of one another is always connected to a verb. Fellowship is a participatory action. "*Happy are you if you do them.*" There is no

fellowship without action on the part of everyone involved in the fellowshiping community. Fellowship is an initiative on the part of individuals to get involved in the lives of others. And when one comes into the fellowship of the Christian community, he has come into a community of people who seek to be involved in the lives of people. Yes, hermits often do not want to become Christians because they know that they will have to involve themselves in service to others, and others will be involved in their lives.

Now we are beginning to understand the foundational meaning of James 2:14-26. In the middle of James' exhortations concerning an active faith, he stated, "*But someone may say, 'You have faith and I have works.' Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works*" (Js 2:18). Was he really meaning, "Show me your fellowship without your works, and I will show you my fellowship by my works"?

One key point never to forget in reference to fellowship is that it must always be from the heart. It is for this reason that a legal oriented religiosity can never produce the level of fellowship that God wants us to enjoy with one another. Our Christianity is not simply a "camaraderie for the faith" because we all believe the same thing. Fellowship is more than socializing around commonly accepted doctrines.

We must always remember when seeking a definition of Christian fellowship that coming together in assembly is only an outward manifestation of a heart-

felt desire to be with one's brother in Christ. If we can keep coming together, there is progress in our bonding with one another. But assemblies produce only a certain level of fellowship, a level with which we must never be satisfied. When we start working together in service to all men, then we will start understanding the nature of true fellowship (See Gl 6:10). Remember what the Roman Cae-

sar Marcus Aurelius said, "Humans are all made for cooperation. We've been given like hands, like feet, like upper and lower teeth, like eyelids—these are made to work together. To act against one another, then is contrary to Nature." In organic fellowship, it is only natural that all the members of the body work together in order to accomplish the mission of the Head.

Chapter 5

Fellowship Assumes Oneness

The New Testament teaching on true fellowship assumes unity. All Christians have a common salvation (Jd 3) in that they have all come into a covenant relationship with Christ by being crucified with Christ on the cross, buried with Him in a tomb of water, and resurrected with Him to walk in newness of life (Rm 6:1-6; Gl 3:26-28). The fellowship of the obedient with one another, therefore, is the blessing of God when He adds us to His community of people (At 2:47). Unity in fellowship is not something that is orchestrated by man, but the God-given serendipity of our common obedience to the gospel. And since this unity can be disrupted through immoral living and rejection of the truth of the gospel, the Spirit writes that every disciple must be "*eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" (Ep 4:3).

The legally oriented person will try to discuss unity without correcting fellowship problems. The error of his proposition is that unity cannot exist without brethren being in fellowship with

one another. We might legally agree on a certain outline of doctrines, opinions and methodologies, but unless we are able to be in fellowship with one another our unity is only surface. It will break apart when personalities clash. Euodia and Syntyche certainly had unity with one another because their names were written in heaven (Ph 4:2,3). However, they struggled in their fellowship with one another because of some disagreement. Therefore, unity without love will last until there is some disagreement over opinions or methodologies.

When discussing the fellowship among the saints, we must not confuse ourselves by seeking to promote unity with orchestrated negotiations that actually lay the foundation for disunity. We must keep in mind that unity in fellowship is a blessing from God, not something that is negotiated by all parties involved. Common acceptance of common views, interpretations, opinions and methodologies may produce union, but they can never take the place of God's

blessing of unity that results from our common obedience to the gospel.

We must concede that one endorses some of the views of those with whom he does not seek to be in fellowship. At the same time, all of us claim fellowship with those with whom there are some views that we do not endorse. For example, the Jewish brethren from Jerusalem did not endorse Peter's going into the house of Cornelius (At 11:1-8). Nevertheless, they endorsed Peter as a brother in Christ. Paul did not endorse John Mark going on the second missionary journey (At 15:39). Nevertheless, he continued to endorse Barnabas as a fellow soldier of the cross, though Barnabas took John Mark. We are often very inconsistent in this area of fellowship. This is particularly true in reference to our fellowship with those who come into Christ with a different religious heritage, and baggage, with which we try to do two things. We seek to clone the new convert after the baggage of our heritage, or we refuse to fellowship fully those who have a different religious vocabulary or way of carrying out faith in their lives.

Accepting into fellowship those with views with which we do not agree would be the application of Paul's discussion in Romans 14 concerning the "meat eating" brethren and the "vegetarian" brethren. Paul's instructions to both parties was that they receive (fellowship) one another (Rm 14:3). The lesson from the context of Romans 14 is that God receives those who have different opinions, life-style habits, and in this case, diets. This is illustrated by God's acceptance

of the faithful in the seven churches of Asia, when at the same time there were in some of the churches those who believed erroneous teachings and behaved immorally (See Rv 3:1-6). Though the faithful were a part of a church wherein there were those who taught erroneous doctrines and behaved immorally, Jesus would not hold the faithful accountable for the false doctrines and behavior of the erring (See Rv 2:18-29). Each disciple will be held accountable for his own teachings and his own behavior (2 Co 5:10; see Js 3:1). We should be cautious about excluding from our circle of fellowship everyone with whom we cannot endorse in matters of opinion, interpretation and methodology. If there is a disciple among a group that believes erroneously, God accepts that disciple because of his personal obedience to the gospel. Those who surround us do not determine our eternal destiny. The one beside whom we may sit on Sunday does not determine our eternal destiny.

If we contend that we as a group must have perfect agreement in all matters of opinion and work, then this would mean that even God could not have fellowship with us. Certainly God does not endorse all our behavior and thinking. However, because of His mercy, He maintains fellowship with us as we walk in the light (1 Jn 1:7). The Corinthian church was filled with a great deal of nonsense, and yet, God still addressed them as the "church of God" (1 Co 1:2). It is doubtful that "small circle drawers" would have claimed fellowship with the church of God in Corinth.

Possibly the word we need to use here is “harmony.” Our fellowship with one another is not based on everyone walking in complete harmony with one another. Harmony is our goal in fellowship, but its reality is quite difficult. Harmony assumes that everyone agrees on everything in the same manner. But since we are human, complete harmony is always outside our reality of accomplishment while we are in the flesh. Fellowship, therefore, cannot be conditioned on harmony, though we seek to be in harmony with one another as much as possible. Because we are in fellowship with one another, however, our goal is to walk in harmony with one another. But we must remember that there is no statement in the Bible that mandates that in order to have fellowship with one another there must be complete harmony. It is just not there. God did not create us to walk as robots. He created us with free-moral choice, and in doing this, He knew that we would struggle with having a harmonious walk. Amos 3:3—“*Can two walk together, except they have agreed?*”—is not a passage that is calling us to be cloned robots. Free-moral individuals will always have disagreements. Nevertheless, they can agree to disagree, and thus walk together in discussion, not argumentation.

The goal of fellowship is harmony, but complete harmony is that illusive dream to which we aspire. We must not be frustrated in our efforts to be united if we are sometimes out of harmony. Our goal is not to be cloned, but to be in fellowship with one another as all of us seek

to focus on Jesus. If we assume we have division among us because we are not in harmony with one another, then we have established a condition for unity that will never exist. In our frustration we will be driven to clone if we confuse perfect harmony with fellowship. We will be driven to legalize codes to which all must conform in order to establish a superficial unity. When we do this, we are no more than a cult. If we establish legalized codes to bring harmony (unity), we will eventually splinter when people start freely thinking for themselves.

It was for this reason that the Catholic Church burned Bibles during the Dark Ages. The leadership did not want the people reading the Bible in their own language. Today, the denominational world discourages personal Bible study, and often, refuses to have open Bible classes during their assemblies. They do not want the people to personally study word of God, since such has been left to the clergyman who controls the group through the intimidation of his many years of study, though he is often “*always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth*” (2 Tm 3:7).

We must not forget that the names of sister Euodia and sister Syntyche were written in heaven. They were sisters in Christ and in fellowship with one another. However, Paul wrote, “*And I ask you also, loyal companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers whose names are in the book of Life*” (Ph 4:3). These two sisters certainly were not in harmony with one an-

other at the time Paul wrote. However, they were in fellowship with one another because their names were written in heaven. In such cases of fellowship in diversity we should read Philippians 2:1,2. *“Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love and being of one accord, of one mind.”* If any church would illustrate the truth of the preceding concepts it would be the church in Corinth. They remained the “church of God” regardless of their lack of harmony (1 Co 1:2).

Now we would challenge your thinking concerning the historical assembly situation of the early church. This is a challenge that is often ignored by most Bible students on this subject simply because of the custom of corporate churchianity that prevails throughout Christendom today, something that would certainly be strange in a New Testament setting. Nevertheless, it is a historical fact that the early Christians in every city met in the homes of the members. There were no purpose-built church buildings, which buildings did not come into existence until the early part of the 4th century when Caesar Constantine wanted to bring Christianity into the context of pagan temples throughout the Roman Empire by building church buildings.

Among many scriptures in the New Testament on house assemblies, one is of special interest in Romans 16:5. *“Greet the church that meets in their [Priscilla and Aquila’s] house.”* Now

suppose you lived in Jerusalem, or Rome, or Ephesus, or Corinth and assembled with a small group in someone’s house (See also At 5:42; 20:20; 1 Co 16:19; Cl 4:15; Pl 2). This was the customary assembly of the early church. No Bible historian denies this fact. If you were regularly meeting with a small group in a house every Sunday, would you not crave the fellowship of the extended family of God throughout your city? “Greet-the-church-that-meets-in-their-house” was a signal to fellowship all house fellowships. This was only natural because of the worldwide fellowship and unity of the disciples in every city. No small house group made a declaration of independence from the rest of the house groups in the city. Doing such would have been totally contrary to the desire of people of a common salvation to maintain their fellowship in the midst of paganism and persecution. It would certainly be the death of a small house assembly to rise up and claim some independence from the rest of the family of God in any particular city. It would simply be unnatural, if not divisive. This seems to be what Diotrephes was trying to do in separating those over whom he assumed authority from other groups meeting in houses (See 3 Jn 9:10).

It is contrary to the organic fellowship of the body of Christ for groups of disciples to declare their independence as groups from one another. On the contrary, **it is natural that the body declare its oneness in Christ.** This is certainly what the members do when the universal body of members partakes of the one

bread (1 Co 10:17). All the house groups in Corinth proclaimed their being one body in Corinth where they all ate of the one bread. Why in our rush to crystallize into groups and declare our division we forget 1 Corinthians 12:12? *“For as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the one body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.”* The “one body” is not a collective of individual and independent bodies. We are members of **one universal body of Christ**. In the New Testament discussion concerning fellowship, the discussion is not about fellowship between groups, but members. There is only one group. This is the one universal church of Christ. There are many members. But all these members, though scattered throughout the world, are one body.

Throughout the years we have witnessed a breakdown of the universal organic body of Christ in those areas where groups of disciples have taken it upon themselves to declare their independence from all other disciples in a particular area. When they declare their independence from others, they assign for themselves their own authorities on earth, thus

minimizing the **all** authority of the one universal Head, Jesus Christ (Mt 28:18). The result of their declaration of autonomy under their own authorities has left them forever small, dysfunctional and backward. Their spirit of isolation has left them uncooperative and unable to accomplish any significant works in cooperation with their fellow disciples who have also declared their isolation. They have thus doomed themselves to being hermit churches with a selected theology outside which they are fearful to venture in order to make contact with others who are struggling to come out of religious confusion. Evangelism means to convert one over to the cocoon of the theology of an independent group, rather than to Christ. The isolated thus preach church, and not Christ.

Fellowship is about individual disciples of Christ staying connect with one another. It is not about groups. And because a disciple assembles in a particular group, does not separate him from disciples that assemble in other groups. Our fellowship with all Christians does not depend on where we sit on Sunday morning.

Chapter 6

Walking Away From The Covenant

Unity among disciples is based on a common covenant relationship with God. Only when one walks away from the conditions of this covenant does he

walk away from his fellowship with the rest of the covenanted people of God. There are three ways one can walk away from his covenant with God.

A. Behavioral denial of the lordship of Christ:

One is identified with Christ by his loving behavior (Jn 13:34,35). This principle is addressed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5. He introduced a problem among the Corinthians by referring to the immoral behavior of one who continued in fellowship with the Corinthian church. *“It is actually reported that there is fornication among you, and such fornication is not even practiced among the Gentiles, that one should have his father’s wife. And you are arrogant and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed **might be removed from among you.**”* If one adopts a life-style that is contrary to God-defined moral behavior, then those who are of Christ must remove such a one from their fellowship. Those who live immoral lives have violated the sanctity of their covenant relationship with Christ, and thus, have no part with the body of Christ.

The sin of immoral behavior in fornication is taking a member of the body of Christ and laying it with a harlot. Paul rebuked the Corinthians, *“Do you not know that your bodies are the members of Christ?”* (1 Co 6:15). Now if one takes one of the members of Christ’s body and lays it with a harlot, then he has actually taken a part of the body of Christ into fornication. *“Will I then take the members of Christ and make them the members of a harlot?”* (1 Co 6:15). Paul’s answer to his own question was, *“Certainly not!”* (1 Co 6:15). Then he asked the Corinthians, *“Or do you not know*

that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her?” (1 Co 6:16). When one comes into Christ, he is no longer his own. He has joined his body in a covenant relationship with Christ, and thus the Spirit of God resides within him. *“Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? ... glorify God in your body”* (1 Co 6:19,20). If one joins himself to another in fornication, he has violated the body of Christ. Such a one can no longer be in fellowship with those who have kept themselves pure from immoral behavior.

B. Doctrinal denial of fundamental principles:

All Christians are in error somewhere in reference to matters of opinion. But our lack of knowledge of all things does not sever us from our covenant relationship with God. The Father loves His children, knowing that His children do not know all that is to be known. However, if one rebels against those fundamental salvational truths that come to us, not by interpretation, but through clear and declarative statements, then he has violated his covenant relationship with God.

What we must understand in order to come into a covenant relationship with God is that which needs no interpretation. However, once we are in a covenant relationship with God, all truths are certainly true, but not all truths are fundamental to maintain our covenant relation-

ship with God. There are truths we learn from Bible study throughout our lives. Those truths that we do not understand after coming into a covenant relationship with God are truths to learn. Learning new truths does not invalidate our obedience to those truths we had to know to come into a covenant relationship with God. We would call those truths that are necessary to establish a covenant relationship with God as truths that are fundamental. Those truths that we learn through Bible study throughout our lives are true, but not truths that would disengage us from our covenant relationship with God, and thus, not be truths to lead us to disengage with one another.

What motivated us to come into a covenant relationship with God was our realization that Jesus was the resurrected Christ and Son of God. A denial of these truths would certainly negate our fellowship with Christ (See 1 Co 15:1-5). How could one be in fellowship with the One whom he denied to be the Son of God. Our rejection of who Christ is and what He did would sever us from Him, just as our acceptance of Him and what He did moved us to connect to Him. One can be wrong about a lot of things, and yet, still be in fellowship with Jesus if he continues to believe those fundamental truths that moved him to come into a covenant relationship with Jesus. But if he rejects those truths about Jesus that moved him to obey the gospel, then he has removed himself from his fellowship with Christ and those who continue to believe the salvational fundamentals of the gospel.

It was these to whom John referred

in 1 John 2:19. *“They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out so that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”* Those who have gone out of the fellowship of the saints because they gave up that which brought them in, are as those about whom Peter wrote, *“For if after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning”* (2 Pt 2:20). The latter state is worse because the gospel message of the Sonship and atonement of Jesus no longer appeals to them. *“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance ...”* (Hb 6:4-6).

C. A divisive spirit:

If one is arrogant and sectarian, he establishes an atmosphere of division among brethren over matters of opinion, his opinions. If such a person is unresponsive to all admonition to refrain from promoting his opinions to the division of the body, then he has made his opinions a legal rule by which to promote division. This is the meaning of Paul’s thoughts in Romans 16:17,18. There were among the Roman disciples those who elevated their thinking to law, and

thus, they brought into question the grace of God by their meritorious law-keeping. These were brethren who were of the opinion that they must bind their opinions where God had not bound. They were thus causing *“divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching you have learned.”* Paul admonished those who were troubled by such legalistic teachers, *“... turn away from them.”*

If one persists in binding on the people of God those things that are either tradition or matters of opinion, then the people of God are to turn away from that person. Paul’s explicit mandate to evangelists is, *“Reject a factious man after the first and second admonition, knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned”* (Ti 3:10,11). These are those who seek to involve others in “foolish controversies” (Ti 3:9). If a person has a spirit of controversy, therefore, he has walked away from giving all heed to keep the unity of the Spirit. He must be marked and turned away from. He has forgotten Paul’s admonition to Timothy, *“And the servant of the Lord must not quarrel, but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient”* (2 Tm 2:24).

Division begins when one who has a sectarian spirit recruits others to his opinions which he things are binding as law (Gl 4:17). He then leads his party in setting up standards by which to judge whether others are faithful to his position. Those who do this *“are worldly-minded ones who cause divisions”* (Jd 19). The sectarian often commits the same transgression and sin as those to whom Isaiah spoke. *“Behold, you fast*

for strife and debate, and to smite with the fist of wickedness” (Is 58:4; see Js 3:12-18). One who is arrogant, assuming that he is right on every issue, is often morbidly craving for controversy. *“He is obsessed with controversy and disputes about words, from which come envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, perverse disputings between men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth ...”* (1 Tm 6:4,5).

D. A lazy spirit:

The context of 2 Thessalonians 3:6 is a situation wherein some had quit their jobs, and were subsequently living off other brothers and sisters. This was not a poverty situation. There was work, but those who could work terminated their work. Such people cannot live in fellowship with the saints of God. Paul clearly instructed the faithful, *“Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw yourselves from every brother who walks disorderly and not after the tradition of that he received from us”* (2 Th 3:6). The tradition that Paul had left with the Thessalonian disciples was, *“... we worked with labor and hardship night and day so that we might not be a burden to any of you”* (2 Th 3:8). To enforce the disfellowship of the idle brothers, he added to his instructions, *“if anyone is not willing to work, neither let him eat”* (2 Th 3:10). *“... note that man and have no company with him so that he may be ashamed”* (2 Th 3:14). If one seeks to live off the church when there is work to

be done, but he will not work, then he must be disfellowshipped from the family of God. This concept of Christ-like behavior was the foundation of Paul's statement in 1 Timothy 5:8. *"But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his own household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever."*

We would conclude that there are only four areas for which the church has grounds to withdraw their fellowship from one who would persist in sin. (1) We would withdraw fellowship from those who through their immoral living deny that Jesus is the resurrected Christ and Son of God. (2) Fellowship would be withdrawn from those who reject the belief that Jesus is the incarnate Son of God, and thus, the source of our life and the foundation for our faith as the united body of Christ. (3) We would withdraw fellowship from those who would seek to fragment the body by legally binding either religious traditions or opinions by which they set themselves up as judges and lawmakers, and thus have supplanted

Jesus as the head of His body who has all authority. (4) The church family should disfellowship those who refuse to work in order to take ownership of their financial responsibilities. These are the only four situations in the New Testament whereby the body can on the foundation of the Scriptures withdraw fellowship from any person. All other reasons are thus illegitimate and contrary to the spirit of unity in Christ.

If this is true, then fellowship among brethren allows a much greater spectrum of differences than most of us are willing to either admit or concede. There would certainly be a broader category of opinions, interpretations, and doctrines that would be allowed through the spirit of freedom than what most would accept. We would conclude that if a view or opinion does not contradict areas of fundamental belief and behavior, then we should consider the exhortation of James in James 2:13. *"For judgment will be without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. And mercy rejoices over judgment."*

Chapter 7

Opinionated Opinions

In matters of faith surrounding salvational principles, God has spoken clearly through direct commands or declarative statements. There is no room for opinion in these areas of teaching, nor necessity of interpretation. When there is a "thus saith the Lord," we have moved

outside matters of opinion and interpretation. But when we come to matters of opinion in reference to our interpretation of various passages that are not clear, or need deductive reasoning to understand, then there is room for tolerance, longsuffering and freedom of personal

interpretation. It is a time for discussion, not debate. If we must use human reasoning and a great deal of study in order to deduct truth, then we must be patient with one another. When determining fellowship on the basis of our knowledge of the word of God in areas of opinion and interpretation, no Christian should be eager to disfellowship someone who is a brother. Matters of disagreement in the area of opinion are areas of discretion and patience.

What often happens in areas of opinion is that we move into an area of what we might call “selected theology.” We determine which opinions are to be canonized as “law,” and then we bind on everyone these “laws” (opinions) who would be accepted into our fellowship. We then seek to fellowship only those with whom we have the same “selected theology,” or those we have convinced that we have the right theology. We draw a circle of fellowship around all those who conform to our selected theology, and then, exclude as “liberal” those who do not conform. We have now become a “selective fellowship.”

In order to easily identify those who have conformed to a particular selected theology, we identify ourselves with a “selected name.” Whether this name is derived from the New Testament, or just dreamed up by our imagination, we can quickly use the name to pick out of the crowd those who have adhered to the canonized selected theology of each particular group. Being “Christians only” is simply not good enough because those of the selected theology have assembled under

this name, regardless of how the New Testament defines one to be a Christian. After a name has been chosen to identify those who have adopted and adhered to a particular selected theology, the division among Christians is encased, and now, the adherents to each body of selected theologies are validated as true denominations. The only thing left is to chisel the name in stone on church buildings throughout the world. Our mission now is to promote the church of the selected theology while we minimize our message of the Christ of the church.

With our hermeneutics we determine that everyone within this selective fellowship that is now named has been cloned after the selected theology. Unity is assumed to prevail when everyone conforms to the code of opinions and interpretations of the selected theology. A sectarian denomination is thus formed when all adherents cannot determine the difference between fundamental truths, and those truths that are only matters of opinion or interpretation.

When we establish authorities to determine what opinions are correct, then our sectarian spirit has created a new religious denomination. Bible schools are established within the selective fellowship of churches in order to continue the “selected theology” of the “faithful.” These schools are often established by those who seek to indoctrinate young conformists to the accepted cliques, vocabulary and codes of fellowship. Within a closed environment (the classroom), the students are taught and tested over a “pattern of theology” in order that when they

are handed a diploma at the end of the cloning process, they will be considered “faithful” to the theology of the denomination. We know of few Bible schools that teach students to think freely and guard the freedom of their brothers (Gl 5:1).

In reference to this subject, there are some Spirit-inspired statements in Scripture that we have already mentioned, but demand a closer review. Many of these scriptures are often twisted out of context by legalistic clonists who fail to appreciate that in Christ we have been set free from the bondage of legal religiosity. An appropriate introduction to these statements would be Galatians 5:1. *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”* This is a fundamental principle of thinking among the people of God. It is a command that should alert every disciple to be on guard against being brought under the bondage of anyone or any teaching that would endanger our freedom in Christ.

A. Colossians 1:18:

“And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that in all things He might have the preeminence.”

So how would a statement as this apply to unity and fellowship? Simple. **There is brotherhood (fellowship) only among those who have accepted Jesus as the one head of the universal body.**

Accepting the universal headship of Christ means that Christ has all authority (Mt 28:18). Jesus’ universal headship means that He was the universal center of control for the disciples in Ephesus (Ep 1:22), as well as those in Colosse. Those in Colosse were not autonomous from those in Ephesus because the disciples in both cities were under the universal control of Jesus. There is no autonomy between those who have accepted a common head. On the contrary, those who have accepted a common center of reference have been united into the fellowship of one body. And since the one head has all authority, there should be no squabble for authority among the members of the universal body who have submitted to the one authority over all things.

We must keep in mind that when men among the disciples start assuming some of the authority of Jesus, they seek to separate a group of the disciples unto themselves over which they would exercise their authority. And unless their authority over their group is questioned or challenged, they declare autonomy or independence of their group from all other groups of disciples who also have separated their groups unto themselves (See At 20:30). The result is that the universal fellowship of the church is broken into splintered camps that often go to war with one another, and often disfellowship one another. No such teaching is found anywhere in the New Testament.

Universal headship and all authority are inseparable and belong to Jesus. When disciples in one area begin to think

that they have authority over those who assemble in Colosse, and those in Ephesus do the same, then there is division between the disciples in both locations. But if the disciples in Colosse and Ephesus maintain that Christ has all authority, then they remain the one universal body of Christ under the headship of Christ. The disciples in Colosse assume responsibility over their own ministry in Colosse, and the disciples in Ephesus assume responsibility for those in the city of Ephesus. In this way the one universal body organically functions worldwide. But taking ownership of the ministry in one's area (assuming responsibility) does not mean that the disciples in different cities have stolen some authority from King Jesus. They have only assumed responsibility to do the work of Jesus in their areas.

But when groups claim authority and declare independence, and yet seek unity, some organized monstrosity often develops. When such autonomous groups seek unity, they end up producing unions. Union is created out of independent groups coming together in order to negotiate a compromise. When a negotiated compromise is agreed upon by all parties involved, then a "united council of churches" often develops. Before we progress to this point, we need to take another look at restoring all authority to King Jesus. When those in Colosse and Ephesus agree that King Jesus is the only head who has all authority, then there can be no negotiations over headship, authority and doctrine. We are simply the one universal body of Christ seeking to work

together in ministry with the Bible as our only road map in teaching. When our particular ministries touch one another, or when there is a famine that affects a particular region where part of the body is located, we seek to work as one body in doing good to all men in that region (Gl 6:10; see At 11:28-30). The universal body of Christ works as one when Christ remains the sole head with all authority. When He remains preeminent over all disciples throughout the world, then the church remains one.

There is no man or group of men on earth who have the right to designate one law for the body of Christ. It is the work of the elders to make sure that this never happens among the saints (See Ti 1:9). There is only one lawgiver for the flock of God, and He has already given His law (Jn 12:48; Jd 3; Rv 22:18,19). Whenever a group of men on earth assume the prerogative to make laws for the church, then that group of men have assumed the position of Christ and stolen some of His authority over the universal church of Christ. Whenever a group of men, a committee, an organization, or a Pope, assumes authority to delegate laws to men by which they must work and be identified, then that group of men or individuals have infringed on the authority and dignity of the Son of God.

Universal fellowship of the body of Christ is endangered between groups who claim their own authority over themselves other than Christ. There can be no true unity among such groups. They may negotiate for unity, but they will end

up with a union, or simply a “working agreement.” This is not the unity of the church about which the New Testament speaks. Negotiated union can never produce the fellowship about which the New Testament speaks.

B. **John 17:20,21:**

“I do not pray for these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be one in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me.”

This statement was made first to the twelve apostles. However, it extends to all those who would believe in Jesus through their word. The Father and Son are one in relationship. All Christians are one because they have all been baptized into the one body. This is the theme of Paul’s discussions concerning the oneness of the body in 1 Corinthians 12. *“For by one Spirit we were all **baptized into one body**, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bondservants or free ...”* (1 Co 12:13). Though the members differ in their gifts, social status, or culture, they are still connected to one another in the one body. Though they differ in methodologies of work and opinions, they are still the one organic body of Christ.

The Father and Son functioned in different areas in reference to our salvation, but they were still one. We function in different ways to carry out the mission of Christ in our lives, but we are still one body. “Be one,” therefore, does not mean that we are cloned. And being

different does not mean that we are being divisive. Since we are the one body, our blessing from God is that we are the one body. When those of the world witness our unity in diversity, they understand that the church is real. It is real because everyone knows that everyone is different. Everyone has different gifts. But when different people can call themselves after Christ, and yet be one in Christ, then they understand that Christianity is not something of human origin where everyone is cloned and crystallized as in a cult.

The identity of a man-made religion is in the fact that the group is held together by everyone conforming to a set of man-made rules or traditions. The identity of that which is from God is that everyone is held together because of a common submission to one divine Head who speaks through His word. Unity, therefore, can never exist between men unless all men submit to the authority that extends from heaven to men through the word of God.

The oneness about which Jesus was speaking in John 17:20,21 was in reference to the “divine nature” of which all of us must take part in order to be one man in Christ. *“Through these are given to us exceeding great and precious promises, so that by them you may be **partakers of the divine nature** ...”* (2 Pt 1:4). Partaking of the “divine nature” does not mean that we have assembled under a supposed scriptural name and legalized a particular ceremonial structure of worship. It is having the heart of Christ. To be one as the Father and Son are one in-

volves being so saturated with the word of the Father and Son that when we speak, we speak as the oracles of God (1 Pt 4:11). It is having the mind of Christ. *“Let this mind be in you that as also in Christ Jesus”* (Ph 2:5). It is as Paul wrote, *“For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake so that the life also of Jesus might be manifested in our mortal flesh”* (2 Co 4:11). When the “divine nature” is within us, we love one another in our diversity, and yet, remain the one body of Christ. We are one body because we *“have obeyed from the heart that form of teaching that was delivered”* to us (Rm 6:17). Only God can produce a fellowship as this. It is beyond the ability of man.

C. 1 Corinthians 1:10:

“Now I urge you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Does this statement of Paul infer that those in fellowship with one another must know all the truth and understand its application alike in order to be united? Some have assumed that 1 Corinthians 1:10 is teaching this. But such a concept of unity is humanly impossible. We cannot assume that we understand alike every single passage of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. If we assume that we must in order to be in fellowship with one another, then we would be arrogant, self-righteous, and calling

for an impossibility.

Some have erroneously assumed that having the “same mind” means to have a unified understanding of all New Testament revelation by everyone who is to be in fellowship with one another. But the objectivity of those who would suggest such a claim might be questionable. The same people who make such a claim have tried and failed to understand alike difficult passages within their own ranks. Even the apostle Peter would never make a claim that we all understand difficult passages alike in order to have the “same mind,” and thus, be unified in fellowship. He wrote, *“... as also in all his [Paul’s] letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are **some things hard to understand**, which those who are untaught and unstable distort to their own destruction, as they do also the other Scriptures”* (2 Pt 3:16). Would we question Peter’s fellowship if he did not understand all the revelation that was given through Paul? Would we be so arrogant as to claim that we do have “perfect understanding,” and thus base our fellowship with others on the foundation of our understanding? Do we have a right to disagree with Peter’s interpretation of some of Paul’s “hard-to-understand” statements? We must keep in mind that when we are in a classroom studying the revelation of God, Peter is seated right there beside us as God teaches all of us through revelation. He is raising his hand just as we are in studying those “hard to understand” points of revelation.

The fact is that those who claim to understand everything in the New Testa-

ment, and thus set themselves up as standards of interpretation, are actually doing what Peter stated, “... *those who are untaught and unstable distort to their own destruction, as they do also the other Scriptures.*” If we affirm that others must conform to our understanding of difficult Scriptures, then we are distorting the word of God to our own destruction. We are destroying the unity of the body by forcing on others our own interpretations of difficult passages.

Does Paul assume in 1 Corinthians 1:10 that we all understand all Scripture in the same way? This cannot be the case simply because there are some scriptures over which we will always disagree. We all have our personal opinions concerning the interpretation of difficult passages. It is true that there are some scriptures that are more clear and easy to understand than others. Those scriptures that are less clear cannot be used to establish doctrines that determine fellowship and unity. If we assume that they should, then who is the authority to determine the correct understanding of the passages? Whose interpretation has authority over others? If a particular passage is not clearly understood by a brother, another brother cannot assume that his understanding is correct, and thus, not fellowship the brother who does not clearly understand the passage because he is new in the faith. We cannot use passages over which we find ourselves in disagreement as “proof texts” that determine fellowship. If we do, then we have elevated some teachers as the authoritative interpreters of the Scrip-

tures. Some religious groups have done this, and thus, denominations have written books of enthroned authoritative interpretations of their forefathers in order to preserve their identity. In the Catholic Church this authority is simply placed in the hands of the Pope, whom the Catholics claim to speak by inspiration.

This brings us back to a better understanding of 1 Corinthians 1:10. In the context, **Paul is simply not talking about doctrinal differences.** The context is discussing division among the Corinthians concerning **personalities**, not doctrines. He is rebuking them in the context for calling themselves after certain individuals, when they should be calling themselves after Christ alone (1 Co 1:12,13). This is what he means when he said that they must “speak the same thing.”

The phrase “speak the same thing” is a Greek idiomatic expression. It means “to be on the same side, and not in a civil war.” In the context, our allegiance to Christ is commanded. This is the context of 1 Corinthians 1:10. The Corinthians had all been baptized into a covenant relationship with Christ, and thus, they were all on the same side. They were destroying this relationship by going to “civil war” with one another over personalities. What Paul was commanding was that they restore their allegiance to Christ alone. They must understand that all baptized believers are on the side of Christ, not the side of Paul, Apollos or Cephas. Therefore, it is Christ alone who can bring all believers together into fellowship. This is not the work of man, but the work of our Savior.

D. Ephesians 4:1-6:

“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you that you walk worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience and forbearing one another in love, being eager to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 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 above all and through all and in all.”

The foundational teaching of Paul’s words in Ephesians 4:1-6 is Jesus’ statement in John 17:20,21. The three of the Godhead is the foundation for the oneness of the body. The unity among the three is the basis for the unity among the many members. The disciples of Jesus are in unity simply because of the oneness of the Godhead. *“For by one Spirit were we all baptized into one body”* (1 Co 12:13).

The spiritual qualities that maintain the unity of baptized believers is humility, gentleness, forbearing one another, and an eagerness to stay together as the family of God. In verse 4 of Ephesians 4 Paul moves from the hortatory to the declarative. He moves from telling them **what should be** to telling them **what is**. What is is the fact that there is one body, Spirit, hope, Lord, faith, baptism and God. This is the reason why Christians should be eager to keep the unity of the Spirit.

Ephesians 4:4-6 brings the oneness of the Godhead into the oneness of the

body. The body is one because the Godhead functions as one. There are three statements of truth made in Ephesians 4:4-6 that focus around the Spirit, Lord and Father. There is a triad of truth that is symmetrical, and thus, illustrates the oneness of the body because of the oneness of the Godhead. God, the Father, is above all and in all. Those in whom the Father dwells have come into a covenant relationship with Him through the one faith and one baptism. And it is the one Spirit that dwells in the one body that is called into one hope. Spirit, Lord and Father are one. The one body, hope, faith, and baptism result from the one God. The unity of the one body, therefore, is traced back to the oneness of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Those who accept the unity of the Godhead, respond through faith and baptism to become the one united body of God’s people. The unity of the respondents, therefore, is a testimony to the world that there is one God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Jn 17:20,21).

Now the growth of the body unto maturity is explained by Paul in Ephesians 4:13-16. He explains that the body comes *“to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a complete man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”* (vs 13). It is our oneness in unity that matures with our spiritual growth. This is something that cannot be commanded. It comes naturally as we grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus. It is something into which we grow individually over a period of time. Therefore, it is with matu-

riety that we grow into oneness. When we grow in the “*grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2 Pt 3:18), we grow to think as one. Our bonding with one another in Christ, therefore, is our continued objective as we grow in Christ.

Our oneness in heart is not where we begin, but where we seek to end in Christ. This is the goal that Paul set forth in 1 Corinthians 1:10, and the goal that we seek to realize because of our love for one another (Jn 13:34,35). In order to accomplish this oneness, Paul concluded Ephesians 4 in reference to the bond of peace, “*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ has also forgiven you*” (Ep 4:31,32). There could not have been a better statement made to conclude an exhortation on unity and a description of the fellowship we have in Christ. In all our differences, Ephesians 4:31,32 is us as the body of Christ. It is not that we have arrived at perfection in these areas, but that all who are in Christ have this road map to oneness in fellowship with one another.

E. 2 John 9,10:

“*Whoever goes ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. He who abides in the teaching of Christ, he has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive*

him into your house and do not give him greeting.”

Those who have obeyed the gospel of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (1 Co 15:1-4; Rm 6:3-6), find themselves in the common salvation (Jd 3) that is in Christ. In Christ we are to grow in this unity that comes as a blessing from God (Ep 4:3). Because Christians have been called by the gospel (2 Th 2:14) into fellowship with Christ (1 Co 1:9), they are to work out of their attitudes any spirit of contention or sectarianism. Christians are Christ-centered because of their faith in “the teaching of Christ.” This “teaching of Christ” must dwell in them in order that they continue in the faith. But in the statements of 2 John 9,10, we understand that this teaching can be forfeited, and thus, fellowship with those who have forsaken the “teaching of Christ,” must be broken.

In order to understand what John was writing, we must keep an axiomatic truth in mind: **Whenever something is possible because it depends on the existence of something else, then when the foundational truth ceases to exist, then that which stands on its existence must also cease to exist.** Now apply this truth to John’s context. Our unity in Christ is based on the fact that Jesus is the Christ and the incarnate Son of God. If in one’s thinking Christ ceases to be this, then one must forfeit his unity with those with whom he was blessed with fellowship in the one body. Now we bring this thought into the context of 2 John 9,10 to help us understand the one who was not abiding in the “teaching of Christ.”

Both 1 John and 2 John appear to be written around the same time, though to different recipients. Both deal with a prevailing problem that threatened the church. Consider 1 John 1:2. *“For the life was manifested and we have seen and bear witness and show to you **that eternal life that was with the Father and was manifested to us.**”* Now compare this statement with 2 John 3. *“Grace, mercy and peace will be with us from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ, **the Son of the Father, in truth and love**”* (See also 1 Jn 2:24; 4:1-6,9,14,15; 5:1,5,6,9,10,20). Both passages deal with a rising problem of Gnosticism (antichrists) that would in the 2nd century take about half of the church into apostasy. In 1 John 2:18,22, John continues, *“... And as you have heard that the **antichrist is coming**, even now there are **many antichrists**. By this we know that it is the last hour”* (vs 18). *“Who is a liar? **It is the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ. This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son**”* (vs 22). In 2 John, John follows up on what he said in 1 John. *“For many deceivers have gone out into the world **who do not confess that Jesus Christ is coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist**”* (2 Jn 7; see also 1 Jn 2:19-20,28; 3:7,23,24; 4:1-4; 5:13,20).

John was writing to those who were continuing in that which they had heard from the beginning (1 Jn 1:1-3). He rejoiced over their faithfulness (3 Jn 3,4). However, he warned the recipients of his three letters (1 Jn, 2 Jn, 3 Jn), that there were those who were giving up the foun-

dational truth of the incarnate Christ that they had heard from the beginning. These were the deceivers and antichrists (2 Jn 7). John’s warning to the faithful was, *“Look to yourselves so that you do not lose those things that we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward”* (2 Jn 8). He thus reminds his readers of 2 John that if they lose the teaching concerning who the Christ was, they would also lose God. If they left Christ as the incarnate Son of God, they would leave God. This was exactly what the Gnostic teachers were doing. They were giving up the simple teaching that Jesus was incarnate in the flesh (See Jn 1:14). They were denying the incarnation that Jesus was continuing in the flesh. By denying this teaching of Christ, they were thus giving up God. If they said they were “Christian,” therefore, they were liars. One cannot deny the Son, and at the same time honor the Father. *“He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father **who has sent Him**”* (Jn 5:23). *“**Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father**”* (1 Jn 2:23). And then, *“**Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in him and he in God**”* (1 Jn 4:15).

Honoring the Son as to who He was could not be terminated, and still remain in fellowship with those who continue to believe in the incarnate Son. One could not deny who Jesus was, and yet remain with the Father. Who the Son is establishes the foundation upon which our faith stands and our fellowship continues. If Jesus were not who He said He was, then we are of all men to be pitied.

The context of 2 John is seated in the historical context of those who were denying that Jesus had come in the flesh, was continuing in the flesh, and would come in the flesh. Now we must think on this context in view of the fact that so many people completely miss the point of understanding 2 John 9,10. 2 John 9,10 is not talking about someone with whom we might have a disagreement of interpretation over a difficult passage, or one who does not conform to our “selected theology.” It is not talking about differences of opinions. It is not talking about differences of methodologies. To use 2 John 9,10 as the foundation upon which to reject, or not even eat with those Christ-believers with whom we have some differences in interpretation, is a gross twisting of the meaning of what John was saying. We certainly know of no one in Christendom today who denies that Jesus came in the flesh. It would be just as wrong to use this passage to withdraw from some brother with whom we might disagree as it would be to deny the truth that Jesus was the Son of God who came in the flesh.

We must keep in mind that 2 John 9,10 is talking about the incarnate Son of God in view of His present and future existence. This is “the teaching of Christ.” We must keep in mind that the word “teaching” is singular, not plural. Therefore, reference is not to a codified outline of teachings, but to a teaching. And that teaching is that Jesus is the Christ, the incarnate Son of God.

F. Romans 16:17,18:

“Now I urge you, brethren, mark those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching you have learned, and turn away from them. For they who are such serve not our Lord Christ but their own belly” Maybe we should follow this statement with Proverbs 22:10. *“Cast out the scoffer and contention will leave, yes, strife and reproach will cease.”*

The question is, “Who are the ones to be marked?” The answer, “Those who cause divisions and offenses.” But who are these? Verse 18 answers this question. These are those who *“serve not our Lord Christ but their own belly.”* This is not the brother who has a different view concerning cups at the communion, differences concerning the final coming of Christ, assembly order, or some other matters in reference to opinions or methodologies. Those who are to be marked are those who are doing what Paul explained in Galatians 4:17. *“They zealously recruit you, but not for good. Yes, they want to exclude you so that you might be zealous for them.”* Or, consider also his exhortation to the Ephesian elders. *“For I know this, that after my departure grievous wolves will enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from your own selves will men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves”* (At 20:29,30). Those to be marked are those who recruit others for the sake of having

a following. In doing such, they develop sects among the believers. In the Galatian context it was the legalistic judaizing teachers who were seeking to bind where God had not bound, and thus bring into the bondage of meritorious works those who had been set free in Christ (See Gl 5:1). In the context of the Ephesian elders it was those who sought to use their work as a shepherd to gain a following. In both case, reference was to those who sought to gain a following. Those who recruit and seek a following may have used a particular set of opinions to identify their schism. But in doing this they are drawing away disciples after themselves, and thus, they are to be marked. This has no reference to working in areas of freedom. The context of these scriptures was in drawing away disciples unto either personalities or doctrines that they would bind where God had not bound.

Those in the context of Romans 16 were those who had a sectarian spirit. They wanted to create their own party. The context of Romans 16:17,18, therefore, is in reference to personalities, not some doctrine. And since the entire book of Romans is about being set free by God's grace, then Romans 16:17,18 would be in reference to those individuals who sought to bind where God had not bound in order to draw disciples away after themselves.

But view Romans 16:17,18 also from a situation in which the minority sometimes finds themselves. The same principle applies. Suppose a minority within a group seek to function in the

realm of freedom to work in a different way than the majority. They have the freedom to so work, but usually draw the condemnation of the majority because they are not walking according to the norm of the majority. In this case, the majority are violating the principle of Romans 16:17,18 because they are binding in the area of freedom those things that are simply the tradition of the majority.

Whenever the majority seeks to bind norms that are in the area of opinion, and thus in the area of freedom, they have identified themselves as a religious denomination, and thus, they have become exclusive in their fellowship. It is in this way that denominations are formed. The majority seek to infringe on the freedom of the minority through social pressure that they conform to the function of the majority. They do this by threatening disfellowship, or more subtly, by ignoring those with whom they disagree in areas of freedom of function. By their actions they have defined themselves as a sect that is governed by an unwritten code of function. The majority are the ones who have thus caused the division, not the minority who are working in the area of freedom in Christ.

This is the contextual meaning of what Paul discussed concerning the judaizing teachers who were binding circumcision as a test of fellowship (See At 15:1,2). Of these brethren who would bind their matters of opinion (circumcision) on the Gentile brethren, Paul stated—and read this very carefully—*“I could wish that those who are troubling you [those binding circumcision] would*

cut themselves off from you. For you, brethren, have been called to liberty ..." (Gl 5:12,13). If you were a Gentile brother living in Jerusalem during the early days of the church, you would be in the minority. You would have been compelled to be circumcised, that is, to conform to the norms of the majority. But Paul would never stand for such, that is,

the majority seeking to compel the minority to conform to the wishes of the majority in the realm of liberty. Such he said on one occasion when he took Titus, a Gentile, on a trip to Jerusalem. "*But not even Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised*" (Gl 2:3).

Chapter 8

Receive One Another

We have heard some interesting ideas throughout the years concerning what is "biblical." We were once confronted by a delegation who disagreed with baptizing people in a stationary baptism wherein there was no running water. We have heard of others proclaiming that clapping hands in assembly somehow brought people into some hypnotic trance. We have heard of those who would not partake of the fruit of the vine until it set out at room temperature long enough to ferment into wine, and thus, become "biblical." And we have seen those who believe that only one cup can be used to serve the fruit of vine, even to a massive audience of hundreds of people. This list could go on. And this brings us to the context of Romans 14. Paul's teaching in this one chapter should encourage us to be cautious about drawing circles of fellowship, or at least to see opportunities where we can show love by being patient with those with whom we disagree. The Holy Spirit's instructions in this chapter give us some

principle guidelines by which to maintain the unity of the Spirit in our diversity, while at the same time we respect one another's uniqueness.

A. Unity in diversity:

This is a real life principle that teaches that there can be unity, though there is diversity of thought and behavior in areas of freedom. This "unity in diversity" must exist between the mature (strong) brother and the weak brother. Paul assumes, therefore, that there are levels of maturity that the strong must understand in order to maintain unity with the weak brother who is growing in the faith. In the following chapter 15 Paul summed up his principle for unity. "... so that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, **accept one another as Christ also accepted you to the glory of God**" (Rm 15:6,7). Paul's admonition in Romans 14, therefore, is, "*Do not let him who eats despise him who*

does not eat. And do not let him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has received him" (vs 3). The first principle to understand in establishing unity is that God has received both parties who may be involved in a controversy. In our disagreements as brethren, we must never forget that both our names are written in heaven.

In the fellowship of the saints there are the mature brothers and there are those who are young brothers who are new converts. Each must receive one another in order to preserve the unity with which they were blessed upon their baptism into Christ. God accepted them with all their baggage, therefore they must accept one another. Our fellowship with one another does not mean that everyone is mature spiritually. And it does not mean that everyone is mature in understanding that which is beyond fundamental teachings. It does mean that we must be lovingly patient with one another as we grow together in Christ.

In the context of Romans 14 the vegetarian brother was wrong in thinking that it was wrong to eat meat. However, to him personally it was wrong to eat meat because he still associated idol worship with the meat that was sold in the market. If he ate the meat, he would sin (Rm 14:23). In order to help this brother overcome his thinking in reference to food, Paul instructed, "*I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself*" (vs 14). The strong brother was to exercise patience until the weak brother came to this conclusion.

Now if the vegetarian was one who had been long in the faith, then this would be an entirely different context of instruction. Paul would be writing as to the Galatian judaizing teachers who were making matters of opinion matters of salvation. They were making matters of opinion salvational by binding their opinions as law. If one who had been in the faith for several years would seek to bind vegetarianism as a law, then Paul would have written judgment concerning him because he would have been binding in the realm of freedom in which Christians live in Christ (Gl 5:1).

B. The strong and the weak:

In the context of Romans 14 the weak were the vegetarian brethren who thought that they were to abstain from anything that was associated with idol worship (vs 2,6). Some esteemed one day above another (vs 5,6). In these things they were somewhat contentious (vs 6,15,20,21,23), and thus, judgmental of the strong (vs 2,3,10). But Paul's exhortation to the weak was that they not judge the strong (vs 3,4,10). They were to receive them (vs 3,7), and thus not bind on the strong their misconceptions (vs 2,3). If the weak sought to bind on the church vegetarianism, then they would be binding where God had not bound.

The strong in Romans 14 were the mature brethren who knew that there was nothing in what one ate, nor any significance to a particular day of the week. The strong knew that there was nothing in what the weak believed concerning the

eating of meat (vs 2,5). But they had a responsibility to the weak in reference to maintaining fellowship with them. They were to receive the weak (vs 1; 15:7). They were to avoid any divisions in reference to their fellowship with the weak (vs 1). They were not to despise the weak because of their beliefs in reference to vegetarianism (vs 10). Though the strong were free from the scruples of eating meat, they could not bind on the weak their freedom to eat meat. The weak could not bind their vegetarianism on the strong, and the strong could not bind their freedom to eat all foods. Both parties were exhorted to guard one another's freedom in Christ until the weak grew out of associating meat with idols and any religious significance in reference to particular days.

C. Teach what is right:

Another important lesson we learn from Romans 14 is that the truth must always be taught. Regardless of the inhibitions of the weak brother in reference to eating meat, the truth must be taught that God created all foods to be eaten (vs 14). The truth must be taught that the kingdom of God is not food and drink, *“but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”* (vs 17). In the context of Paul's instructions to the weak, he assumed that the weak would eventually grow out of their scruples in reference to eating meat. In their growth, they would soon eat meat without any reference to idols. But until that time, Paul never instructed the brethren to divide into the

“meat eating church” and the “vegetarian church.”

D. The responsibility of the strong:

It is the responsibility of the strong to create an atmosphere wherein the weak can grow without being intimidated to do that which is against his conscience. Since the weak can only abstain from that which goes against his conscience, then it is the strong brother who has two options. He can abstain or he can eat. He has freedom to do both. But until the weak grows out of his feelings that eating meat reminds him of things offered to idols, he must abstain. The strong is truly free, but he is not free to encourage the weak to eat that which is against his conscience. If he does, then he is not walking in love. And if the weak eats by the encouragement of the strong, then the weak is not walking by faith (vs 23). He is thus encouraged by the strong to sin against his conscience. The strong must restrain their freedom for the sake of the weak, and by doing such, they walk in love (vs 15; see 1 Co 9:21).

Paul is not discussing in Romans 14 the whims of those who are supposed to be strong. This matter is between the strong in the faith and the new convert, not those who have been in the faith for years. If one has been in the faith for many years, then he is the strong. He may disagree with another strong brother who is walking in an area of freedom. But because he may not agree with a particular point of opinion of another strong brother who is exercising his freedom in

Christ, does not give him the right to intimidate or speak against the actions of another strong brother who is exercising his freedom to do things differently. If he does, then he is cantankerous, and thus has a spirit of contention. A strong brother who speaks against the actions

of another strong brother who is walking in the rights of his freedom is a brother who must be approached for his spirit of contention. This is when the church must follow the mandate of Titus 3:10. *“Reject a factious man after the first and second admonition.”*

Chapter 9

Free In Christ

There is a fundamental principle of unity taught by Paul in Galatians 5:1. *“Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage.”* Maintaining the unity of the Spirit is seated in the principle that Christians are free from meritorious law-keeping and works. Since Christians have also been freed from the doctrines and commandments of men, they are mandated by Paul in the preceding statement to guard their freedom. It is incumbent on all Christians to help one another to remain free from anything that would bring them into the bondage of men.

When we focus on freedom, we are focusing on keeping our minds on Christ and His word, and not on the religious restrictions and laws that come from man. Freedom, therefore, is not from Christ, but from man. We are free from man in order to obey Christ. Any who would authoritatively bind religious man-made laws on God’s people are stealing away their loyalty to Christ alone. We have been set free from the confinement of the laws of man in order to submit totally to the law of Christ. Any religious author-

ity on earth that would supplant the authority of Christ, weakens our focus on Christ. Any religious code of laws that we would bind on ourselves, weakens our total commitment to the word of Christ as the foundation of our faith.

Maintaining the unity of the Spirit is impossible for those who have submitted themselves to the religious laws of man. It is for this reason that God gave us the Bible. The Bible is our freedom charter. It is the standard of judgment by which we accept others into fellowship. We are not left to ourselves to determine standards of fellowship. That responsibility has been assumed by Jesus (Jn 12:48). Therefore, any standard of authority for fellowship other than the word of Christ, is a standard that has inherent division.

Freedom and a sectarian attitude oppose one another. The sectarian is legalistic in his beliefs, and thus his fear is that someone will discover an inconsistency in his theology. The sectarian fears freedom of thought, for freedom releases one from the confines of that which identifies a sect. Those who have been confined in the bondage of sectarianism are

kept there because some forefathers wrote a creed book to guarantee their legacy and identity as a denomination. It is even more difficult to escape the bondage of those denominations that have written no creed of identity. Such groups are often perpetuated on the basis of conducting regular meetings wherein the marks of identity of the group are rehearsed and adherents are continually brought into conformity by the intimidation of the whole. Whether written or unwritten, the creeds of men are contrary to the freedom that every believer has in Christ.

Freedom in Christ does not assume that we are free to believe and practice whatever we so choose. There are beliefs and practices that are “*contrary to sound teaching*” (1 Tm 1:10). It is as Paul warned Timothy, “*Hold fast the pattern of sound words that you have heard from me, in faith and love that is in Christ*” (2 Tm 1:13). When one is baptized into Christ, he is baptized into a realm of freedom wherein he is released from the bondage of man-made religious laws. He has been born into a realm of instruction by the word of Christ (Jn 12:48). Paul warned Timothy that a time would come when those who had come into Christ would no longer desire to continue in a faith that was under the direction of Jesus. “*For the time will come when they will not endure sound teaching. But to suit their itching ears, they will surround themselves with teachers who will agree with their own desires*” (2 Tm 4:3). Elders have the specific responsibility of guarding the church

against such apostasy, for an elder must hold “*fast the faithful word as he has been taught, so that he may be able by sound teaching both to exhort and refute those who contradict*” (Ti 1:9).

The word of Christ sets us free from the bondage of man-made religiosity. It is for this reason, therefore, that every disciple must school himself in the word of God. In order to appreciate and maintain our freedom in Christ it is absolutely necessary that every disciple be a noble-minded student of the word of God (See At 17:11; 2 Tm 2:15). Those who are ignorant of the word of God, therefore, are not free. They are in bondage to their own religiosity. It is in ignorance of the word of God that thousands of churches have resorted to either favorite personalities or concert assemblies in order to maintain the attraction of the people. Adherents to such churches are not truly free. They may feel good after their assemblies, but they are not free. It is only the truth that will set one free from himself (Jn 8:32). And if one is ignorant of the truth of God, he is not free. Churches that do not encourage Bible study can never be free. They will always be in bondage to their own religiosity, and thus, divided in fellowship from all other groups that are doomed to the same destiny of division.

Our freedom in fellowship, therefore, is based on the word of God. This does not mean that we agree on every detail of Scripture. Unity does not depend on a uniformity of interpretation of every verse of Scripture. Those who would seek unity by cloning interpreta-

tions have simply established another denomination. Our unity comes as a gift of God upon our baptism into Christ. Unity can be maintained between covenanted disciples only when each disciple gives other disciples the freedom to approach the Scriptures as an individual interpreter.

No person has a right to be the final authority in opinions and interpretations. No one group has the right to establish the correct code of law. When free individuals are given the right to approach the Scriptures from their own understanding, then we are set free from one another. We are thus guarded from being brought into the bondage of one another's opinions and interpretations. Being a teacher of the word of God, therefore, does not assume that one has authority over another to bind where God has not

bound. Since all authority rests with Christ, then we are simply communicators of His authority that comes through His word. When we are teachers of His word, it is our task to keep Jesus on His throne in the lives of our students. Our vast knowledge of His word as a long-time student does not give us a place of authority among the disciples. If we do not maintain this attitude as a teacher of the word, we will bring our students again into bondage, our bondage.

If we give one another freedom, we protect one another from intimidation. We protect one another from authorities that might rise up among us to steal sheep away from Jesus (At 20:30). But if we keep one another focused on Jesus through His word, then our fellowship is strong, for our Head is unmovable.

Chapter 10

Fellowship Versus Ecumenism

Ecumenism is the belief that as long as one believes in Jesus, he is a part of the "universal church," and thus, in a saved relationship with God. Regardless of what one believes in reference to conditions for salvation and "the truth," one is fine with God. There is a strong ecumenical movement among religious people today. We would commend the rise in religiosity, but religiosity without truth is void of our desired goal of true fellowship and unity that is based on the word of God.

Embedded within ecumenism are

the seeds of its own destruction. If there is no absolute truth to which men must conform in order to be obedient unto God, then there is no revelation from God that would demand our obedience and fellowship with one another. The answer for unity among all religious people is not to scrap the Bible. It is to seek out God's standard by which we can come together as His one family.

Ecumenism teaches that unity of all believers is based on the desire of all believers to simply have a mutual fellowship with one another. But this is decep-

tive. **Unity among believers cannot originate from the believers themselves.** It originates from God. Jesus' prayer that they all be one, "*even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You*" establishes the foundation for true unity. Unity among believers must always originate from the Father and Son. They are one in all, and thus, that "even as" foundation must be communicated to those who seek to be in fellowship with one another. This is the concept that John sought to convey to us. "*That which we have seen and heard we declare to you so that you also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ*" (1 Jn 1:3). Anytime men come together to create an artificial unity that is hammered out at a table of negotiation, then we know that the result is a man-made union based on compromises. Only the oneness of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the basis upon which true unity is made. And since this is true, all who would be Christians, and subsequently one in Christ, must assume that God has revealed His standards for unity and fellowship among His people.

Those who would support an ecumenical solution for religious division miss the point. The foundation for unity is beyond the inventions of religious people. It involves the complete truth of Christ and a total focus on His word. True fellowship and unity is the joyous serendipity of those who have been obedient to the gospel, and thus the obedient feast on the revelation from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

When people obsess over the word of God, they emerge from it in obedience to the gospel. Every person anywhere in the world who is like-minded in study and obedience comes forth from the waters of baptism to be added to the one universal church of Christ (At 2:47). This is not something that is orchestrated by man. It is a God thing that is produced by His word. And thus, it is the word of God that produces true unity. It is the word of God that is the effective medium through which unity among all believers is realized. This is the thought of Peter when he stated, "*... having been born again, not by perishable seed, but imperishable, by the word of God that lives and abides*" (1 Pt 1:23).

Peter also wrote, "*... to those who have obtained a like precious faith with us through the righteousness of God and our Savior Jesus Christ*" (2 Pt 1:1). It is the word of God that produces this faith (Rm 10:17). Therefore, it is the faith first, and then the unity. There is no unity where there is no like precious faith. And thus, there can be no true unity unless there is a common acceptance of the divinely inspired word of Christ that produces faith. Men are drawn together in unity when they are first drawn to Christ together through His word. Any other concept of "unity" is only union that has been negotiated by religious people.

Those who seek to establish ecumenical unions are seeking to usher into Christendom a false premise upon which to establish unity. Their erroneous assumption is that believers can be united if they hold common forms and beliefs

in religion. Sharing common religious formalities is believed to be sufficient grounds upon which to be “united.” But the fallacy of such thinking is obvious. We share certain beliefs with the Jews, but the Christian is not in fellowship with Jews. Christians share certain beliefs with Muslims, but Christians are not in fellowship with Muslims. Christians share religiosity with Hindus and idol worshipers, but this does not bring Christians into fellowship with such religions. Must we be reminded of what Paul wrote to the former idol worshipers of Corinth. *“And what agreement has Christ with Belial? Or what part has he who believes with an unbeliever? And what union has the temple of God with idols? (2 Co 6:15,16).* If unity in fellowship is simply based on common points of religious contact, then we must scrap the word of God. We must throw our common faith out the window. If we accept Belial into our fellowship, then the Bible must go.

If the word of God is our foundation for faith, then only on this word must our fellowship be established. Any other foundation for fellowship is man-made, and thus false. It is a fellowship that is political and doomed to destruction. It is for this reason that there can never be any real fellowship between a Bible-believing Christian and those who have no respect for the word of God. No believer has any part in fellowshiping a religious unbeliever whose foundation for faith is anything other than the word of Christ. Fellowship in Christ is not an open-door policy to allow every religious person in. Jesus is the door to fellowship with His

fold, and the way in is through His instructions (See Jn 10:1-21).

We must keep in mind that **things equal to the same thing are equal to one another. But those things that have some common features, but features that identify themselves as different from others, are not the same thing.**

In the world of Protestantism there are many religious groups. Among all the different groups are some common features. But there are also those features that identify each group as unique and different from the others. Unity is never established on the basis of bringing these groups together on the foundation of their common features. Each group will continue to fight for their peculiar identity by maintaining their unique names and doctrines. Their union in a “council of churches” will only be an artificial “unity” that is based on a political acceptance of one another. No one group in the council seeks to return to the word of God as the foundation for faith. In fact, the opposite is true. They entrench their marks of identity in order not to be lost in the maze of the religious organization.

Some have been critical of those who seek a restoration to the word-based faith of Jesus Christ and the authority of the Scriptures. They consider that the differences that exist among restorationists invalidates the restoration plea. Or, they view the restorationist as hypocritical in calling people out of denominational division into a movement that has its own denominational division. The critic has missed the point.

Those who call for restoration are not calling people to religious cloning. They are calling people back to the authority of the word of God, with freedom in the area of opinions and interpretation. Calling people back to the authority of the word of God means calling people back to fundamental truths that need no interpretation. Once one returns to these fundamental truths, then there is freedom to study the word of God the rest of our lives without being intimidated by traditions or some religious heritage. It is freedom to restore Bible classes where Bible students can come together in an atmosphere of free thinking, without the pressure to defend some religious tradition or heritage.

What history has revealed is that there are thousands of people throughout the world who find the plea for res-

toration refreshing. Thousands have throughout history escaped the bondage of a protestant religion of creeds and power structures in order to find freedom in Christ. They have turned from catechisms and creed books in order to enjoy the liberty that comes from being focused exclusively on Christ and His word. Thus the plea of the restorationist has worked effectively. The plea for restoration has been effective because it is not a plea to “start another church.” It has been effective because millions have discovered that the church was already started two thousand years ago. And if one wanted to be added to this church of God’s people today, then he simply needs to believe and obey the gospel. No schooling in catechisms and creed books are required.

Chapter 11

The Rise Of The Party

When we read the description of those with whom Christians are not to fellowship, an interesting picture develops. Paul described those who are to be marked as serving “*their own belly*” (Rm 16:18). These are “*factious*” in their relationships with other disciples (Ti 3:10). Paul refers to factious people as “perverted” and “self-condemned” (Ti 3:11). Some disciples walk disorderly (2 Th 3:6). They are busybodies, going about living off the wealth of others (2 Th 3:11). They have gone beyond the teaching of Christ (2 Jn 9,10). They practice “evil

deeds” (2 Jn 11). These are deceivers and liars (2 Jn 7). Now is this a description of the local preacher down the street who is preaching for a church against whom we would not dare seek to associate in any manner? Is this a description of our neighbor across the street with whom we have had many discussions over the Bible, and yet have not been able to come to an agreement? Please think on these things. We often go to war with those about whom the Bible speaks nothing concerning the “error” of their way.

There is certainly an appeal in the

Scriptures that we contend earnestly for the faith that is based on the truth of God (Jd 3). But sometimes our field of contention is outside the realm of Scripture where we should be contending. Instead of lumping everyone with whom we disagree into the crowd of these about whom the Scriptures define as “false teachers,” it would be best that we should be a little more patient with one another.

We must keep in mind that our task is not to convert someone to our views on opinion, but to Christ and the authority of His word. And in working with others in reference to the Bible, there are some things that are perfectly clear that are made in declarative statements and direct commands. Over such things no opinion of interpretation is to be made. But there are other areas that are not so clear. Therefore, we must work cautiously in areas of opinion where interpretation is needed. Some things may be clear to us, but not clear to others. And simply because they are clear to us does not make us the authoritative interpreter for others. For this reason we cannot make conditions for fellowship those teachings that are based on passages that are not clear, but need more time for study in order to understand. This is true simply because we have no inspired interpreters among us who can be our authorities for interpretation.

Now in view of the fact that there are scriptures that are not clearly understood, a religious phenomenon arises that often denominates believers into different theological camps, each conforming to the accepted interpretation of the camp

as a whole. In the development of these camps around their “selected theology,” the group of adherents have agreed to overlook certain disagreements over opinions and interpretations in order to develop their party. At the same time, when the selected doctrines develop in the group in order to identify the party as unique and distinct from all other parties that they conclude are in error, then there is strict conformity to the accepted identifying doctrines of the party by all adherents. When everyone chooses to conform to the agreed doctrines, then unity is supposed to prevail. What has happened in the evolution of this distinct party is that a legal adherence to the selected doctrines of the party have become the standard by which other parties are judged to be in error. If others do not conform to the selected doctrines of the party that assumes to have “the truth,” then they are judged to be in error. At the same time, the party that has championed its selected doctrines has become a denomination itself because of its theology that has resulted from enshrining selected opinions and interpretations. As a result, they have separated themselves from everyone else.

What this scenario produces is an embedded basis for division within the group. Our desire for unity is misled because we have sought to orchestrate unity around agreed upon opinions and interpretations that we champion as marks of identity of the church. In order to have unity we convince ourselves that we must all conform to the accepted theology (opinions and interpretations) of

the party, while rejecting those who might have come to other conclusions in reference to our proof texts. Our dilemma is that we seek to have unity wherein our conscience is governed by all the accepted codes that identify our particular party. Since we have a host of scriptures under every point of the codified outline that identifies the uniqueness of our party, we are at ease in our conscience.

The problem with this theological mentality is that we have always had disagreements over understanding certain scriptures on our outlines. But since we have agreed to conform to a selected few points of scripture that are supposed to have been interpreted correctly by our forefathers, then we have taken it upon ourselves to be “defenders of the faith,” not knowing that we are actually defending our forefathers’ interpretation of those passages that supposedly validated the unique nature of the church. The old and established principle of Bible study that says “all familiar passages must be reexamined,” is thrown out the door.

Now that we have consciously conformed to our “pattern” of “sound doctrine,” we have bred factionalism into the ranks of our own party. Any who would not conform to the accepted interpretations of the proof texts of our outline that supposedly identifies the true church that Christ established are criticized and ostracized. Free thinking is terminated, and thus, a legal religiosity that is void of the spirit of Christ is sacrificed for legal conformity to the accepted doctrines of identity. What we have theologically maneuvered to be the foundation for unity has

now become the occasion for division.

Here is where we often go wrong in the initial stages in the evolution of our isolation. If we assume that our intellectual agreement on certain opinions and interpretations to which we all must conform is the foundation for our unity, then we have gone wrong in two areas. First, **we have erroneously assumed that our human intellect has the ability to determine a theological outline of opinions and interpretations upon which we can identify ourselves as a unique body.** In developing this outline, we add to the fundamentals that truly identify the church. Nevertheless, by elevating minor points of opinion and interpretation that we suppose must also identify the church, we have produced an identity of the church that is the foundation upon which division is rife. But in order to reassure ourselves that our outline is correct, we assume we have theological “scholars” among us in whom we have vested authority to determine what are the correct minors. However, these minor points are based on texts over which there is often disagreement, even among the ranks of the “scholars.” But because we have agreed on our selected interpretations that would supposedly produce unity and identify us as the church, we have confused fundamental teaching with opinionated interpretations. Our outline of the church is rife with points of disagreement, and thus, we go to war with one another over minor points of opinion. We major in theological minors. What theological humbugs we are.

Secondly, **we have wrongly as-**

sumed that every believer will come to the same conclusions at the same time when he comes to Christ. But this is erroneous thinking because babes in Christ have a lifetime to study the word of God. Only those things that are fundamental to salvation are clearly and immediately understood, and thus establish our fellowship with the people of God. As new babes in Christ continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ (2 Pt 3:18), they often come to different conclusions in their studies because of their different religious backgrounds or amount of study of the word of God. After the fundamentals for salvation are known and obeyed, different conclusions in Bible study cannot be grounds for disfellowship since all disciples are in a process of growing in the grace and **knowledge of Christ** (2 Pt 3:18). Only when one comes to a conclusion that violates plainly stated truth are there grounds for “marking” and “rejecting.”

As we study the New Testament, we will continue to come to some different conclusions in understanding various passages. We seek to acquire as much knowledge of the word of God as possible. However, acquiring this knowledge is a process. It takes time. It takes a lifetime of study, and thus our learning is progressive. **Nowhere in the New Testament is it revealed that we must come to a certain knowledge of the word of God at a specific time in order to be brought into the fellowship of the church.** Therefore, love must prevail between individual interpreters on

their journey to study the word of God. It would be against the principle of forbearing one another on this journey of learning if we seek to criticize and ostracize continually those with whom we may disagree along the journey. Validating ourselves as faithful Christians while we criticize and ostracize others over matters of opinion is certainly not Christian.

The road map of our journey (the word of God) will not lead us in different directions, directions that lead us to different theological camps, or denominations. The road map is correct. It was never written to produce disunity. Men produce disunity, not the word of God.

What must continually be brought into check is our attitude and the methods by which we come to our conclusions in our study of the word of God. If our methods of study produce factionalism among the sojourners, then we must bring into question our methods of Bible study and our attitudes. The Holy Spirit never inspired the word to be written in a manner that would produce division among sincere Bible students. If division occurs, then we must question ourselves and our methods of study, not the Holy Spirit. And before we question our methods of study, we must first check our attitudes to make sure we have a forbearing heart (Ph 4:5).

In our struggles to agree along our journey of understanding the word of God, we must be cautioned about throwing around the term “false teacher.” This term was used in the New Testament in reference to those who denied either the

resurrection or incarnation and sonship of Jesus. This is far from the beliefs of those with whom we might disagree on matters of opinion and interpretation. One is not a false teacher who has disagreed with our selected interpretations on unclear passages that we have used to identify our particular party.

What we must understand is that in a Christendom of disagreements, every conclusion cannot be true. When we come to different conclusions in matters of opinion over unclear passages, one of us has to be wrong. But we might never know who has the wrong conclusion because it is a matter of opinion. The problem comes when we move opinion into law by allowing the “scholars” among us to be the authoritative interpreters to whom we have given the right to canonize their particular interpretations. When we do this we have set up little popes who roam the land, or establish their schools in order to train conformists to continue their selected theology.

In all the trumpeting about who has come to the correct conclusion in all matters, we have ignored one very important point. Can a brother be wrong in his conclusions of study and yet be saved? The legalist who trumpets conformity to the selected agreements of doctrine must answer no. But this assumes he has come to a correct conclusion in all matters of study. He is thus arrogant, assuming that his study of the Scriptures has given him the right to reign over those novice students of the word who have just begun their lifetime of study.

If anyone assumes that we cannot

be saved because we have come to some wrong conclusions over matters of opinion, then no one can be saved. No one can be saved because there is no one alive who knows all the truth of all scriptures in all the Bible. Now if we can be saved with our false conclusions on certain scriptures, then we must deal with another challenge. What erroneous conclusions in our personal study of the Bible can be maintained, and yet we be saved? If there are specific doctrines that we have developed that would bar us from heaven, then we have burdened ourselves with the responsibility of identifying those doctrines and proclaiming them as fundamental to our salvation. Imagine the emotional turmoil into which we have now cast ourselves?

If we feel that this responsibility is too great, then what we often do is turn this responsibility over to another. We often hear the statement, “Let me ask my pastor.” This person has given his brains over to another because he will not deal with the word of God himself and the supposed consequences of his conclusions. Not only has he centered the existence of his party around the pastor, he has revealed that his approach to the word of God is insufficient. He has refused to take ownership of the conclusions of his own Bible study. Asking the pastor may be justified if one wants a second opinion on matters of interpretation. But when we are dealing with fundamental matters of salvation, one need not ask for another person’s opinion. What is necessary for salvation is stated clearly right there in the Bible. Concerning these sal-

vational matters we must always keep in mind what Paul wrote. *“Therefore, when you read you can understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ”* (Ep 3:4). Paul instructed no person to “ask his pastor.” Those things that are fundamental

and necessary for salvation are clearly understood. One usually wants to ask his pastor only when he is confronted with fundamentals that contradict his previous claims to salvation.

Chapter 12

Avoiding Popes

If we assume that unity in fellowship can be achieved only through a uniform conformity to an established man-made creed of identity that is agreed upon by all adherents, then there must of necessity be authorities within our party to proclaim what opinions or interpretations are authoritative. Some religious groups write down their deduced opinions and interpretations, and thus a creed book becomes the authority. Other groups do not write their accepted deductions down, and thus establish through history living authorities to whom the adherents must go in consultation as to what is the correct teaching on all matters. Some establish schools to which they call all adherents in order that young minds be indoctrinated with the selected and accepted theology for the preservation of the heritage of the party. In the independent church movements, the “ask-my-pastor” thinking has set up the local preacher as the final authority. Regardless of where the authority rests, conformity to a selected theology of opinions and interpretations apart from fundamental and salvational teachings, must have a human final authority if the party seeks

to maintain its identity as a unique group. This is of necessity true since all of us within our chosen parties have come to different conclusions on certain passages within our parties.

The problem we often develop is that we make “doctrinal correctness” in every area of study a condition upon which we are church and upon which our salvation depends. In reference to church, we identify unity upon the basis of everyone conforming to a codified selection of teachings that have been determined by previous “authorities” among us. We fellowship only those who conform to the identity that our “authorities” have developed in order that we all “speak the same thing.”

We must affirm that there is absolute truth that we would call fundamental and necessary for our salvation. To these fundamentals all must comply for salvational purposes. However, we must also conclude that **we do not absolutely know all truth**. As we grow throughout our lifetime of Bible study, we come to know and understand more truth that is revealed in the Bible. However, we must keep in mind that nowhere in the Bible

is there a specific time established in the journey of Christian growth that we must come to a knowledge of all truth that would validate our salvation, and thus our fellowship with one another. And since there is no point in time demanded, then we must assume that we should be patient with one another as we grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus.

After obedience to the gospel, every individual is at a different level of knowledge of the Scriptures. As the erroneous conclusions of our past religious confusion are dispelled through personal Bible studies, who are we to judge one another concerning fellowship? All of us are on this journey of discovery. Must we not accept one another as we grow? Or must we establish “new converts classes” in order to indoctrinate one another as soon as possible in order to guarantee that no one passes from life with a “half” knowledge of the “selected theology” of “our” church? At which stage of knowledge must we allow others into our fellowship? Who determines that we know enough truth after our obedience to the gospel to guarantee that we are saved with our erroneous conclusions that we have not yet dispelled through continued Bible study?

Our erroneous conclusion that there is set of doctrinal conclusions to which we have all agreed, which doctrines must be known and adhered to in order to guarantee salvation, has moved us to twist some scriptures out of their context. For example, as previously mentioned, in the context of 2 John the apostle was writing concerning those who denied the in-

carnation and sonship of Jesus. But in our eagerness to conform others to our conclusions, we have twisted the phrase “teaching of Christ” to refer to our code of opinionated conclusions. John was not referring to a code of teachings, but to the teaching of the deity and incarnation of the Son of God. We have subsequently betrayed our erroneous interpretation of this passage by rejecting those who have not conformed to our code of conclusions that identify our particular party.

So we might find ourselves in a situation of division or diversity. And we might understand how we got to where we are. But the question is how to deliver ourselves from our predicament in order to establish the fellowship about which God intended we have in Christ. The following are some points of beginning:

A. Recognize that we are human, but sincere:

The first thing to do is to admit that we are human and we are not where God would have us be. This is in the area of spirituality and knowledge of His word. People have convictions and want to do that which is right. However, we must not be so arrogant as to think that we are right on all matters, and thus, think that everyone must come to where we are before there can be fellowship and unity. Only the arrogant believe that they have all the answers and that their code of deductions is the measure by which everyone must be aligned before there is fellowship and unity.

We must remember that Christianity is a faith of growth. Consider these statements: “...until we all come to the unity of the faith ... to a complete man ...” (Ep 4:13). “... we may grow up into Him in all things ...” (Ep 4:15). “... causes growth of the body ...” (Ep 4:16). “But grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord ...” (2 Pt 3:18). Get the point. In this process of growth after obedience to the gospel, it is incumbent on all disciples of Jesus to be patient with one another. We must be patient with our wrong conclusions and misunderstandings of the Scriptures as we learn to handle correctly the word of God (2 Tm 2:15).

B. Honor the conscience of others:

We adhere to our accepted code of deductions because we seek to conscientiously do what we think is right. We seek to please God, and thus we establish our legal code of doctrine in order to do that which we think is right in the eyes of God. However, we must remember that legal codes promote division and exclusions. They hinder us from receiving one another with all our wrong conclusions and novice understanding of the word of God. Notice the principle that was given by Paul after discussing the division in the Roman church over eating meat and the religious vegetarianism of new Christians. “Therefore, **accept one another as Christ also accepted you to the glory of God**” (Rm 15:7). We may not agree, but we must agree to accept one another even as Christ also accepted

us in all erroneous beliefs. We cannot demand uniformity in belief concerning matters of opinion, but we can accept one another in our differences. If we understand that Jesus accepted us in all our fallibility, then we can accept one another with all of what we might consider incorrect interpretations and deductions of the Scriptures. Even with our lack of knowledge of all truth, Jesus still accepts us. We must expect no less of one another.

C. Accept one another on the basis of salvational fundamentals:

We can maintain our fellowship and oneness when we reconsider again the fundamental teachings to which we initially responded that brought us together into Christ. We need to focus again on our understanding of being justified by the blood of Jesus. We need to rehearse our faith in the gospel event of Jesus’ death for our sins, His burial, and His resurrection for our hope (1 Co 15:1-4). Regardless of our differences in opinions and methodologies of work after our obedience to the gospel, if we reassure ourselves that we have all obeyed the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus through baptism, then we can be assured that God has added us to His body of people (At 2:47). Reaffirming the fundamentals that brought us into this body reaffirms our brotherhood and our fellowship with one another. We are brothers, and thus we have God’s blessing of being one man in Christ. We need to remember Galatians 3:26-29. We are “*sons of God through*

faith in Christ.” We have been “**baptized into Christ,**” and thus we “*have put on Christ.*” We are “**one in Christ Jesus.**” We are all “*Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise.*” If we can remember these things, then we will begin being more kind to one another, putting all slander and maliciousness aside for the sake of the wonderful fellowship that God has blessed us with in Christ (See Ep 4:31,32).

D. Forbearing one another:

In the midst of our squabbles over nonessential matters of opinion, we need to remember the words of Paul in Philippians 4:5. “*Let your forbearance be known to all men.*” Every disputant in a controversy must ask himself the question, “Am I known for being a forbearing person?” When Peter said, “Love the brotherhood” (1 Pt 2:17), he meant that I must forbear my brother in my differences with him over matters of opinion. If we are not forbearing, then we do not love our brother. Small circle drawers have revealed that they are having a difficult time in loving the brotherhood, and thus, being forbearing.

E. Deductions cannot be made tests of fellowship:

Each of us conscientiously holds to our personal deductions from difficult scriptures we have studied. Our personal deductions often conflict with the deductions of others. Nevertheless, we must be given the freedom to study the Bible

for ourselves without the intimidation of some hierarchy of authorities who would judge us because we have not conformed to the accepted code of deductions of our heritage. But since we will always have conflicting deductions that we conscientiously hold, we must agree that we will remain one in fellowship regardless of our differences.

The idea of a unity that is based on conforming everyone to the same deductions is an illusive phantom in which is embedded all sorts of demonic division, the curse of which many live today. We must come to the conclusion, therefore, that our personal deductions that come from our personal study of the word of God must never be the foundation upon which we would cast one another out of fellowship. We simply cannot test one another’s fellowship with a systematic code of selected deductions that we have formulated through our personal studies.

We can differ without dividing. If we honor and respect one another’s right to personally study the Scriptures and come to our own personal conclusions, then we can be assured that we will at times come to different conclusions. We would not be so arrogant as to believe that we have been guided by the Holy Spirit to come to our personal understanding of difficult passages that are not so clearly understood. It may be that those who believe that the Holy Spirit personally and directly inspires individuals to interpret the Scriptures will have a very difficult time in this area. They will assume that their deductions are Spirit

inspired, and thus, must be added to the canon of law to be bound on the church. But we would not go down that road of arrogance and self-righteousness, for that road leads only to division, destruction and one setting himself up as a judge and lawgiver. It leads one to set himself up

as the authority in matters of interpretation, and thus, it leads one to making himself the pope of Bible interpretation. This is the one about whom Paul described as being “self-condemned” (Ti 3:11). Such a person always draws a small circle.

Chapter 13

Detoured From Unity To Union

Disunity will always prevail among the world of denominations in Protestantism who maintain their identity through unique traditions, names and teachings that are inherently divisive. When men count sacred the heritage of their uniqueness, and subsequently seek to continue such, they will maintain coined names and traditional teachings that distinguish them from others. Because of this there will always be “united councils of churches” when such groups that seek some type of political union with one another. Therefore, we do not forget what and who causes the Protestant disunity of Christendom.

We have had the privilege of working with hundreds of independent religious groups throughout the years who have broken away from the mainline denominations of Protestantism. Some have been independent from mainline churches for so long that they crave the companionship, or fellowship, of other independent groups. These groups know that they do not want to go back to traditional, mainline churchianity. However, in their efforts to form unions and alli-

ances among themselves, they are destined to return to that from which they fled. Some of these groups are often so desirous of fellowship with others that they seek to establish alliances or forums that are similar to the unions of mainline traditional churches. They thus become ecumenical in their movement toward union.

There is a conservative side to the independent church movement that is somewhat different from the experiential religions that often make up the family of independent churches. These groups are struggling to return to the authority of the word of God. These groups are willing to sacrifice the baggage they brought from their mainline forefathers. The good news is that these groups are on the right road. It is these groups that must be patient with one another as they make their way back to the word of God as the sole authority in matters of faith. This is a good movement as these groups discover one another in their common desire to restore the word of God as the foundation of their faith.

A. **Fundamental points of fellowship:**

In their efforts to bring some union between themselves, there are about six basic beliefs upon which independent groups seek to align with one another in their communities. Some would refer to these as fundamentals upon which union is based.

1. *The Bible:* All independent groups agree that the Bible is the inspired word of God, though respect for and obedience to what it teaches may sometimes be questioned. By respect for what it teaches we mean that when it clearly teaches something, we must change our lives and beliefs in order to comply with its teachings. Nevertheless, everyone has some respect for the authority of the Bible as the word of God. Though often mixed with traditions and experiential emotionalism, the Bible plays a central part in the theology of most independent churches.

However, the lack of respect for the word of God is common among the leadership of some independent churches. An unwillingness to base faith on the word of God has produced little desire in the hearts of some adherents to move past experiential-based religiosity to a faith that is based on a knowledge of the word of God. It is for this reason that most independent groups focus on the validation of their faith through personal experiences rather than Bible knowledge. Their infatuation with “miracles,” “prophecies,” “tongue speaking,” and concert assemblies is often the center of

attraction among such groups. Invariably, such experiential groups can be identified by the fact that they have no Bible classes where adherents come together to focus on open Bible discussion. It is unfortunate, therefore, that such groups are led about by the ignorance of preachers who know very little about what the Bible teaches.

Regardless of those independent churches that are led about by either charismatic preachers who know little Bible, or the personal experiences of the adherents, there is a conservative group of independent churches who are discovering again the awesomeness of the word of God. As these groups continue to discover one another in their regions, restoration movements are arising out of a common focus on the authority of the Scriptures in matters of faith.

2. *Jesus as the Son of God:* This belief is not questioned among independent groups. Faith in Jesus is absolutely central to their faith. In fact, focus on Jesus is often stronger in validating faith than those who seek absolute doctrinal validation. This is especially true in reference to traditional churches. While traditional churches validate their existence in reference to their heritage, conservative independent churches are moving toward focus on Jesus and His word. We have never heard among these groups anyone who would question either the messiahship or sonship of Jesus as God in the flesh.

3. *The atoning sacrifice of Jesus:* Central to the theology of all independent groups is the cross. That Jesus was

incarnate in order to make an atoning sacrifice for all men is central to the faith and teaching of those who are on their way from the baggage of Protestant denominationalism. However, we would question the absolute respect for the atoning sacrifice of Jesus as central to these groups. We would question such because of the lack of emphasis that is placed on observing the Lord's Supper on a regular basis, which Supper was specifically instituted by Jesus in order that we not forget His atoning sacrifice (Lk 22:19).

4. *Salvation only through Jesus:*

Jesus is so central to the theology of independent churches that it is correctly believed that there is no eternal salvation outside Christ (At 4:12). Though some efforts of unions among mainline Protestant churches have invited in the Hindus and Muslims, this is unheard of and abhorred among independent churches who believe that one cannot approach God outside Christ Jesus. These groups would repudiate the thinking that union could ever be established on the basis of simply having a belief in a Higher Power and maintaining some standard of morality.

5. *Working response to faith:*

Good deeds flourish throughout independent churches. They believe that a faith that is unexpressed is a dead faith. Enthusiasm to work for Jesus is thus adhered to as a way of life. Though the expression of faith may sometimes be based on a legal approach to salvation, these groups are great believers in community efforts to bring glory to Jesus.

6. *Freedom from denominational*

control systems: Many independent groups originated when leaders fled the control systems that are often very strong among Protestant churches. In their efforts to submit to Jesus alone, groups were started in rebellion against those political structures that discouraged the freedom of individuals to serve Jesus at will and according to their own studies. Unfortunately, the power structures in independent groups have often simply changed from the power structures of the groups from which they fled, to individual church power structures where the pastor is at the top and in control. Some have fled Catholicism simply to become independent Catholic churches in their autonomy from other churches.

Regardless of the struggles along their road to independence, there are thousands of groups and their leaders who are on a road from Protestant denominationalism to restoring Jesus as the central focus of their lives and His word as their road map. The preceding are often referred to as the fundamentals upon which unity in diversity can be maintained while traveling down this road. There is a great deal of diversity between these groups. Nevertheless, in their diversity we have found that independent church leaders give one another more freedom of thought than most mainline traditional churches. Where traditional churches are quick to excommunicate someone who does not conform to the accepted "statement of faith" of the particular denomination, independent churches give one another a great deal

of freedom in which to work and believe. It is in this environment of free thought that many of these groups will make their way back to the word of Christ as their authority in matters of faith. They will study their way out of experiential religiosity to a faith that is based on the Bible. The word of God will become the basis of their fellowship with one another in order to restore the unity of the Spirit.

B. Fundamental truths in which to grow:

Though independent groups may find some comfort in unity based on the preceding beliefs, there is room for growth. There is a great deal of theological baggage from the past that must be discarded. There are many truths to learn that would be fundamental for fellowship and unity. Some consider themselves fundamental evangelical churches, but some fundamental truths have been ignored in an effort to establish fellowship with other “fundamental” churches.

Many independent groups are on a journey to discover the truth of God’s word. On this journey there are some areas of their heritage that they must overcome. Many are simply doing the best they can with what they know. When they learn more, these who are truly searching for what God says on every matter are ardently obedient to newly discovered truth in the Bible. This is a very encouraging attitude among some of these groups because learning and obeying the word of God are essentials that bring people together in fellowship with

one another. It also encourages each group to resist the desire to cocoon within their own ranks, and thus become as denominational and power-structure oriented as the denominations they left.

There is a real spirit of restoration among many non-experiential independent groups throughout the world. Unfortunately, many of those who have “branded” the concept of restoration have already become so denominational that they would have no fellowship with those who are just starting their restoration journey. These groups have already circled around and become that from which they fled, or they have given up those teachings that identify the ekklesia of Christ. In an effort to become ecumenical, some have forsaken fundamental teachings simply to become one with the whole who fellowship others solely on the basis of the preceding six points.

But for those fundamental independent churches that are on their journey of restoring Christianity, the following are fundamentals that must be restored in order to be the ekklesia of the New Testament:

1. Obedience to the gospel into a covenant relationship with God: When Paul went to Corinth, the **first thing** he preached in the city was the historical event of the gospel (1 Co 15:1-4). He did so because he knew what would eventually happen to those who do not obey the gospel when Jesus comes again. He wrote to the Thessalonians, “... *the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, taking*

vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will be punished with everlasting destruction ..." (2 Th 1:7-9). This was the answer to Peter's question of 1 Peter 4:17. "*For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God. And if it first begins with us, what will be the end of those who do not obey the gospel of God?*" Paul knew what would be the end of the Corinthians if they did not obey the historical event of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus had said, "*He who believes and is baptized will be saved*" (Mk 16:16). It could not be more simple than this.

For the Roman disciples, Paul rehearsed the necessity of obedience to the gospel. "*Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore, we are buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised up from the dead through the glory of the Father, even so we also might walk in newness of life*" (Rm 6:3,4). When one believes that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God, that belief, if it is true and sincere, will move him to go with Jesus to the cross (Rm 6:6). It will move one to be immersed with Jesus in a tomb of water, and then be resurrected with Him to walk in newness of life in Christ. Believing that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God is fundamental. But it is fundamental also that in order to begin the Christian journey in newness of life, **one must obey the death, burial and resurrection of Christ in**

baptism. In order to be a new creation of God in Christ (2 Co 5:17), the old man of sin must be buried in order that all past sins be washed away (At 2:38; 22:16). This fundamental teaching is so clear throughout the New Testament that there need be no interpretation. This is the fundamental truth upon which all fellowship must begin. If two people do not obey the gospel, they can be friends, but they cannot be in fellowship with one another, for fellowship is not a proclamation we make for ourselves, but a blessing from God. Of necessity this is true because our fellowship in Christ is not something we determine for ourselves. It is God's work to bring us into fellowship with one another by adding us to His people after we have obeyed the gospel (At 2:47).

The problem is that many independent groups have come out of a "faith only" salvation heritage. The result is that they have failed to see obedience to the gospel as the primary condition upon which fellowship is established and unity continued. That one comes into Christ and has the remission of sins at the time of recognizing that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God is not what the preceding passages are saying. One may think that when he simply confesses that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God that he is saved. But he has missed a most important point in reference to our salvation before God. **Salvation is not something that we personally declare for ourselves before God. Salvation is declared by God** through the revelation of His word. One cannot personally lay claim

to salvation while at the same time he ignores God's declaration that one is saved once the old man of sin dies with Christ, and one is washed of sin in the waters of baptism. This is why Peter wrote, "*The like figure whereunto even baptism does also now save us ...*" (1 Pt 3:21). It was necessary for Peter to make such a clear statement because so many people have such a strong conviction that faith alone will bring them into the family of God's fellowship. Some believe they can declare their fellowship with the family of God without the approval of God upon obedience to the gospel. If we self-proclaim ourselves a part of God's family without joining God's Son on His cross, burial in His tomb and resurrection, then we have simply made a presumptuous proclamation.

It is at the point of baptism that God declares one saved. It is at that point that fellowship begins among all those who have submitted to the gospel. On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, about three thousand people were baptized for the remission of their sins (At 2:41). On that day God added these baptized believers to the fellowship of His people (At 2:47). Therefore, one comes into the fellowship of the people of God once he is baptized. This is a fundamental truth that cannot be ignored when we discuss fellowship and unity. And since unity is the blessing of God among all those who have obeyed the gospel throughout the world, then one cannot have this blessing unless he has been added to the fellowship of God's people by God at the point of baptism. It is not that we negotiate our

fellowship with one another. It is not that we accept one another's fellowship because of our personal and emotional repentant experiences. It is God who brings us into fellowship with one another after we have obeyed the death, burial and resurrection of His Son. Until baptism, therefore, God has not added us to the fellowship of His people. We are not declared to be His child until we are dripping with water from baptism into the death, burial and resurrection of His Son.

2. Celebration of the Lord's Supper: Many of the independent churches that we have visited still do not realize the centrality of the Lord's Supper to the fellowship of the universal body of Christ. Paul wrote, "*The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not the fellowship of the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not the fellowship of the body of Christ? For though we are many, we are one bread and one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread*" (1 Co 10:16-17). It seems almost inconceivable that a group of people who would call themselves after Christ would either minimize or fail to celebrate the Supper that proclaims the reason for their existence.

Paul added, "*For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes*" (1 Co 11:26). We may proclaim the Lord's death with our mouths. But what Paul is calling on us to do is to manifest our faith through action, the action of partaking of the Lord's Supper.

Partaking of the Lord's Supper is a proclamation to the world that the church

is the one universal blood-bought body of Christ. In an era of history wherein Christendom has obsessed over concert assemblies that would match the professional production of any rock concert, there are few who realize the centrality of observing the Lord's Supper as often as possible in order to proclaim our fellowship as the blood-bought body of Christ. Churches that obsess over miracle healings, but do not obsess over proclaiming the blood and body of Jesus in observing the Lord's Supper, have deceived themselves into thinking that they are the church of Christ.

Those who would profess to be Christ-centered have actually fallen short of fellowshiping the body by expressing their religiosity while ignoring or avoiding the memorial of that which identifies one's focus on Jesus. Observing the Supper is fellowshiping the blood of Christ. It is fellowshiping the universal body of Christ. We are many members of the body, but in the Supper we proclaim our unity. Can unity prevail among those who count insignificant that which proclaims unity?

The 1 Corinthians 10:16,17 statement of Paul is that the one bread represents the living fellowship of the members of the one body. It is "one bread and one body." If we are not partaking of the bread as often as possible, then we are refusing to fellowship the rest of the body. In other words, those who do not celebrate the partaking of the one bread have disfellowshipped themselves from the one body of Christ. They have proclaimed their lack of desire to fellowship

the body. If we would come into fellowship with the blood and body of Christ, therefore, we must restore the Lord's Supper to the centrality of our fellowshiping one another.

3. Faith response to the grace of God: 2 Corinthians 4:15 is crucial to explain the difference between meritorious obedience and good works and a faith response to the grace of God. "*For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace that is reaching many people may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.*" This is an evangelistic statement. It is not a passage in reference to the behavior of the church in response to the grace of God, though such is also true. In his own response to grace in his Christian walk of life, Paul stated the same motivation in his own life. "*And His grace toward me was not in vain, but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me*" (1 Co 15:10).

True believers obediently respond initially to the grace of God by obedience to the gospel. Obedience to the gospel is our way of expressing thanksgiving to God for the death, burial and resurrection of His Son for our sins. When we come out of the waters of baptism, our life is as Paul's. Paul abounded in the work of the Lord because he continued to be motivated by the grace of God. This is what Paul stated in Philipians 2:12,13, "*... work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you*" Paul did not say we should work for our salvation, but to work out our salvation that

we have because we have been baptized into Christ. We have been “*created in Christ Jesus for good works ...*” (Ep 2:10).

Obedience to the gospel can never be a meritorious work of obedience. It is a faith response to the grace of God that was manifested through Jesus (Ti 2:11). Our salvation is by faith in response to God’s grace. If there is no obedient response to grace, then the faith is dead. If faith does not result in repentance and washing of sins (baptism), then it is useless in reference to bringing one into fellowship with God and His family of believers. Those religious groups that stop short of an obedient faith response to the grace of God have missed the point. They have missed the point at which time God declares through His word that one has remission of sins (At 2:38). They are thus still old creatures, never having been born again into the household of God (Jn 3:3-5; 2 Co 5:17).

By meritorious works of law no person can be saved, “*for by works of law no flesh will be justified*” (Gl 2:16). Unfortunately, some have cheated themselves of the fellowship of the body of Christ by equating obedient faith with a meritorious work of law. And in avoiding the water, they have revealed their lack of thanksgiving for the grace of God that was revealed from heaven through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. Unfortunately, we cannot assert our own salvation on the basis of any confession of

faith or “sinner’s prayer” if we do not obediently respond to the grace of God. We will continue outside the fellowship of the one body simply because one comes forth from the grave of baptism to newness of life (See Rm 6:3-6).

Fundamentals need no interpretation. They come to us from God in declarative statements or direct commands. When we consider fundamentals in reference to our salvation, the old principle of Bible study holds true, “It means what it says, and says what it means.” We would assume, however, that Satan will do his best work in confusing the minds of the people concerning those things that are most important to establish one’s fellowship with God. In the 1st century, the Gnostics confused the people concerning the incarnation of Jesus. In this century, Satan encourages people to simply cry out “Lord, Lord,” but at the same time he confuses people in how to establish a saving relationship with God that brings one into the fellowship of the saints (See Mt 7:15-23). We would be naive to think that Satan would not mess around with the minds of people in reference to obedience of the gospel of Jesus’ death for our sins and resurrection for our hope and eternal life. It seems that Satan has done His work well. He has deceived thousands to believe that they are in fellowship with God and His people when actually they are not seeking to go to the cross and tomb with His Son.

Chapter 14

Inclusive

Our study of fellowship in the New Testament often reveals one characteristic about ourselves. God seems to be much more inclusive in His fellowship than we allow ourselves to be. It is certainly not our responsibility to determine how inclusive God should be in reference to the fellowship of the ekklesia. What we must understand, however, is that we include in our fellowship all those who have obeyed the fundamentals of the faith in coming into Christ, and who have maintained their belief that Jesus is the Christ and Son of God through moral living in obedience to the word of Christ. Nevertheless, it is often our inclination to denominate into sects and parties those who have come into a saving relationship with God. But in doing so, we have promoted some concepts that are contrary to the very identity of the fellowship we claim to be sustaining.

We often become experts in minors. We often obsess over issues and opinions to the point that the weak brother turns away in disgust at our inability to show love and mercy toward one another. Our obsession with a particular issue often steals our joy of coming together in assembly.

Sometimes our obsession over a particular issue or matter of opinion becomes so strong that we ourselves are turned away from that which we are supposed to be doing. It is our work to

preach the gospel to the world. But when minds are obsessed with trivial matters, evangelism is the first work to cease. A church that is biting and devouring itself has no zeal for evangelistic outreach or appeal to lost souls.

The result of our lack of evangelistic outreach is the loss of souls. Before we become obsessed over a particular matter of opinion we need to step back and see where this obsession will lead us. If two people disagree over a point of opinion, then one, or both, have to be wrong. If we heatedly engage one another, the first people we will forget in our confrontation are the lost. The lost, therefore, will continue to be lost because of our inability to judge something to be a simple matter of opinion, and thus, something over which there should never be debate.

Now consider those who might walk in on our heated discussion concerning matters of opinion. Will they be drawn to a church that is biting and devouring itself over nonsense? Or, will they be driven away? They will certainly be disgusted with those who claim to be united, but are at the same time actually going to war with one another. Paul referred to such a situation in Galatians 5:15. *“But if you bite and devour one another, take heed that you not be consumed by one another.”* The group that persists in biting and devouring over non-

essential issues will cease to be evangelistic. They will forget the mission of their Master. And those unbelievers who show up for a visit, will certainly be turned away. Such a church has thus consumed itself. Biting and devouring brethren can never convince the unbelieving world that they are a fellowship of love and mercy (See Ep 4:31,32).

Pride and prejudice always sustain division over issues. Saul, and later Paul, certainly dealt with pride while he campaigned against the people of God. While stricken on the road to Damascus, Jesus said to him out of heaven, *“It is hard for you to kick against the goads”* (At 26:14). If our pride is hurt, then there is a fever of sickness that will prevail to keep brethren spiritually sick and apart from one another. We can understand why Paul told both evangelists, Timothy and Titus, not to engage in foolish controversies that generate strife (2 Tm 2:23; Ti 3:9-11). Solomon gave some wisdom to the wise on this matter. *“It is an honor for a man to cease from strife, but any fool can start an argument”* (Pv 20:3; compare Js 1:26). When it is a controversy over a “genealogy issue,” then it is a controversy over issues and opinions about which we should not engage one another. Controversy generates strife, and strife division, and division is sustained and continued by the sickness of hurt feelings. Solomon explained, *“The beginning of strife is as when one lets out water, therefore leave the quarrel before it breaks out”* (Pv 17:14). Therefore, *“let us walk ... not in strife and jealousy”* (Rm 13:13; see 1 Co 3:3; Gl 5:19,20).

We must come to our differences over matters of opinion and nonessentials with a spirit of humility. Solomon wrote, *“A wrathful man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger appeases strife”* (Pv 15:18). *“An angry man stirs up strife, and a furious man abounds in transgression”* (Pv 29:22). *“Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins”* (Pv 10:12). These would be passages that we should remember when in disagreement with our brother over matters of opinion.

It is always good to doubt our own conclusions, knowing that they may change with more study. And we must be willing to change if we come to deductive conclusions that prove existing beliefs to be wrong. In our controversies to defend our beliefs, there is one axiomatic truth that must always be remembered in reference to differences over opinions: **“We can both be wrong, but we both cannot be right.”** We must never assume that we are always right and our opponent is always wrong. We can never determine who is right in a controversy over a point of disagreement if we assert that we are always right. If we are arrogant enough to assume that we have all “the truth,” then we will never be objective to discover new truth from our personal study of the word of God. We will always be listening to those who represent what we believe is “the truth.” In our arrogance, we will listen to our opponents only out of courtesy. If we feign “listening” to our opponents out of courtesy, then we can never say that we are objective Bible students. If we listen only for the purpose of finding some con-

tradition or misquoted scripture in our opponent's position, then how can we say we have a spirit of objectivity? How can we set ourselves forward as objective students of the word of God who are seeking truth, regardless of where it originates? When we are humble enough to doubt our views, then we are open for

truth to be spoken and received from any source. When we always challenge ourselves in what we believe, then we are open to learn more. We will continue to study our Bibles. The word of God can then have a free course to "*reprove, rebuke, exhort,*" in our own lives (2 Tm 4:2; Ti 2:15).

Epilogue

All pleas for unity and fellowship in the New Testament are directed to Christians as individuals, not groups of Christians. Since each individual disciple will give account of himself before the Lord (2 Co 5:10), and we are individually immersed into a covenant relationship with God (Gl 3:26-29), then each individual is responsible for maintaining his or her gift of fellowship with the universal body of Christ. There is no emphasis in the New Testament on uniting groups. All emphasis is on individuals to stay united in Christ. Regardless of what a group as a whole may decide on a particular teaching, it is the responsibility of individual Christians to take ownership for unity with Christians in general, wherever those Christians are located in the world.

Fellowship in Christ, therefore, is not a "them" and "us" fellowship between groups. It is all "us." When Paul wrote letters to churches and individuals, it was "us." "Us" is not groups. "Us" refers to individual disciples in cities who were first united with one another in their cities, and then, united in fellowship with the one universal church of Christ. "Us" is not autonomous from another "us"

because of assemblies in different places. Assemblies of Christians were never meant to be an occasion for division. Assemblies were opportunities for edification and to remember the one universal body through the breaking of the one bread.

The fellowship of the ekklesia of Christ is worldwide. When one is added to the ekklesia by God upon immersion into Christ, he or she is brought into a global fellowship of saints throughout the world. One can never be separated from this global family by where he or she sits on Sunday morning. Assembly is a blessing and serendipity, not a legal mark of faithfulness or validation of membership in the universal fellowship of the body of Christ.

When one comes to believe in Jesus as the crucified and raised Son of God, responds to the good news by immersion into the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, and then is added by God to His universal family, even before he shows up somewhere for an assembly he is in our fellowship. As the almost 3,000 on the day of Pentecost were added to the universal family of God before their assembly the following Sunday, so every

obedient believer is immediately in fellowship and united with the global body of Christ immediately upon being resurrected with Jesus from the grave of water. God does not wait until Sunday morning to add souls to His family.

As fellow obedient believers we must accept one another into the fellowship with which we were blessed by God.

In order to do this we might have to tear down some fences and stop drawing our small circles of fellowship. We need to give our circle drawing pencils back to God, and with love and patience accept others where they are on their journey of discovering God through their personal study of His word.