

LET MY PEOPLE GO!

PREVIOUSLY TITLED:
THE ONE TRUE CHURCH

by

DAVID W. DYER

**"A Grain of Wheat" Ministries
Publication**

LET MY PEOPLE GO!

PREVIOUSLY TITLED:
THE ONE TRUE CHURCH

First Printing 2007
Second Printing 2009
Third Printing 2014

“A Grain of Wheat” Ministries

*Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations are from
the New King James version of the Bible.*

To receive free copies or read this and
other books and pamphlets online, go to:
www.agrainofwheat.com

“Son of man, describe the temple to the house of Israel, that they may be ashamed of their iniquities; and let them measure the pattern.”

“And if they are ashamed of all that they have done, make known to them the design of the temple and its arrangement, its exits and its entrances, its entire design and all its ordinances, all its forms and all its laws.”

“Write it down in their sight so that they may keep its whole design and all its ordinances and perform them.”

(Ezekiel 43:10,11)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE	6
1. A HEAVENLY VISION	9
2. THE SUBSTANCE OF THE CHURCH	21
3. THE FORM OF THE CHURCH	39
4. WHERE GOD DWELLS	59
5. LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH	75
6. LET MY PEOPLE GO!	115
7. THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH	135
8. COMMITMENT	152
9. MEETINGS OF THE TRUE CHURCH	171
10. LIVING IN LOVE	201
11. THINGS THAT DESTROY	227
12. BUILDING ON THE FOUNDATION	252
AFTERWORD	275

PREFACE

This is a book about the house of God. But very few Christians appear to have much interest in the subject. They seem to think something like this: "Who cares about where God lives? He's certainly able to take care of His own problems. We have our lives to live. We have bills to pay, children to raise, and work to do. We just don't have time to worry about where God is going to live."

But David the king had a different kind of attitude. He had a different kind of heart. He said: "I will not give sleep to my eyes or slumber to my eyelids, until I find a place for the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob" (Ps 132:4,5). David was a man who had intimate fellowship with the Almighty. From this communion, his heart began to embrace the desires of the Most High. He began to sense the things which were in God's heart and long for them also. Perhaps this is why the Lord found David to be "...a man after [His] own heart" (Acts 13:22).

David was a man who was blessed by God, in part because he sought the things which God wanted. But many believers today don't experience this blessing. They work long hours to try to pay their mortgage and other debts, but never seem to get on top financially. They try to entertain themselves with various diversions including food and drink, but they are not really satisfied. They are constantly buying new clothes, but this too does not seem to meet their emotional needs.

"Consider your ways!" says the Lord. "You have sown much and bring in little. You eat, but do not have enough. You drink but you are not filled with

drink. You clothe yourselves but no one is warm and he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes." "Consider your ways!" "You looked for much, but indeed it came to little, and when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why?"

"Because of my house that is in ruins, while every one of you runs to his own house. Therefore the heavens above you withhold the dew, and the earth withholds its fruit. For I called for a drought on the land and the mountains, on the grain and the new wine and the oil, on whatever the ground brings forth, on men and livestock, and on all the labor of your hands" (Hg 1:5-7,9-11).

God is calling men and women today to turn back to Him and work together with Him in constructing His eternal home. He is looking for those who will respond with all their hearts and dedicate themselves to His service. He is searching for those whose hearts will respond to His heart.

It is the author's hope that through this book some Christians will be led to change their focus. Perhaps through this writing, some will be induced to understand more profoundly the things which are on the heart of God. Then they can dedicate their lives to building up His house. They can make building up His kingdom the first priority in their lives. Certainly, in this way, they will experience wonderful blessings in their work and eternal rewards when Jesus returns also.

David W. Dyer

1.

A HEAVENLY VISION

*T*he instructions which God gave to Moses He is also speaking to each one of us today. Not only in the Old Testament but in the New Testament also we find the following admonition: "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" (Ex 25:40, Heb 8:5). This is an admonition which we must seriously contemplate.

Moses was a man called by God to lead God's people and to build a dwelling place for Him. Moses understood this exceedingly high calling and was ready to respond to it with all his heart. However, he was not free to do anything on his own. He was not at liberty to invent anything, plan anything, or make anything according to his own tastes or desires. He was strictly instructed to make everything only according to the heavenly vision which he had personally received while on the mountain with God.

You see, Moses had gone up the holy mountain. There he spent time (40 days and 40 nights to be exact) in the very presence of God Almighty. He knew the fear of God. He had experienced His awesome majesty and power. Furthermore, he had seen into the heart of God and had begun to understand something of what it was that his Maker was desiring. So when he descended from that mountain, he had burning within him a heavenly vision, a spiritual revelation which then governed his work while he was building a dwelling place for the Most High.

These things should speak loudly and clearly to us today. When we become converted and then begin to desire to be involved in God's work, this is something which we should seriously consider. If we want to be co-laborers with God and assist Him in building His eternal dwelling place, there is an important factor which we must contemplate.

Before beginning to work in earnest, we must have entered profoundly into God's presence. Not only must we have entered, we must have spent time there – a lot of time – hearing, seeing, and understanding what it is that He desires. Before we go much beyond the stages and activities of spiritual infancy, it is of the utmost importance that we have received a heavenly revelation so that our work is done with Divine substance and is not merely wood, hay, and straw (I Cor 3:12). We must have seen God's holy plan and then build in harmony with it.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is not an unimportant consideration. It is not something which we should take lightly. When we become involved in building together with God, we take part in a construction which is eternal. What God builds through us will be His habitation forever. Therefore, it cannot be, it must not be something done without much revelation and prayer and even fear and trembling. We all should have a healthy dose of respect and awe for God when we begin to build anything in His name.

The Lord our God does not and never will live in a temple which human hands have made (Acts 7:48). Therefore, if we do not build according to His design, what we build will not satisfy Him and He will not live there. It will not be the place of His residence.

Many Christians today have become deluded because God occasionally visits their construction sites. Since His presence comes once in a while, they then imagine that He is approving what they are doing.

But what we urgently need to be building is not somewhere that God stops to visit now and then, but the place where He is pleased to reside. We must be constructing the

eternal, spiritual house of God where He will dwell permanently, for eternity. To do so, we must have received a profound, heavenly vision. Everything which we do must be guided by this revelation.

OTHER PATTERNS

Many millions of believers, men and women of God, are building today. There is a lot of Christian activity. Every day which passes, literally hundreds of "churches" spring up around the world. I like to believe that most of these dear brothers and sisters are doing their work with a pure heart and a sincere desire to please God. However, very many of them seem to be constructing without much understanding of the heavenly plan. Instead, they are simply copying what they see others doing. They are building according to the vision they have seen on the next street corner and not on the holy mountain of God.

Instead of receiving a vision from God, they are relying on man. In place of a heavenly revelation, they hear of some group or other which is having success and attracting large numbers and then rush to copy what these others are doing. Perhaps some are merely repeating what their particular denomination has done in the past. Possibly tradition has bound them to a certain pattern for construction. Others may be doing what they learned in a Bible school or seminary. Still others rely upon their own popularity, gift, or charisma to attract and hold numbers of people in their flock. There are, in fact, very many methods and patterns being used in building today.

But perhaps we should all stop for one moment and carefully consider what we are doing. This is a very serious subject. The things we do have eternal consequences. Therefore, it could not hurt to take a few minutes and prayerfully contemplate our works for God. Let us enter into His presence and spread out our plans and projects before Him. Let us reverently open our hearts to hear His opinion. Let us ask ourselves and God honestly, are all these things which we are doing really made of fireproof

materials? Is what we are constructing really the house of God? Is it something in which He will be pleased to dwell for eternity?

In I Corinthians 3:10-17 Paul gives us some admonitions and instructions about how to build up God's house and what materials we should use. He urges us to be very careful about what we are doing. He says: "But let each one take heed how he builds [on the foundation]" (vs10). It is not sufficient for us merely to build anything we think might be good or something of which others approve. It is essential that we build according to God's design and use the approved materials.

So, dearest brothers do be careful! Be very, very careful that what you are doing is in harmony with the mind of God. Don't be in such a hurry to get out there and do something. It is extremely important that we hear from God and see His eternal habitation first, before we begin to build. If we begin with a heavenly vision, then all our work will be approved. Thus we will not be ashamed when He comes and examines what we have done.

As we go along with this book, we will be looking in detail into exactly what kind of materials we should use, but for now we must clearly see that there are two types available. There are supernatural materials which are typified by "gold, silver, [and] precious stones," and earthly materials, represented by "wood, hay, [and] straw" (vs 12).

The first type has its origin in God, being heavenly in quality. The second type is something merely human and natural. In today's world, both kinds of materials can be used to make impressive constructions. Many multimillion dollar mansions have wood as their basic structure. But in God's kingdom, only by using His materials and following His plans can we satisfy Him.

SUCCESS IS NOT THE STANDARD

In our endeavor to be pleasing to God, one thing must become very clear to us and that is that the yardstick for our works is not success. Let me repeat that. The measure

which decides whether or not God is pleased with what we are doing is not how many people are coming to our meetings. It is not how popular we and our message have become. It is not that others in the Christian community are applauding and admiring our work. It is not that our work is growing and spreading at such a rate that the whole nation and even the world is beginning to hear about us. Honestly, even a virus can spread rapidly and become world famous.

Yet in our world today, there seems to be one criterion which people admire. When other people look at our work, usually they are looking to see one thing. They want to know whether or not we are successful. The worldly standard is normally this: Is there some visible amount of success? Is the work expanding? Is there some concrete evidence of achievement? If there is, our work is admired and approved. If not, then what we are doing is disregarded or even despised. This is the standard of the world.

But God's standard is completely different. His standard is obedience. His measure is whether or not we are working according to His plan. What we do in obedience to Him may appear successful in men's eyes. However, it is also quite possible that it will not. God's ways are often mysterious. He does not use the ways and methods of the world. His wisdom is something which this world and the people in it do not understand (See I Cor 1:18-25). Often His works are hidden, small, and unexpected. Yet through the course of time, they are shown to produce the most excellent results.

To clarify this point a little, let us take a look at some of the men of God who were powerfully used by Him but yet who were despised and rejected. They were successful in God's eyes, but discounted by the world and some even by the religious communities of their day.

Noah was obedient but certainly not popular. I imagine most people considered him to be crazy. There he was building a huge boat on dry land with no way to ever get it to water. No doubt he was the laughingstock of the surrounding community. But he was obedient to God.

Jeremiah was a prophet who was anointed and used by God. Two entire books of the Old Testament are his works and prophecies. Every single word was inspired and anointed by the God of the universe. Every prophecy he spoke was right on target and came (or will come) to pass. Yet he had no group of followers. Almost no one paid any attention to him or obeyed his words. The nation to which he prophesied never repented and eventually had to be judged by God. His “ministry” was a disaster from a human standpoint. Many of the other prophets also fit into this category.

Although we might imagine the situation differently, Paul the apostle also seemed a failure at the end of his ministry. He was imprisoned, so his “sphere of ministry” shrunk up from being a globe-trotting worker to only having contact with a very few who managed to visit him in prison.

Then, all the churches in Asia, many of which he had founded, rejected him and turned away (II Tim 1:15). He did manage to write a few short letters from prison but this certainly could not have taken up all his time. Yet who could have imagined the fruit which this period of his life would produce?

Jesus, the firstborn Son of God, also was despised and rejected by the majority (Is 53:3). Although He did enjoy some times of popularity, He knew that men were often flocking to Him for the wrong reasons. So, every so often He spoke a word of righteousness to them which caused many of them to turn around and leave. At the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus was alone. At the peak of His supernatural work, all His followers abandoned Him.

Although today we view Jesus’ work as a success since Christianity has spread all over the globe, if we would look at things as if we were there at the time, His work would probably have seemed a failure, or even a disaster. He, the leader, was dead and all of His followers were scattered. Apparent success is not and can never be the measure of our work for God.

OUR WORKS WILL BE JUDGED

When Jesus returns, what we have done in His name will be judged. Again in I Corinthians 3:13 we read that our works will be tested by supernatural fire. If our works have been done with combustible materials, ie. something human, natural and earthly, they will be burned up. If our works have been done with heavenly materials, they will survive the test.

God assures us here that even if the works of some are destroyed, they themselves will still be saved (vs 15). However, it appears that there is a very severe judgment for those who construct wrongly. Not only will their works be lost along with any rewards for such works, but there will also be some kind of judgment for them personally.

Perhaps related to this judgment is a warning expressed in I Corinthians 3:17 where we read: "If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him." The context of this verse is very important. The subject here is building the temple of God. In this work of construction we are told that if we "defile" the temple of God, we will suffer severe judgment. According to R. N. Champlin, Ph.D., in his New Testament commentary, this word "defile" can also be translated: "ruin," "destroy," "corrupt," "damage," and/or "adulterate."

The word translated "destroy" (vs 17), referring to what God will do to the offending person, is exactly the same Greek word as "defile" in the first part of the verse. So we see that God will punish the one who defiles His eternal house exactly according to what he or she did. The defiling works which anyone does will become their own judgment.

What then does it mean to "defile" His house? It is by using incorrect materials that we can pollute or damage the very dwelling place of God – His temple. It is quite possible for us, working without supernatural revelation, to construct things within the temple of God which are defiling, polluting, damaging, and adulterating it. Further, if

and when we do such things, we will suffer severe consequences when Jesus comes to judge us for our works.

Dear brothers and sisters, this verse should be very sobering. We are not dealing here with some kind of temporary, earthly construction. We are building the eternal dwelling place of God Almighty. Therefore, we must be very, very careful what we do. If we, through our ignorance and fleshly motives, defile God's house, we will be defiled in the same manner when He comes.

SOME OLD TESTAMENT EXAMPLES

In the Old Testament we are given some specific examples of this kind of pollution. In the book of Leviticus chapter 10 beginning with verse 1 we read about the story of two priests, Nadab and Abihu, who were sons of Aaron. They seemed to enjoy their religious duties and became proud because of their position among the people. So they thought that they might improve a little on God's design.

One day instead of following the commands of God they got their censers, put a little incense in them and marched into the tabernacle to make their own kind of offering. They had come up with a new, modern way of worship. From God's viewpoint it was "profane fire" (Lev 10:1). This invention of theirs cost them their lives. They had profaned the dwelling of God and so fire came out from the presence of God and consumed them.

In II Kings chapter 16 we have the story of Ahaz who was one of the kings who ruled Judah. Unfortunately, this man did not fear God or have any understanding of His ways. One day he took a trip to Damascus to meet the king of Assyria whom he had just paid off with gold and silver which he had stolen from the temple. There he saw a pagan altar. It was really impressive. Evidently it was large, ornate, and spectacularly beautiful. It seemed much better in his eyes than the fairly simple, smaller bronze altar which Solomon had made.

So he sent Urijah the high priest some measurements and a copy of the design. Even before Ahaz had gotten

back home, Urijah had made him a full-sized replica of this pagan altar. Next, Ahaz had Urijah haul the bronze altar of the Lord off to one side and set up his new impressive altar in the temple. He then instructed the priests to use the fancy altar for all the sacrifices and offerings. The old bronze altar he would just use to “inquire by,” meaning to seek the guidance of God. Probably, this bronze altar was used by him very little.

This new altar was big and impressive, but it was not the design of God. It was a grand, human effort. It was appealing in many earthly, fleshly ways. But it was a pollution of God’s symbolic habitation, the temple.

There are many things which men appreciate with their natural senses. Beautiful surroundings, eloquent messages, soul-stirring music, and many other such things are enjoyable to us. Therefore, there is a great temptation to institute these things in our work for the Lord.

While we are building His dwelling place, it is tempting to add a little bit of our own ideas and decorations. It is very difficult for us not to incorporate some of our own designs and directions. But let us always remember: “For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (Lk 16:15).

MANY TYPES OF WORKERS

There are many kinds of laborers involved today in God’s building project. Just as an earthly construction project requires many different types of workers, including electricians, plumbers, carpenters, masons, etc., so the building of God requires people to perform many different functions. We read in the New Testament about apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. Further, we are told about many other different types of gifts and ministries. It is not the purpose of this writing to delineate and discuss each of these different functions, but only to say that they are many and diverse.

One important ministry which does have a direct bearing on our present investigation is the work of an

apostle. God is the architect of His building. He Himself has designed the plan. But there are also those who are called “master builders” (I Cor 3:10). They are sort of like construction supervisors. They are individuals who have spent time on the mountain of God. They have gazed deeply into His heart. They have seen His plan and have understood how to build what they have seen. This is the work of an apostle. An apostle then is someone who has an overall view of what God desires and a clear, spiritual understanding of how to construct what has been revealed to him.

The apostles are those to whom God has shown His “mysteries.” Paul writes: “...by revelation He made known to me the mystery” (Eph 3:3). Having received these revelations, they then become “stewards of the mysteries of God” (I Cor 4:1). They have gotten something of supreme value and are responsible before God in their stewardship of it. This is referred to in Ephesians 3:9 as the “administration of the mystery” (NASB). This means that the apostles are to be lowly servants, faithfully sharing with the rest of the body of Christ the precious things which God has revealed to them. They must work to help the other members be guided by this same heavenly revelation.

Of course every type of ministry needs some divine revelation to operate. Each member of the body must follow supernatural guidance to be effective. However, it is here that we encounter a common problem in the church today. To explain further, we will use an earthly example. Let us talk about a plumber. Let us assume that he knows how to fit pipe. He is good at what he does and knows that it is an essential part of the plan. But if he begins to think that what he sees and knows is the whole plan, then problems begin to appear.

Perhaps we could think of our “plumber” as an evangelist. He is good at what he does. He knows that his part is important. Everywhere he looks in the Bible, he sees evangelism. Since this is his gift and function, this is what God reveals to him from His word. But it is all too possible and even common for this member to begin to imagine that

he has seen the whole plan. He begins to think that his part is the most important, his work is the work which God wants done. Since this is what he sees when he looks into the word of God, he then supposes that is all there is to see.

However, since this brother or sister is not an apostle, his or her vision is limited and God does not reveal to him the whole plan. Unless he has the humility to realize this and understand his need for the rest of the body, he will undoubtedly encounter difficulty and even cause many problems in the church through his work.

Instead of working in harmony with the other parts, he or she may become independent and even fight against what others are doing, since it is different from what he has seen. (By the way, we do not mean to pick on evangelists, this same problem also surfaces with other gifted members of the body of Christ.)

Today in Christ's church we see many brothers and sisters building in this shortsighted manner. Thinking their ministry is the most important or even the only way, they begin to "build a church" around their ministry. Instead of simply doing their part to build the body, they get off in a corner and surround themselves with others who agree with them or whom they have convinced of the significance of their ministry.

The result is that we see groups trying to construct God's house solely out of pipes and fittings (which might be evangelism). Others are building only of wires, plugs and light fixtures (which could correspond to prophecy or teaching). Each one emphasizes their understanding and gift without the humility to see that theirs is only a part of the plan.

Thus we come to understand part of the importance of the apostolic ministry. Part of their function is to serve the various parts of the body by helping them understand the whole plan of God and how they can perform their part in harmony with the rest. Since they have seen the entire building, they can be of use to the others, helping them use their gifts and ministries to construct the eternal dwelling place of God.

Apostolic vision is a necessary ingredient in the building of God's house. It is important then for all the workers on the construction project to listen to and understand the heavenly vision from those who are genuinely receiving it.

Divine revelation is absolutely essential when we are building the church of God. We must not even begin without it. Just as a builder of a large building or even a smaller house would not think of beginning without a plan, so we too must receive revelation from God. We must have seen just what it is that is in His heart. Then we must be careful to build exactly according to this vision which we received while on the mountain with Him.

2.

THE SUBSTANCE OF THE CHURCH

And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam, and he slept; and He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh in its place. Then the rib which the Lord God had taken from man He made into a woman and He brought her to the man" (Gen 2:21, 22).

When we become converted and begin to think about working together with God to accomplish His eternal purposes, we must first receive a revelation from Him. We must have spent time in His presence. We must have ascended the holy mountain of God. It is there that we perceive what is on His heart and it is there that we understand what and how we should build. Without such a revelation, it is possible or even probable that much of our time and energy will be wasted constructing something which He does not desire.

One of the things of which we must be very certain when we begin to build is what kind of materials we should use. When we are constructing the habitation of the eternal God, there are some very specific guidelines which we must follow concerning the building materials. We are not free to use whatever kind of elements we think might do the job. If we are to satisfy God's heart, we must carefully follow the Divine plan.

On one hand we can all too easily build with natural materials. The scriptures call these things “wood,” “hay,” and “straw.” These items are representative of what a human being can do on his own.

For example, a natural man can plan. He can organize. He can administrate. He can use his “God given” talents to influence people and even attract a following. Many men and women can persuade others of their “position” in the church. They can recruit others to join their ranks. They can give counsel, teach, and give advice about any number of subjects. Some can give interesting or even powerful, emotion-stirring speeches. These and many more things the natural man can do.

Since the natural man can do these things it is easy for us to do them when we begin working for God. Especially if we have abilities in some of these areas, it is only natural for us to think that we can use our assets to help build the house of God. But if and when the origin of these things is earthly and human they really are only wood, hay, and straw. It does not matter how impressive the structure we build is. What counts is what kind of materials we use in the construction.

The scriptures also mention other types of building materials: gold, silver, and precious stones. These items represent materials of supernatural origin. These are not works which man does for God, but works which God Himself does through man. When we are constructing with divine materials it is no longer us doing the work but God living in and moving through us to accomplish His purposes.

Many men have a lot of ability. Some can build a shed or house. Others possibly could make a car or airplane. Still others are able to design and build spaceships or giant computers. There are some really remarkable things which men have built.

But there is still one thing which man cannot build. He cannot make a living being. No man can join cell to cell, connect the various cells with nerves, make bones and muscles, the various specialized organs and then cause all

this to live and breathe. Only God can give life and make a living being.

The house of God in which He will dwell for eternity is a living house. We, His people, are the "living stones" in this house (I Pet 2:5). God's house is not a static, physical structure like some king or president on earth would build. Instead, it is a construction which is alive with the life of God. It will be a living, breathing tabernacle. It will be a vessel in which He will be seen and through which He will live, move, and express Himself to the universe.

Since no man can make something living, it is clear that we cannot build anything for God on our own. The best we can do is co-labor together with Him (I Cor 3:9). By following His leading moment by moment and relying completely upon His power, we can be used by Him to construct something which pleases Him.

Even if we have had a revelation of the finished product, we still do not have the supernatural ability to make what we have seen. We may have had a divine vision. We might have had a glimpse of His eternal house. But we are and always will be, completely dependent upon God to do the work in us and through us. Revelation never makes us capable of doing things ourselves. Instead, like little children, we must walk hand in hand with our Creator and cooperate with what He is doing every day.

GOD DESIRES A BRIDE

We learn from the scriptures that our Lord is constructing a bride for Himself (Rev 21:2). In the Old Testament, reading about the creation of Adam and Eve, we encounter a prophetic picture concerning the future bride of Christ. Here we can understand quite a lot about what kind of materials God wants to use. We are told that Adam was created from "the dust of the ground" (Gen 2:7). He was made from common, earthly materials.

But when his bride, Eve, was formed, God used something different. Eve was made from something which came out of the side of Adam. Nothing else was added. No

“dust,” no wood, leaves, or rocks were used. God only used what He had taken from Adam’s side to make his bride. This ancient story still speaks to us today.

Just as Adam was put to sleep and God performed the first surgery on him to extract materials for a bride, so too Jesus “fell asleep” on the cross. There God’s surgical assistant, the Roman soldier, made an incision in Jesus’ side and something very precious flowed out – blood and water (Jn 19:34). The blood and water, representing the poured out life of Christ, are the very substances which the Father is using today to build a bride, His church. Just as in the case of Eve, nothing earthly can be added. Nothing human, no other ingredients can be used. Only the life of Jesus Christ can be used to build up the bride which His heart desires.

THE LIFE OF GOD

Since this Life is the substance, in fact the only substance, which we can use to properly construct God’s holy habitation, perhaps it would be good for us to spend a little time here and investigate exactly what this is. Although some readers may already be familiar with this material, for many it will cover some very new and important ground.

In the New Testament, which was first written in the Greek language, we find at least three different Greek words which are translated as one English word “life.” Evidently the Greeks had a kind of philosophical culture, with a richer, broader understanding of life than we have today. So they used several different words to express these ideas.

There are three Greek words which will hold our attention at this moment. They are: “BIOS,” “PSUCHÊ,” and “ZOË.” These three words are translated as one English word “life,” yet they have distinctly different meanings. Therefore, it is important for us to know the meaning of these words and differentiate between them as we read the Bible. In this way we can have a better understanding of what the Bible is saying. Please bear with me as

we review the meanings of these three Greek words together.

The word BIOS seems to approach most closely what we mean in English when we say “life.” It includes such ideas as the duration of our life, our job or livelihood, and our moral conduct.

The word PSUCHÊ generally means our psychological life or our soul life. This includes our emotional life and our thought life. In fact, this word is often translated “soul” and is contrasted in Hebrews 4:12 with our spirit. Here we read that one function of the word of God is to make a clean and definite division between our (PSUCHÊ) soul and our spirit.

The Greek word ZOË is most frequently used in the New Testament to refer to a very special kind of life, the life of God. The New Testament writers chose this Greek word to express something supremely exalted – the very life of God Himself. Since He is the only eternal, uncreated being in the universe, His life is really something special.

It is exactly this supernatural life which was in Jesus Christ (Jn 1:4). It is this without-beginning and without-ending life which flowed out of His side at Calvary. It is this all-powerful, triumphant life which He is freely giving to those who believe. And it is this very life of God Himself which is the substance which He is using to build up His church, His bride.

OTHER MATERIALS

So when we begin to co-labor with God and construct His dwelling place we must use the proper material. We must build with His ZOË life. We must use this and only this divine substance. Nothing else can be added. Anything earthly or human cannot be used. This means that our natural abilities are excluded.

For example, our ability to organize people to follow us needs to be laid aside. Our gift for influencing others and persuading them to do what we want done must also be discounted. Our charismatic personality, which we

have so often used to charm others and attract them to our work, is rejected. Our ways of politically manipulating others, our techniques for seeming to be everybody's friend and so attracting them to our group, our commanding presence which we have used to impress people – all these things must be thrown out. More than this our knowledge, the things which we have learned about "how to" build up a group or church, must be discarded.

Why are these things rejected? It is because they have their origin in the soul. They are things of the earth. They are an expression of our BIOS or PSUCHË life and not a revelation of God's ZOË variety.

When we desire to work together with God and build up His eternal house, we must first humble ourselves and empty ourselves of all our preconceived ideas and plans. We must lay aside that which we have learned from other merely human constructions. In fact, we must repent from all that we have been doing which has been only earthly and natural efforts. Then, we must learn how to build according to His heavenly plan. As we have been seeing, an essential aspect of this plan is that no other materials may be used besides that which He has provided which is His own supernatural Life.

It may be that some will argue that since God made us a certain way, with certain aptitudes and talents, He surely would want us to use these natural abilities for His glory. However, this is not the case. Nothing natural can be used in His construction. He will not live in a temple made with your hands, no matter how talented you imagine you are. Your construction of wood, hay, and straw may be impressive, but it is not God's house.

The question here is not whether or not we have abilities but rather is "who is in control of these abilities?" Who is really doing the work? Is it truly God or is it the natural man trying to work for God? Is it us doing our best to work for Him or Him moving and flowing through us? Nothing natural within us can be used by Him until it has been thoroughly and completely broken by His hand. Our self-confidence in our capacity to do things must be totally

brought to an end. Our personal capabilities and qualifications are of no use to God as long as they are under the control of the natural man.

Paul, the apostle, before his conversion was a strong, natural man. He had many human abilities. So God had to work in his life to break down his confidence in himself. After years of experience following Christ he could write: "For when I am weak, then I am strong" (II Cor 12:10). And again: "For we also are weak in Him, but we shall live with Him by the power of God toward you" (II Cor 13:4). He quotes for our benefit what Jesus had taught him, "My strength is made perfect in [human] weakness" (II Cor 12:9). God brought Paul to the place where he no longer had "confidence in [his] flesh" (Ph 3:3). Human capabilities get in the way of God, but in human weaknesses He is glorified because He finds a way to exhibit His power.

OTHER KINDS OF ANIMALS

Before God made a bride for Adam, He and Adam together examined all the animals and Adam gave them names. But when we read this passage carefully (Gen 2:18-20) we see that this was not merely an animal naming session. God and Adam were looking for something specific. They were searching for a bride for Adam (vs 20). But none could be found.

Although these birds and beasts were no doubt cute, fuzzy, friendly, or attractive in their own ways, they were not the same kind of being as Adam. They did not have the same kind of life as he had. Therefore they could not qualify to be his wife. They were rejected. In the same way, God Himself can only marry someone who is of His same life and nature. This means, just as in the case of Adam and Eve, she must be constructed out of what comes out of His side.

Perhaps the group you are putting together is "successful." It may be that large numbers are attracted to your work. Possibly your different programs for the youth, the singles, the married couples, etc. are being well attended.

It could be that your organizational and managerial skills (or those of your wife) are amazing and you are reaching your goals. Perhaps your apparent attainments are attracting the attention of others and your “ministry” is expanding rapidly. It is possible that you have recently joined up with a “Christian” movement which is popular today and so your “church” is growing rapidly. Maybe you are gaining fame and even an international audience.

But in all this there is one important question which needs to be answered. Is this a product of the Divine life or of human ambition and ability? Is this a product of what is flowing from Jesus’ side or something natural and earthly, clothed in Christian words and phrases? Is what you are building really the bride of Christ or is it just some other kind of furry, cute little animal? Or worse yet, is it some kind of religious monstrosity? Only one kind of work will stand the test of judgment day. The others will be burned (I Cor 3:15).

I am not the judge of your work for God. It is He who will analyze what we all do. Each of us will stand before His throne along with all of our works and there God’s judgment will be executed upon them. With this in mind, we ourselves are exhorted to carefully examine our own work in the light of God (Gal 6:4).

My job, as your brother in Christ, is not to approve or condemn what you are doing in Jesus’ name. It is only to share with you the things which He has shown me and to urge you, in the fear of the Lord, to hear what God might be speaking to you and to respond to it with your whole heart.

GOD’S TRUE HOUSE

The true house of God is built by the ministry of ZOE life, flowing out to us and through us by the Holy Spirit. We are being built into a habitation of God through the Spirit (Eph 2:22). It is the “...Spirit of [ZOE] life in Christ Jesus” (Rm 8:2) that is doing the work in us and through us. This is not a work which the natural man can do. There

is nothing within us, apart from the Holy Spirit's ministry of life, which can serve to be used in the building.

Therefore, it is essential for every believer to be able to distinguish when they are in the Spirit and when they are merely operating by the soul. They must be able to discern when they are acting and speaking by the flow of divine life or when something natural is at work. We desperately need to discern what is from on high and what is from the earth.

The key here is that the new life from God lives in our human spirit. The Holy Spirit has become joined to our spirit and the two spirits have become one (I Cor 6:17). Therefore, what is flowing to us from our spirit is from God. On the other hand, what has its origins in our soul is natural, earthly and rejected as useful in the construction of God's holy temple.

How much we, God's people, need to experience the dividing asunder of our soul and our spirit (Heb 4:12)! How desperate is the necessity in this hour for us to know when it is merely our soul acting for God and when it is actually God acting through us! This subject of distinguishing between the soul and the spirit is vast.

There is not time in this writing to go into these things in great detail. But I would like to urge all readers to take some time and review two chapters of my book *From Glory to Glory*. These two chapters, 10 and 11, regarding the dividing of the soul and spirit, may be of some help in understanding this essential subject.

THE HUMAN MIND

There are, however, a couple of aspects of the soul that need to be examined in a little more detail since they very easily enter into our building projects for God.

Firstly, we will speak about our mind. The mind forms part of our soul. When our mind is under the control of the Spirit we find the flowing of ZOE life and peace (Rom 8:6). But when our mind is being motivated by the flesh, this means that the life of the soul is filling our mind and flow-

ing through our mind. The result is death. Often the carnal use of our mind is a result of acting according to our accumulated knowledge.

Many believers, perhaps without realizing it, have “learned” how to act like a Christian. They have experience in what to say and do and how to treat various situations. Perhaps they have been trained in some school or by others about how to live and act in a Christian environment. It is possible that they think that they know how to build up a church or group and are busy implementing what they have learned among their circle of Christian acquaintances.

Thus they are trying to build the house of God with earthly, carnal materials. They are using the natural wisdom of the human mind. This perhaps should remind us of Paul’s words where he says, “If anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know” (I Cor 8:2). What we really need to know is how to build with and by the Holy Spirit which conveys to us the life of God.

Do you remember the garden of Eden? There was a tree there called “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” This tree was full of knowledge. Perhaps we should expand our understanding of this tree a little bit to see that it represents much more than simply the knowledge of evil. We should be aware that there is also “good” knowledge exhibited by this tree.

This tree was and is full of all kinds of good, human, earthly knowledge and wisdom. This “good” knowledge includes the knowledge of: how to build up a church, how to counsel people in this or that situation, how to organize various ministries of the church, how to do this and how to do that in a “Christian” way and much, much more.

The results of eating the fruit of this tree was death. The same is true also today. Yes, the mind used by the natural man produces death. The human mind, filled with all kinds of knowledge of how to be a Christian, how to act and react in every situation, how to form a group, etc., results in spiritual death. The natural mind, being animat-

ed and used by the life of the soul produces death wherever it is manifested. Truly the scripture says that, "knowledge puffs up" (I Cor 8:1) but it does nothing to build up God's spiritual house.

Possibly you have some experiences which can verify this truth. It may be that you have sat through any number of worship services which did not edify your spirit. It may be that your mind was stimulated, but your spiritual man was not fed. Possibly you have received counsel and/or "ministry" which did nothing to penetrate to the root of your need or to minister *ZOE* life. Your spirit was left without the true spiritual food.

There are innumerable men and women today who, although they are regularly participating in some kind of organized Christian group, are actually dying from spiritual hunger. If the ministry they receive is merely mental, if it is simply a transmission of biblical knowledge, they cannot receive nourishment. Any ministry which is not the expression of God's divine life flowing through the Holy Spirit cannot build up the bride. Jesus' bride is only made of that which flowed out from His side on Calvary.

EMOTIONS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Some of course sense this lack of the flow of life. They discern that they are not receiving spiritual food. But all too often their solution is also carnal. Sensing the spiritual lack, they resort to emotional stimulation to try to fill the void. Their worship music becomes louder and louder. They are urged to clap, jump around, wave banners, or dance. Some of the preaching becomes merely shouting of various commonly accepted words or phrases.

All this and much more is merely an effort to stir up the emotions of the attendees, trying to substitute for the lack of the flowing of the Holy Spirit. This too has its origin in the soul.

Emotional stimulation does nothing to feed the human spirit. When a Christian meeting is composed of a lot of screaming and shouting, a casual observer might be

led to conclude that either the God of this particular group is deaf, or that He is a very long way away.

Another common tactic in the church of our day, in an attempt to compensate for the lack of the flow of Life through the Holy Spirit, is to resort to various entertainments. Of course there are the standard choirs or solos. But even more popular today are the dance routines complete with flags and costumes, theater presentations, mime, and ever more professional bands. Fancy lighting and special effects may also be employed.

It may be that these things are bringing to your group some apparent success. It is possible that more and more people are flocking to your meetings. Perhaps you imagine that you are building up the house of God with your different methods.

But we need to pause a minute and ask ourselves some very serious questions. Could it be that these things are merely earthly and human? Are they producing truly spiritual results? Are the men and women who are flocking to our meetings really being changed into the image of God? Are they being freed from sin and filled with God's life and nature in a visible, verifiable way? Are they being transformed into such sanctified people that God is pleased to dwell in them? Are their lives being changed, their marriages being restored, and their families being governed by God's grace?

Is our ministry a result of the flow of divine life or a human substitute? Is this a work we are doing for God or a work which God is doing through us? And is this work truly fireproof and so will pass the test of judgment day or something which appears good but is really made of wood, hay, and stubble? The true bride of Christ is being constructed of only that which is flowing out of His wounded side.

WALKING BY FAITH

Many people, when discussing how to build up the church want to know what steps to take. They seem to

want some kind of formula or program which they can follow. They like to have something tangible in their hands which they can do, something they can implement in their group. They feel very insecure with simply trusting in Jesus to do the work.

But God's house is a spiritual house. It is nothing which can be made with plans, programs, and formulas. Since it is spiritual, it is also mysterious and intangible. The natural man with his natural mind cannot comprehend it. Our physical eyes cannot see it. And our human hands cannot build it. Only the poured out life of Christ can accomplish this work.

God's house is a living house. It is not something static which we can plan, implement, or control. Since it is living, it is always new. Jesus, the architect of this house is alive today! When He was on this earth, His words and actions were always unpredictable. When His disciples awoke every morning, they had no idea where He would go, what He would say or what He would do next. They simply had to trust Him to lead them and they followed where He went.

Nothing has changed. Jesus does not reveal to us a program for building His house. We, in childlike simplicity, must walk with Him every day. Just like the disciples, we too must walk with Him without knowing what will happen next. We must believe that as we follow Him and obey Him, His house is being built up.

Co-laboring with God to build His house is a walk of faith. It is not something fixed or preprogrammed. Unless we know how to walk with Jesus in faith, we cannot construct His house. Through faith, we are able to sense His leadership day by day and cooperate with Him in the things which He is doing.

If we think we know what to do, then there is a great probability we will try to do it. If we imagine that we know the program, then it is very easy for our natural man to try to implement it. The minute we think we know what God is doing, we stick our human hands in there to try to help. For this reason, our Lord does not show us everything. His

plan is that we would simply walk with Him and obey Him. The necessity to walk in childlike faith never stops. If we are to work with God in building His house, this is the only way.

As soon as we imagine that we know what to do or how to do it, this is evidence that we have lost our spiritual direction. The minute we think we know how or what to build, this is proof that Jesus has moved on and we are simply holding onto the empty shell of what He did in the past. How many men of God are in this position. They are trying to hang onto or recreate something which God did in the past. But it just doesn't work.

It is true that God can give us some future direction. Occasionally He will show us how to accomplish something or other for Him. However, these things are always subject to change. Our Lord is "new every morning" (Lam 3:23). We must never take our eyes off of Him and begin to look only at the thing or things which He has shown us. We must always be ready, like the children of Israel in the wilderness, to pack up and move on at a moment's notice. We must not lose contact with Him. In this way, we will be fruitful in our work to build His eternal house.

BUILDING UP IN LIFE

Our calling from God is to edify the individual members of Christ's body. This requires that we must minister the life of Jesus Christ to one another. But in order to do so, we ourselves must be full of this supernatural life. How then can we be filled with the Life of God? Let us spend a little time here together investigating this all important matter.

The basic necessity of all life is food. Every living thing, whether it be plant or animal must have food to live. Therefore, we can conclude that in order to be full of this spiritual life, we too must be receiving some kind of spiritual nourishment. Our spiritual life does not grow by learning. It is not a product of mental or emotional effort. There is no other way to be full of life than to eat.

The food which our spiritual man needs is a Person, Jesus Christ. He explains to us: "...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no [ZOË] life in you" (Jn 6:53). This is quite simple. To be full of His divine life, we need to be partaking of Him. We must be eating and drinking of all that He is.

Therefore, the first step which we must take to build up the house of God is to fill ourselves with Him. We need to spend time, lots of time, in His presence. We need to eat, drink, and breathe in all the facets of His life and nature. We need to saturate ourselves to overflowing with this abundant ZOË life. This must become our daily experience.

In the book of Revelation chapter 22 verse 1 we read about a river of water of ZOË life. This river is bubbling up right from the throne of God and of the Lamb. So we see clearly that the presence of God is the source of the life which we need. Therefore, the closer we get to the throne of God, the more we can drink of this water. The more time we spend in His presence, the more this water of life will fill our being.

Then, when we speak to others, this is what we will have to share with them. When we are with them, they will sense the sweet aroma of Christ. When we minister, teach, counsel, or help, what will come out of us will be what we have been taking in.

It is "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt 12:34). If we have not been feeding on the Lamb, we will have only something human to share. If we have not been filling ourselves over and over with the divine substance, our "ministry" will be only earthly, soul-ish, and mental.

When we lack this ZOË life to minister, the only alternative is to rely on the flesh. It is then that we come to depend on our Bible knowledge. Our education, our personal appeal, our natural abilities, our persuasive talents then come into play. When we do not have the true Lamb to offer, we are left, as Cain was, with mere vegetables. These things do not and cannot build up the eternal house of God.

WHAT ARE WE WORKING ON?

In the church of Jesus Christ today, there is a lot of commotion. Meetings, conferences, seminars, and retreats abound. Much work is being done. There is a lot of construction activity. But it appears that much of this work is being done to try to improve the soul. Quite a lot of Christian efforts appear to be directed toward making the “old man” better.

Some churches employ rules and regulations to try to control fleshly appetites. Perhaps these norms apply to clothing, hair styles, or sports activities. Other groups subject their members to some kind of human authority such as a pastor or “discipler” who is supposed to supervise their lives. Still others employ some kind of system of re-education, be it Bible studies, training programs, seminars, etc. to teach the new believer how to behave in a better way. In almost all “churches” there is some effort being made to improve, retrain, or restrain the old life and nature.

But all such efforts are doomed to failure. This is because they do not penetrate to the root of the problem. The real cause of our problem is not what we do but what we are in our PSUCHÊ or soul. It is what we are – human beings with a sinful life and nature – that causes us to err. Only the life of Jesus Christ has the power to deal with this problem.

The solution here is to minister Life to the spirits of others. As the spiritual man grows, the old man is put to death. When the new spiritual life becomes strong, our attitudes and actions change. Our appetites and desires become different. Our thoughts and opinions begin to reflect those of our Lord. This is not because we have been retrained or re-educated, but because there is a new Life living in us and through us.

Jesus’ life, which is available to us, is full of His character and divine nature. His thoughts, feelings, plans, and purposes are all contained in His life. So when this life

grows up, it begins to express itself in us and through us. We begin to feel His feelings and actually think His thoughts. The more this life matures, the more we reflect Christ in every aspect of our lives. Instead of trying to think, act, or speak like Jesus, we can become a real expression of His eternal life. We become living vessels through whom God reveals Himself.

So our goal must be to fill ourselves with this life and then minister it to others. The more of it we ourselves have, the more effective our ministry will be. God will use our gifts and spiritual abilities to express Himself through us. Then those around us will be fed and grow also. The most important thing which we can do to build the house of God is to come to Him constantly and fill our spirit with His life. In this way we can “dispense” or “minister” (DIAKONOS Gk.) Him to our brothers, our sisters, and even the perishing world.

Any other method, no matter how well-intentioned it may be, cannot work to retard sin and build the church. This is because such methods only function by trying to correct our thinking, our feelings, or our decisions. These are merely aspects of our soul. Paul is quite clear when he explains the law is weak because it only operates through the flesh (Rm 8:3).

In the same way, all our efforts to apply “Christian principles” to our lives only reach the outer man. They do nothing to actually effect a change from PSUCHÊ to ZOË life. Further, any “discipline” to which we may subject any errant believers will do nothing to penetrate the depth of the question, which is what we are.

The true solution is the ministry of the Spirit. When we are walking in life, that is, we are in communion with God and filled with His life, we then can minister this to others. This living ministry penetrates all the way to the human spirit, effecting a true and eternal change in the core of our being.

This Life, which flowed out of the side of Jesus Christ on the cross, is the only element which can be used to build the house of God. How much we need to experience this

life. How much we need to know life, that is to discern between it and the manifestations of the soul. It is a desperate need in this last hour for the people of God to turn from vain religious exercises. It is essential that we stop all activity which is merely soulish, human, and earthly. It is crucial for us to repent of all our natural work and efforts and begin instead to live and work by the impulses of another Life.

Dear brothers and sisters. These are important considerations. All of our works will be judged one day. The fire of God will both test us and also what we have been building. May we have the humility to stop anything which we have seen is not of Him. May we have the honesty to admit and turn from any building which has been done with human hands. May we be among those of whom it is said that their works were "wrought in God" (Jn 3:21 KJV).

3.

THE FORM OF THE CHURCH

Every kind of life, whether it be plant or animal, has its own particular form. As it grows up, it conforms to its parent's pattern. It turns into that recognizable form from whence it came. For example, every variety of tree grows into a familiar shape. A banana tree always looks the same. An apple tree adopts a typical shape. People who are familiar with trees can tell what type a tree is simply by seeing its shape from far off.

The same thing is also true for animals. Dogs always have a familiar shape and cats similarly exhibit certain common characteristics. Thus, we can recognize any kind of plant or animal by their form.

This outward shape or form is the result of the life which is in them. The cat life always produces the cat form. The dog life always grows up into the dog shape. The familiar life forms which we see around us are not a result of some kind of self-effort on the part of these creatures. Furthermore, it is not something which is produced by other beings around them directing their development. Instead, it is the innate life which is in these creatures which produces the familiar form.

In exactly the same way, the life of Jesus Christ as it grows up within believers, always produces the church. This is a principle which is of the utmost importance. It is

the divine life of God which produces the form of the church, His bride. Further, it is *only* this ZOE life which produces the church. If we are to work together with God in building up the house which He desires, we must thoroughly understand this most basic fact.

When we wish to work together with God and construct His eternal house, we must learn to build according to the pattern which we have seen on the mountain. This pattern is a living pattern. Jesus' church is a living being. His bride is built by His life. Therefore, it is only by building with and by His life that we can arrive at the result which He desires. Unless and until we understand this most basic and essential truth, we are in no position to be building up the house of God.

THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN

Many believers are building today. But far too many of them have very little idea of what they are doing. One of the most common errors which they make is that while reading the New Testament, they think that they discern a pattern for their building. They then begin to copy this pattern. They labor strenuously to reproduce the form which they believe they have seen.

Of course each leader or group imagines that they have hit upon the pattern which most closely resembles that of the book of Acts and/or the epistles. They believe that their way is the most biblical.

Perhaps they are installing a certain kind of authority structure. Maybe they are selecting deacons or pastors in a special way. Possibly they are initiating certain types of meetings, ceremonies, or practices. It could be that they are insisting on a certain set of doctrines or beliefs.

But the problem here is that copying a pattern which they believe they have perceived is a serious mistake. This is putting the cart before the horse. We can never put into practice some pattern, doctrine, or exercise and produce something which pleases God. The pattern which we think we see can never, ever produce the life of Christ! On the

other hand, the life of Christ *always* generates the proper pattern or form which God desires. This is truly a question of life and death. When we work to replicate a pattern, it invariably results in something lifeless, something dead. We do not have the power to give life. Only God can do this.

Perhaps we believe if we produce something which is close to the Divine pattern, that God will rush down and bless it. It may be that we think if we manage to get really close to what we see in the Bible, He will come and live in it. Perhaps He will come and breathe life into the empty form we have made. But no, this will never happen. Our Lord will never give life to the image which we have built for Him no matter how biblical we believe it to be.

Therefore, much of our work remains dead and ineffective. So often it remains a lifeless thing which we must constantly try to prop up with programs, activities, and human enthusiasm. It always demands our attention to keep it moving. We must always keep the lifeless structure working by human energy, effort, and organization.

Since it does not have its own life, a human structure always requires the services of those who have some spiritual life themselves. Since the religious form itself is not living, it must draw nourishment from those who do have a living relationship with Jesus.

So, the zeal, enthusiasm, and love for Jesus which members of humanly controlled groups have is turned into support for the plans and purposes of the institution. Such members are used to run programs, greet newcomers, and any number of other such things which keep the machine moving.

These organizations need men and women to feed upon for their sustenance, as a leech does upon a living body. Sometimes, when the organization has used up all the life which is in some of its members – when they have given all they can to help and have run out of steam – it spits them out and looks for others to take their places. This is one of the unfortunate results of building with earthly materials rather than the divine ones.

HOW THEN DO WE BUILD?

We can work together with Jesus building His church by ministering Him to one another. He declared that He is the "Life" (Jn 11:25). Therefore, when we share Him with each other, we are building up the church. As we follow Him, He will lead us to use the gifts and ministries which He has given us to edify others. Through our intimate relationship with Him, we will receive living revelation, wisdom, and direction. Then we can disseminate what we have received. This life then will take on the form which He desires.

Believers who are in intimate fellowship with Jesus every day are full of His life. These individuals are constantly doing something because their Lord is leading them day by day. They are visiting the sick. They are sharing the gospel. They are on the lookout for the needs of others and asking God for ways to meet them. They are giving to the poor. They are praying for one another and constantly seeking how to minister Christ to one another.

They are together frequently because the Spirit of God is stirring them up to seek the others' company and fellowship. They are meeting together, praying together, and worshipping together. They are being built up and joined together by the Holy Spirit.

Here there is no need for human control. There is no necessity for one man or group of men to be planning or organizing this. Their direction is supernatural. The life of Christ will produce all the aspects of the church which we find in the New Testament.

All the elements of the church must be a product of the supernatural life. When we meet. Where we meet. How the meetings are conducted. The use of gifts. The function of various ministries. Our relationships with other members of the body. When we get together. When we should pray. How, when and where we should evangelize. The exercise of any kind of leadership. Every single aspect of the church must be a product of the Divine life. Every facet,

movement, and activity of the body, must be a result of the life and direction of our Head. If and when it is not, then it is only a dead, religious form.

Jesus has risen from the dead. He is alive today and able to lead us. As He lives in and moves through the different members of His body, the form of His church will manifest itself.

When we minister Jesus Christ to one another, the habitation of God is being constructed. When the Spirit of God flows within us and then out through us, His supernatural building appears. It is the life of God who lives in us which then is ministered to others through us. It is Jesus Himself, living in and moving through His people who is preparing His bride. This is the way, in fact the only way, that the church can be constructed.

Dear brothers and sisters, we must only build in Life. We do not have to try to arrange the church the way we think it should be. We do not need to plan, control, and organize people into the form we think the church should take. There is absolutely no need for men and women to try to manage others so that their group takes on an appearance which they think is biblical. We are not called upon to use human means and methods to try to achieve supernatural goals. The secret of building the living church is to minister Jesus to others. His life will only and always produce the bride for which He is yearning.

God is not depending upon our organizational abilities to get a group of people together and hold them together. He is not waiting anxiously for us to use our gifts to impress an adequate number of individuals so that we can constitute a "church." It is not necessary for us to mold others into something which we imagine God desires. Our God does not dwell and will never dwell in such temples made with human hands. He is looking for a living house. This house is a result of His life growing up within men and women.

We know from the scriptures that Jesus is seeking a bride. Let us consider the example of an earthly man as an illustration. Normally, this man is very interested in the

beauty and the form of his future wife. These things are important to him. So, can he just go out and buy a mannequin? This object may be exceptionally attractive and well formed. But will it satisfy him? Of course not. This man is also seeking someone living, someone who is full of life and can respond to him in many different ways.

In the same way, Jesus will never desire to enter into a marriage union with an empty form no matter how “good” or “right” it may appear. He is looking for someone who is alive with His own life. Consequently, we must never make the form our goal but learn to allow His life to create His bride the way He desires her to be.

FALSE APOSTLES

There are today in the Christian community many people who call themselves “apostles.” It may be that some of them do actually have this ministry. It is hoped that many of them have received and are building according to a heavenly vision.

However, there is unfortunately such a thing as “false apostles” (II Cor 11:13). There are those who claim to be sent by God, but in fact do not have the necessary preparation and vision to fulfill this ministry. They perhaps have sent themselves or have been sent by other men to try to do the work of God. While they may succeed in establishing a series of groups under their leadership and control, it may be that what they are constructing will not stand the test of judgment day.

There are a few of these who seem to be “cookie cutter” apostles. A cookie cutter is something which stamps out the same pattern over and over again from a soft, moldable piece of dough. These “apostles” then are those who imagine that they have discerned a New Testament pattern. They suppose that they have understood the form of the church.

And so they go from group to group which is open to them and “set things in order.” This means that they arrange the leadership and the activities of the group to

conform to their ideas. When the others are young, inexperienced, or pliable enough to submit to their control, then they put their pattern in place. Thus they believe they have “planted another New Testament church.”

But there is a small problem. This formula cannot and will never attract or produce the Life of God. All that can be done with such efforts is to arrive at something which perhaps looks like the church but is not living. It may be that such efforts can produce something which appears very scriptural. It is probable that these builders have many verses to support much of what they are doing. But as we have been seeing, being biblical is not enough. Merely being scriptural does not produce life.

For example, the pharisees of Jesus’ day were very familiar with God’s word, yet they failed to see Him in it. They were very biblical, but they missed Him. We must be building with the Life of the One who is revealed in the Bible. Merely imitating what we think the early believers did will only produce something dead. A dead, superficial form is nothing in which God will care to live.

The New Testament pattern which we need to see and with which we need to build is a living Person. Let me repeat this. The New Testament pattern is a Person. It is not an arrangement, an authority structure, or some kind of biblical “order” to which we must adhere. When we build with Jesus, the house of God is edified. When we plant this living seed, the living church grows up from it.

THE FLOWER EXAMPLE

Let us use here the example of a flower. Suppose we want to have some kind of flowering plant. Perhaps it could be a Morning Glory. Here we have two choices. To arrive at our goal, we could go to a store which sells such things and buy a few items. We could get some colored silk material, some green wire, some glue, paint, and everything we need to produce this plant. From these items we can begin to work. We can glue, cut, tape, and paint. We can make leaves, stems, buds, and blossoms. Soon, we may

have something which resembles the flower which we desired.

Today there are some who are expert at this sort of thing. I have seen silk flowers which are indistinguishable from the real thing. They are so realistic and so well made that they seem to be genuine flowers. You can even buy perfume to put on them which makes them smell like the real thing. But there is one small problem. They are not living. They are artificial. They look like the real thing but they are false. They are a mere imitation.

How many works for God today fall into this category! They have a very scriptural appearance or structure, but lack the abundance of Life. They look good and have all the features one would expect from reading the New Testament. They have leaves, stems, and blossoms, but are not living. Perhaps they have elders, deacons, meetings etc. but it is not the life of God which is filling and animating every part of the structure. The form is not a result of life and therefore can never satisfy the Lord.

If we wish to have a flower, there is another way to go about it. However, it is a much slower way and upon examination looks a little foolish. Yet it is the way of life. First you take a little brown thing, the seed, and drop it on the ground. Then you bury it. Next you throw a little water on it. Then you wait and wait. With time and proper care, the life which is in this little seed will grow up. The power of the life which is that ugly, little brown seed will produce the beautiful flowers which you are desiring.

In the same way, when we wish to build the church, we must understand this life principle. We must have patience. Sometimes we must work in ways which may seem foolish to others. Our work is simply to minister Jesus Christ whenever and in whatever way the Holy Spirit chooses. We do not have to know very much. We do not need a formal religious education. We do not need to do anything with our own strength or intelligence. We only need to patiently serve others with the eternal food, the life of Jesus Christ. We can do this having complete confidence that this Life will produce the New Testament

pattern. The ministry of the Holy Spirit will always result in the church. It will never grow into anything else.

As a flower grows, at first it looks nothing like the picture you might see on the seed package. Probably it is just a little green sprout which is very unimpressive and could be confused with a number of other plants or even weeds. But with time and nourishment, all the features of the flower begin to appear. We begin to see leaves, stems, and buds. Finally, the whole flower is in bloom.

In the same way, when we simply minister Jesus, in the beginning things may seem small and insignificant. Yet we are admonished not to despise "the day of small things" (Zech 4:10). It may be that all the "features" of the church are not in evidence. Perhaps all the gifts and ministries are not yet in full bloom. It may be that certain parts are lacking. But God speaks to us about this in the scriptures. In Mark 4:28 we read that it is "...first the blade, then the head." The little green shoot (the "blade") comes up first and then after time and nourishment we see the fruit (the "head").

We can trust in the seed. The life of Christ will always produce and will only produce the true, living church. There is no need for us to get in a rush and begin to fabricate something on our own. Let us wait patiently. Let us continue on sowing and watering knowing that in His time, His desire will come forth.

We know, for example, that in the church we see certain gifts and ministries. We read in the New Testament about evangelists, pastors, teachers, apostles, and prophets (Eph 4:11). We are told about gifts of healing, miracles, wisdom, knowledge, prophecy, and many other things.

We understand that the early church met daily from house to house (Acts 2:46). The apostles were teaching in the temple and in homes (Acts 5:42). Some later were sent out to teach and preach. Deacons were selected (Acts 6:5). Elders were pointed out or recognized (Acts 14:23). Churches were planted. We can identify many different parts of this plant. But how did all this come about? Was it a result of human effort or of the flow of Divine Life?

WHAT JESUS FORGOT

I don't know how it happened, but it seems that Jesus forgot to teach His disciples about how to set up a church when He was on the earth. He spent a lot of time with them. In fact, it was about three and one half years. They were together all this time, eating, traveling, ministering, and sleeping. Yet He seems to have forgotten to teach them the basics of how to organize a church. In the four gospels we find no record of such instruction.

Jesus did not explain about how to have meetings. He made no mention of how to select elders or deacons. He seems to have neglected to teach about how to organize, how to run things, how to have home meetings, prayer meetings, large meetings, and small meetings.

It must have skipped His mind to instruct them about how to take offerings, pay the pastors and other expenses. He gave no hints about how to have children's groups, young people's activities, retreats, or conventions. He had so much time with them and yet He taught them nothing about how to do all these and many more seemingly necessary things.

Actually, we do find at least two verses in which Jesus teaches us about the church. One of these is when He pointedly says: "I will build my church" (Mt 16:18). This verse should speak to us profoundly. He never said: "Please go and build My church for me according to the following instructions." He insisted that *He* would do the job. He was going to do the building.

Our function is to go out into all the world and preach Him. We are to announce the good tidings about His person and work. While we minister Him to others, He will build up His house. Undoubtedly we are co-laborers with Him. We do have a part to play. Yet it is not us constructing something for Him, but Him working through us.

A second verse in which Jesus speaks to us about building the church is John 16:13. There we read that Jesus will send us the Holy Spirit and that when He comes, He

will lead us into all truth. Instead of teaching the disciples a set of instructions, He said He would send them the Holy Spirit. By obeying the Spirit, all His heart's desires would be realized. The order of these things is very important. First, God did indeed pour out His Holy Spirit. Next, we have a record of all that He did in and through His people.

All the features, the gifts, meetings and ministries, of the church which we read about in the Bible were a result of men and women following the Holy Spirit. These people had no New Testament. They had no detailed instructions from Jesus either. So they were forced to rely on the Holy Spirit day by day. They had to simply follow Him in faith and trust. They were guided by His life and His life produced the churches which we see in God's word.

So if we wish to see these same things happen in our time and place, what should we do? We must do things in exactly the same way as the New Testament believers. First we must be filled with the Holy Spirit. Then we must follow Him in all that He is leading us to do. When we do this, we can be completely confident that His leading will produce the things which we see in the book of Acts and the epistles. God's life will always and only produce the church.

On the other hand if we simply try to repeat a pattern we think we see in the New Testament, we will fall short of the goal. We will produce an empty form without the essential content. The substance of the New Testament church was the life of Christ ministered by the Holy Spirit. All the features which we see were the direct result of the growth and operation of this life. If we too wish to see God's house edified, we must build in the same way.

Actually, Jesus did not forget anything. He taught His disciples all that was necessary to live and be led by the Holy Spirit. He taught them humility. He taught them submission to Himself. He taught them to love one another. All the critical ingredients to build up the church were evident in His teaching. What He did was prepare them to receive and walk in the Holy Spirit which He would send them.

THE NECESSITY OF THE BIBLE

I would like to state clearly and emphatically here that I am not against the Bible. Nor am I teaching that it is unnecessary to us to be biblical in our walk and our work for the Lord. The only question is how we use this Book.

The Bible is absolutely necessary for us in our Christian life and walk. It has many important functions for every believer. First and foremost, it reveals to us the person of Jesus Christ. Instead of a set of rules or instructions, the main object of the Bible is to reveal God to us. He can be seen on every page. If we fail to penetrate behind the words and letters – if we only see the form but do not understand the Life which has produced this form – we have completely missed the message.

This Person who is revealed in God's word is our food. He is our spiritual nourishment. We must learn to eat and drink Him every day. How then is this done? When we open the Bible, we must at the same time open our spirit to Him. Instead of trying to accumulate information about God from His word, we must learn to actually have communion *with* God in His word. We must encounter a living Person there and have intimate fellowship with Him as we read. This is the spiritual reality of communion. Eating and drinking Christ in His presence, through His word.

I recommend that every believer spend much time in God's word every day. This is essential. As we fill ourselves with His Holy word, our spiritual man will grow (I Pet 2:2). We will receive spiritual nourishment. We will be full of the divine life. Thus we will have something real and living to minister to the other people around us. Instead of telling them something we have learned mentally, we can share with them Someone whom we know intimately. This then is how we can work together with God to build up His holy habitation.

When we pray, we can pray in the Spirit. When we worship, our worship can be the variety which is accept-

able, "in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:23). When we minister, we will share the spiritual substance which has been nourishing us. All this is a result of learning how to feed upon God's word. If you do not know this secret, if you are not finding His sweet presence when you open His book, then you need to have some real changes in your life.

Anything which is inhibiting your spiritual relationship with Jesus needs treatment. Whatever there is in your life that does not please Him needs repentance. If you are not comfortable with complete transparency and intimacy with our Savior, you need to seek Him for understanding of what it is that is hindering this relationship. Then you need to make the necessary adjustments so that when you are meditating in His word, you can also enjoy His speaking and His presence.

The Bible is absolutely essential for a healthy Christian walk. Through it God reveals Himself and His will to us. In it He speaks His direction. In its pages, we understand His plans and purposes. God's word convicts us of sin. It shows us where we are short of His glory and will. It challenges us, showing us where we are failing to manifest His nature. It reveals to us how He has led and used others, opening up new vistas for our spiritual life and work.

Concerning the church, the Bible shows us what the finished product looks like so that we can seek Him to produce this same thing in our midst. If we see that certain features of the church are lacking, we must pray that Jesus would lead us into these things. Instead of trying to correct any lack ourselves, we must turn to God.

No human plans and procedures are necessary. We must let Him convict us of any attitudes or actions which are inhibiting the flow of His life. We must open up our hearts and spirits for Him to do any further work which needs doing. When we see things in the Bible which are lacking in our part of His body, it is He alone who can and will produce them.

Let us suppose, for example, that some are sensing a lack among the youth. Perhaps they are not being adequately touched by the ministries which are going on. So

what do we do? Shall we institute some kind of activities and programs and find someone who will shoulder the burden of supervising this? Is this God's way? There is a good chance that this would merely produce another empty form.

But there is another option. Those who see the lack can begin to pray. They can begin to intercede with God that He would meet this need. In time He will raise up someone with an anointing and ministry in this area. He will find someone that He has prepared to meet this need. Then instead of another church program, we will have an anointed ministry which God will use to build up His church.

Furthermore, when we see things happening among us which have no foundation in God's word, we then need to be corrected by this. For example, when someone is exercising unscriptural authority over another, we know that this is not of God. When there is sin, when there is an unhealthy emphasis on so-called "liberty," when some strange doctrine or practice is prominent, then the Bible is essential to convict us. This holy book is somewhat like the picture of the plant which we are desiring to see. Any practices or habits among us that do not conform to the picture should be discarded.

In no way am I negating the necessity of the Bible. I am only saying that this book can be used in two ways. It can be used as a source of Life or it can be used as a legalistic tool to minister death to others. Paul says that he and his co-workers were "...sufficient as ministers of the New Covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit." He enlarges this idea further by explaining that the "letter [of the scriptures] kills" (II Cor 3:6).

This is to say that we can misuse the Bible. We can use it to teach a pattern. We can insist on the superficial appearance of what we think we see and miss the substance of it. We can actually bring spiritual harm to others and even death through such ministry. Or we can use it as a source of life. Through our intimate relationship with Jesus in His word, we can then share this life with others to

build them up. Paul's conclusion then becomes our experience. "But the spirit [of the scriptures] gives [ZOE] life" (II Cor 3:6).

THE FORM IS IN THE LIFE

One conclusion we can draw from our previous discussion is that when we are working together with God to build His eternal habitation, we do not need to worry very much about the form it will take. We do not need to invest a lot of time and energy organizing, planning, and manipulating the structure. We have no need to try to control anything or anyone. If God is not in control, our efforts are futile. "Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it" (Ps 127:1). Our principle need is to learn how to minister Jesus Christ to one another and to a perishing world.

As we have already mentioned, we can have complete confidence in the seed of life. The pattern of the church is in the seed of life which we are sowing. For example, if we plant a seed of corn will wheat grow up from this seed? Of course not. And if we plant a bean seed, will a tomato plant sprout from the seed? Never! Therefore, if and when we are ministering Jesus Christ, His life will produce the church and nothing else. We can trust fully in this fact. Our faith must rest in the ability of Jesus Christ to do what He said – build His church. As we simply do our part in obedience to His Spirit, His house will be edified.

The Christian life should be one of great simplicity. We must become like little children. Our goal is not to become great and have a large organization under our authority. We have no need to try to control the way things are going. There is no necessity for us to organize others into some kind of "church group." The simple object of our work is to help others be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ. In this way and only in this way is the house of God constructed.

This kind of ministry involves a great faith in Jesus Christ. It means that we must follow our invisible leader

every day. We have to trust that He knows what He is doing and will lead us. We must learn to depend completely on our spiritual communion with the risen Savior. Here there is no need for form or formula. We do not need some kind of special doctrine or practice to assure ourselves that we are doing the right thing. We know we are pleasing to Him because we are walking in a faith relationship with Him.

On the other hand, the natural human being likes an earthly kind of security. He appreciates something already planned. He wants to know what will happen tomorrow. He puts great confidence in things which are visible and tangible. Therefore, he yearns for something organized, well-run, and "safe." He wants a kind of earthly structure upon which he can depend.

If we are to build up the eternal dwelling place of God, we must build in life. As this life grows up within each one, the form of the bride will appear. How God must be pleased with this sight! How the heart of the Bridegroom must long for a living bride who is like Himself. When she is full of His life and nature, when she is moving by His own Spirit and responding to His every desire, how He must enjoy her presence. This then is the kind of church experience which attracts the presence of the Lord. This is the kind of house in which He will be pleased to dwell.

DOING NOTHING

Here in this writing we have been emphasizing the danger of building a merely religious structure. We have been seeing that it is only the Life of God which produces the form which He desires. But does this mean that we are supposed to do nothing? For fear of doing the wrong thing, shall we just sit back and watch? Certainly not! The results of this revelation should be that many more brothers and sisters are free to follow the Holy Spirit and do what He is leading them to do.

Once we have acquired a godly fear of building with wrong materials, once we have seen the danger of human

effort, we should be even more equipped to do what Jesus is leading us to do. We no longer need to wait for the "leaders" to tell us what will happen. We no longer must depend on the institution approving what our Lord wants us to do. Every member of the body is free to follow the Holy Spirit. Each one can build according to His leading.

Everyone has something to do. Anyone can evangelize. Perhaps some sister or brother might open his or her home for Bible study, prayer, or counseling. Those with gifts can visit others, ministering their portion to them. Healing and prophecies, worship and prayer are not limited to some religious building. These are things which we can experience from "house to house," (Acts 2:46) every day. No member of the body should be inactive. Each one has a part to play. Every joint of supply (Eph 4:16), every member of Christ's church is necessary for the edification of the whole.

Complacency is not recommended here. We will be responsible before the Lord if we do nothing with the wonderful things which He has given us. So, get busy. Moving in the fear of God, obey Him in what He is leading you to do. Many others are depending on your portion of Christ for their growth and well-being.

THE PROBLEM OF MIXTURE

We have been speaking here about a church experience which is born of, led by, and filled with the Holy Spirit. This is the ideal. But as we look around us we see much construction which is not made with such divine substances. Many groups manifest a mixture of the human and the divine. The works of men and the work of God seem to be occurring in the same context.

Many situations are not black and white, they are not all one thing or the other. While it is clear in many groups that men's hands are at work, sometimes we also see evidence of the Holy Spirit. For example, in some human religious organizations, we can see men and women being born again. Some are growing in their faith. Others are

being set free from some problem or other. What then are we to think about all this?

God is very humble. He does not insist that we be completely right about everything before He will work with us. If He insisted on our doing everything right, He would never work with us at all. So our Lord humbles Himself and tries to fit Himself into our works whenever and however He can. He finds ways and means to work around and through our human constructions. Since He sees spiritual hunger among His children, He finds ways to meet their needs.

For example, He might give a pastor an anointed message. He might inspire a brother or sister to pray for another for healing, deliverance, or some other need. He may stir up some to intercede for the group and the leadership. He will no doubt use the many different members to spread the gospel to the unsaved. These and many other such things God will do among us in spite of any human religious structure we might have.

Perhaps many mistake this work of God among them as His blessing on what they are building. Since they see that He is using them to some degree, they then suppose that He is approving of everything they are doing. They become deceived, thinking that the fruit they see is a result of their religious structure.

The truth is that God is responding to open hearts. When He sees spiritual yearnings among His children, He will do whatever He can to meet their needs. He will find ways to work around the constructions of men to accomplish His purposes.

Therefore some may ask: "Why then is the structure so important?" "What difference does it make how we build?" "Why is this author so concerned about only constructing with God's materials in God's way if the results are the same?"

The problem with errant construction is that it greatly hinders the work of God. It gets in His way. While He may find ways to work around and through it, it is a kind of roadblock in the path of what He truly wants to do in and

with His body. There is so much our Lord wants to do and would do if only we gave Him the room to do it.

If so much of our building were not useless effort, He could work through us much more efficiently. If we would learn to work alongside God, using His materials, our work for Him would be much, much more effective. If what we have done in the wrong way, using the wrong materials was used a little by Him, imagine what He might do if we really worked according to His plan.

God's power and blessing will be found in much greater abundance when we do things His way. Many more unbelievers will be converted. Many more lives will be truly transformed. More marriages will be restored. More healings will take place. More real disciples will be made for Him. These and many other benefits will occur when we learn to work together with Him using His materials. When we learn to abide in Him, we will bear much fruit and this fruit will be the variety that lasts forever, passing the test of judgment day (Jn 15:5).

So then should we tolerate mixture? Certainly not! If we purge out the "old leaven" we will be holy to the Lord (I Cor 5:7). If we work together with Him to cleanse His temple, His presence will be much more powerfully manifested among us. As we begin to build together with Him using His materials, He will actually begin to live permanently among us.

This experience of having God live and move among His body is one which very few have known in any kind of powerful way. Yet, it is His will. When we fulfill His criterion and construct something which is truly His house, He will come and make His home among us. This will result in a potent kind of Christianity of which many have never dreamed. Let us then never be satisfied with a construction which God only visits now and then, but seek one in which He is pleased to dwell.

In the New Testament Jesus made a kind of whip and cleansed the temple. But a careful reading of the scriptures seems to show an interesting fact. It appears that He cleansed the temple twice, once at the beginning of His

ministry and again at the end. In the gospel of John, this event is recorded immediately after Jesus' first miracle. During the Passover, He made a whip of cords and drove out the money changers and animals. This was at the beginning of His ministry (Jn 2:13-16).

But in the gospel of Luke, after Jesus' "triumphal entry" into Jerusalem riding on a donkey, we read: "Then He went into the temple and began to drive out those who bought and sold in it" (Lk 19:45). This incident then is something which He did at the end of His ministry.

It is possible that we could consider these events to be prophetic. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost, God did a cleansing work in His temple. He drew His people out of the old religious form of Judaism and began a new, clean construction. However, during the intervening years between then and now, man has done much to again pollute what God considers holy.

But let us think about this for a moment. Could it be that in these last days, at the end of the "church age" He might want to cleanse His temple again? Is it possible that in this "last hour" Jesus might again wish to rise up in His people and do a purifying work?

My belief is that this is so. My contact with men and women all over the globe leads me to believe that this is His plan. This revelation of His temple is not something isolated or unique. It is a vision which God is giving to many of His people, in many parts of the world, in these last days.

With all this in mind, the question now becomes: Are you willing to work together with God in this effort? Are you ready to forsake all empty religious forms and move with the Holy Spirit in the work He is doing today? Can your heart respond to the call of God to purify His temple and build His true house? If so, now is the hour. Today is the day to lay aside all human endeavors and earthly means and methods. Now is the time to repent of all that we have been doing which is only wood, hay, and straw. It is now, at the end of this age that we must heed His call and help prepare His bride for His coming.

4.

WHERE GOD DWELLS

*T*he Lord our God does not live in a house which is made by human hands. This is very clear in His word where we read: "God, who made the world and everything in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:24). Of course most believers understand that this means God does not reside in some kind of temple or cathedral of earthly construction.

No matter how ornate, beautiful, or elaborate they may be, God is not attracted by earthly temples and does not live in them. Although some people are awed by extravagant religious constructions and mistake this soulish feeling for a spiritual blessing, the truth is that God does not and never will inhabit such earthly things. Furthermore, we also must understand that He does not live in some kind of gilded box in the front of a cathedral, nor in any sort of image, be it made of porcelain, plastic, wood, or precious metal. Most true believers today understand this truth.

But what many fail to see is that God also does not live in human organizations. By this I mean that He does not inhabit Christian groups which have been put together by human effort. Here is a point which may be very difficult for some to understand. While most know that God does not dwell in a house of brick or stone, many have a very strongly instilled concept that He does in fact live in any

group of believers who call themselves a “church.” We easily imagine that God lives in our particular organization.

Yet as we receive a heavenly revelation, we begin to understand that God’s house is a living thing. It is not a static structure, but something which is full of His life. The body of Christ – the home in which He lives – is a living organism. It is not an organization. Such a living dwelling is not a product of human effort or will. It is not something which man can put together. It is a result of His supernatural life. It is something which has grown up and taken on the form which He desires as a result of His own eternal life.

Therefore, we can easily understand that our Lord will not dwell in any Christian group unless it is a product of this very Life. It is not sufficient for our church to be biblical. It is not enough for a group of believers to seem to conform to some New Testament pattern. It is only His living bride, His body, which attracts Him and in which He desires to live for eternity. Only that which is a product of supernatural life will serve to be His habitation.

Simply putting the name “church” on our group will not qualify it to be His eternal habitation. Merely organizing something that looks nice or seems religious from an earthly point of view will not be approved. Anything which is made with human hands is totally unfitted to be God’s dwelling place.

THE FUNDAMENTAL BUILDING BLOCKS

The basis, the fundamental building blocks of God’s house, are individuals, not groups. He inhabits men and women personally. We read that we are the temple of the living God and that He will dwell in us (II Cor 6:16). Also we read that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit (I Cor 6:19). So it is individual men and women who are the basis for the dwelling place of God.

Therefore, in order for the house of God to be built up, the believers who are part of this house must grow up in His life. It is necessary for them to mature and become

what He wants them to be. This individual growth of each member is what causes His house to be built up. It is not simply the joining together of a great number of people which will do the job, but the growth of the individuals which makes the whole more living.

Let us take this thought a little further. If we wish to construct the house of God, we must concentrate our work on the basic building blocks, which are the individuals. We must focus our efforts on helping each one grow in Christ. We must learn how to minister Christ to each one in a way which will cause them to mature spiritually. In this way, the house of God will be built up.

If we wish to build up the temple of the Holy Spirit, there is only one way to do it. We must daily fill ourselves with God's supernatural life. We must cultivate an intimacy with Jesus, eating and drinking of all that He is so that we are filled with Him. Next, we can "minister" or serve this life to the other believers (or even unbelievers) with whom we have contact. By our sharing the living Jesus with others, they too will grow up into all that He is.

Far too many today are instead working to build up some kind of group. Their focus is on the appearance of the whole. They are trying to mount some kind of structure which believers can fit themselves into. They are organizing, administrating, planning, and doing. They are busy constructing a framework of how they think the church should be. They are working to get a group together which to them resembles a "church."

But so much of this effort does nothing to cause the members to grow up in life. Very often, this collection of individuals is just that – a group of believers whose lives are not really transformed into the image of Christ. Often, many of these Christians are only being held up by a structure which someone has made and are not really growing spiritually. Consequently, the group does not become a place where the presence of God comes and lives.

Since God does live in individual Christians, when they are together there is a manifestation of His presence. But this manifestation – the power of His presence – is

entirely dependent upon the degree to which He resides in each individual. The more each one has made room for Him in their lives, the more powerfully He will be expressed in and through the group. The more spiritual maturity and love for Jesus each member has, the more the group will actually *be* His temple.

The emphasis of Jesus' teachings and the New Testament in general is on the individual materials, the building blocks so to speak, and not on the appearance of the whole. It is not God's desire simply to join together an impressive number of believers. It is not His plan for the church to be some kind of well-run organization. He is not attracted by this. He will make his home among us only to the extent that each one of us is permitting Him to make His home in us. His desire is that the individual members be sanctified, transformed, and ready for Him to live in them and move through them.

Perhaps an analogy would help here. Let us suppose that a very wealthy person contracted with a builder to make him a house out of granite blocks. But let us imagine that the contractor used other materials instead. He wanted to build the house faster and cheaper. So he used 2x4's and plywood. Then to make it look like granite, he put some plastic facing on the outside which appeared to be genuine rock. It is possible that in the end he achieved something which looked like the original plan.

When the owner of the house comes to look at it will he be pleased? Will he be satisfied with the work? Or will he refuse to live in such a house which is made out of cheaper, inferior materials? No doubt he will not pay for the work and not move into this imitation house. How much less will the God of the universe live in something which is not made with the correct materials and not built according to His plan. In this case, just as it is with the church, it is the individual materials which are essential, not merely the appearance of the whole.

This distinction is very important. If we are going to co-labor with God and build up His house, we must understand where it is that He lives. He does not live in

Christian organizations which have been put together by man and held together by earthly means. Yet we often find well-meaning servants of God laboring to get a large number of believers together under the same roof. They are using their personality and talents to rally people around them and/or their ministry supposing that this is God's house.

Many people today are talking about how to make "their church" grow. The main idea seems to be to find out how to increase the number of people who attend the meetings. Various methods are being employed to achieve this end including new buildings, new programs, or some new emphasis on gifts, experiences etc. But simply increasing numbers does nothing to build up the house of God. Unless this increase comes from unbelievers actually being born-again, God's house is not edified in this way. Building up a religious organization is not the same thing as constructing the temple of the living God.

God's idea is not principally to construct a group, instead it is to edify the men and women who make up the group. His thought is that we would build up one another. It is that we should help one another grow spiritually. As we grow this makes more "room" for Him to live and move inside of us and through us. As we build up one another in our holy faith (Jude 1:20) we are constructing the eternal dwelling place of God. This is our task.

Jesus instructed us to go and make disciples. This means to aid others to come to know and to submit to Jesus. God then takes these materials and puts them together as it pleases Him (I Cor 12:18).

The manifestation of His presence in any gathering of believers depends on the hearts of the individuals so gathered. It has nothing to do with how well the organization functions. It does not depend on the number of people present. God is not attracted by our programs or "ministries." So what are we building up? If His presence is attracted by men and women who are open to Him and not to our superstructure, where should we be investing our time?

Now some may argue: "But the Bible says that where two or three are gathered together, Jesus is there in the midst." Yes, Jesus does visit our meetings. But, once again, the intensity of His presence is going to be directly related to the openness of heart of the individuals involved. When the hearts of the people present are shut up, they cannot find His presence.

God's visitations do not depend on the doctrinal stance of the group. Neither are they based upon the outward appearance or any other such superficial factor. God looks upon the hearts of the individuals. Furthermore, the quality of the ministry which we receive from Him, the depth of our experience in such circumstances, is directly related to the spiritual hunger and openness of those involved. All this is to say that the spiritual experience of the group depends on the individuals in whom God's work is being done.

GOD NEVER TOLD US TO ORGANIZE GROUPS

Nowhere in the New Testament are we instructed to try to build some kind of church group or organization. This is very important. We are never told to try to get a number of believers together and organize them into some kind of group. We are never taught that we must build up "a" church. We are never exhorted to try to put together some kind of Christian organization.

It is our job, being led by the Holy Spirit to build up one another. This is our part of the work. Then, it is the work which God Himself does to join us together! This joining is not a work which man can do nor a work which we have been instructed to do. A careful reading of the book of Ephesians will help the reader see this more clearly. It is God who raises "us up together" and makes "us sit together in the heavenly places" (Eph 2:6).

Jesus explicitly said: "I will build My church" (Mt 16:18). We learn that "the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). It was God Himself who put this group together. The early Christians

were not laboring to convince people to join their group, but to introduce them to Christ. They were not trying to form any kind of society, but to live by the Holy Spirit and share Jesus with the world. The church or churches which appeared were a spontaneous result of ministering Jesus. They were the automatic fruit of the preaching of the gospel. These results were not effected by believers trying to organize groups, but a product of Jesus being lived out through them.

We read in Zechariah 6:12,13 that it is the work of the Son of God to build up the temple of the Lord. Here we read: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, saying; 'Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From His place He shall branch out, and He shall build the temple of the Lord; yes, He shall build the temple of the Lord. He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule on His throne.' "

God also asks: "Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house you will build Me?" (Is 66:1). The answer is that there is no house which we can build for Him. There is nothing which we can construct that will please Him. None of our human, earthly organizations will work. No matter what we may build, no matter how good or scriptural it may appear, we cannot, ever, build anything in which God will dwell. Only He can do it!

We cannot build the house of God. The best we can manage is to co-labor together with Him. This co-laboring is done by helping prepare the materials. It is then He who puts them together in a way that pleases Him.

The early church, which we think of as being some kind of group, was the work of God and not of man. It was a natural, spontaneous result of the work of Jesus Christ in the hearts of individual men and women. It was He who joined them together. It was also His responsibility to keep them together if He so chose. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find the apostles running around trying to rally believers and form them into separate groups. It was simply not their job.

Our goal, our only goal, is to minister Jesus Christ to one another and to the world. Our calling is to build up

individuals. Our job is to edify the temple of God which is men and women.

God will then use these building materials and put them together in a divine arrangement which only He can do. He will build His church. He will do the building together of the separate parts. Our part is to minister Jesus Christ to one another and leave the results with Him.

HOW IT WORKS

When we succeed in ministering Life to someone, then they will love God more. They will learn to walk in intimacy with Him. They will learn to hear His voice and obey Him. Consequently, they will wish to be with others who have this same love. So they will seek out fellowship. They will naturally look for chances to meet together with others for prayer, worship, and sharing. Thus, the house of God will grow and be built up.

As each one follows the leading of the Head and shares their portion of life with the rest, the house of God will begin to appear. All the features of church which we see in the New Testament, including meetings, ministries, gifts, etc. will begin to appear automatically among any group of believers who are loving and following Jesus. His life will produce this. His life will always and only produce the church. He will lead them into all that He has for them.

This concept is very simple, yet very profound. If we, as little children, simply love and follow Jesus every day, the church will come forth. The house of God will appear as a result of His life. This building will be the product of a supernatural work. It will be something which Jesus builds. Here there is no room for human hands. There is no need for the plans and schemes of men. There is no necessity for organizational frameworks and human structures. As we simply live Jesus, His life will produce the church. In fact, there is no other way to arrive at this goal.

Please pay careful attention to this. There is no other way to build up the temple of the Lord other than allowing the life of Jesus to do it. As He lives in and through us and

others, there will be a supernatural structure being built. As we follow Him every day, ministering Him to others, His dwelling will appear. The dispensation of eternal life will result in the building of God's house. The life of God will always grow up into the form of the church which He desires. Anything else is just a human substitution.

NOT IMPRESSIVE

This way of building is never going to be impressive. Those who choose to build in life are never going to be famous, in demand, or popular. Their works are never going to compete in terms of grandeur and numbers with the schemes of men. God's way has always been a lowly, humble way. We need to prepare our mind for this. We must realize before we begin that our work is not going to stroke our ego or cause our popularity to spread. Our hearts must be prepared to simply obey Jesus and never look for results which the world will find impressive. It is only by humbling ourselves and becoming like little children that we will succeed in entering into the Kingdom of God (Mt 18:3).

When the first shoot of a plant breaks forth from the earth, it is never ostentatious. It does not look like much. Yet, it is the real thing. Therefore, we should never judge our work or any other work in worldly terms. We must never look for success, numbers, fame, etc. to see if what we are doing pleases God.

The only standard for our work is whether or not we are obeying God. If we are faithfully following Him in all that we are doing, then it will be approved. On the other hand, if we are ambitious for success and all the trappings which go with it, then we will have much trouble trying to build God's house in God's way.

THE NEED FOR FAITH

Building in the simple way of life requires faith. It demands that each one have a faith relationship with Jesus

Christ. We must believe that if we only follow Him every day, doing what He leads us to do, He will produce the results. This requires much faith. We must believe that Jesus will do what He said He will do – build His church. We must trust that as we do our small part of God’s plan, He will take care of the rest.

If we do not have such faith, then we will begin to try to do things ourselves. Since the way of life is often slow and unimpressive there will always be a great temptation for man to help God out a little bit. There will often be things which we imagine should be done to accelerate the process. There will frequently be the opportunity to reach out our hand and try to do the work of God for Him.

To build in life is to walk by faith and not by sight. But this kind of walk is very difficult for the natural man. It is very normal for human beings to depend upon something tangible. They easily trust in what they can see, hear, and feel. Consequently, men constantly tend to gravitate toward something outward and earthly. Any man or woman of God who wants to build with His life must continually be on guard against this human tendency.

Religious structures provide just such tangible props for the human soul. Human organizations often have a very strong appeal to the natural man. It is always much easier for men and women to feel comfortable with something mental, regularly scheduled, visible, and verifiable.

Such religious systems do not require much faith. They don’t demand a complete submission to God from the participants. They provide plenty of room for believers to be drawn along by their many activities, entertainments, and programs whether they are truly seeking Jesus with all their heart or not. This is the reason that human organizations seem to prosper while the way of simple childlike faith is neglected. Such systems have the name of Christianity but provide plenty of room for the natural man also. Often such human structures provide just enough religion to satisfy the consciences of the attendees along with a good dose of social functions and other activities to keep the natural man happy too.

A genuine walk of faith demands continual contact with and obedience to Someone invisible. This walk in the spirit is not done by using our natural senses. This means that we must maintain an intimate relationship with our Savior who is very intangible to the natural man. It is only through this spiritual communion with God that we can succeed in living in obedience to Him and build His eternal house. It is as we receive the flow of life from Him that we can minister it to others also and so construct something which pleases Him.

DON'T FORSAKE THE ASSEMBLING

There is an important admonition in the scriptures which urges us not to forsake the "assembling of ourselves together" (Heb 10:25). This is an essential word for all believers. If we are loving Jesus and following Him, we will naturally want to be with other Christians as much as possible. Our "assembling" with them will be one of the strong desires of our heart. An obedient Christian will always be seeking this. Therefore, meeting with other believers for worship, prayer, and mutual edification will be a notable feature of any living church experience. In fact, this desire or the lack thereof is a good test to see if we are really walking in intimacy with Jesus.

However, in no way can this verse be considered as a command to try to put together a group or human structure. This is not what the scripture says. This exhortation is meant to stimulate believers to obey the leading of the Holy Spirit and seek out fellowship with others. Since our flesh naturally does not want to be in the presence of God, alone or with other believers, there is a tendency to avoid meetings and fellowship. Therefore, we are urged to not allow our flesh to dominate us and to make an effort to continue to seek communion with others.

As we serve one another through the Spirit of God, we and they will grow and God's house will expand. When we use our gifts and ministries to build up individuals, the temple of God is being constructed. God Himself will put

the pieces of His house together as it pleases Him (I Cor 12:18). This then is where He will live for eternity, in and among spiritually edified men and women.

Let us think logically about this together. When we appear before the Lord, what will we present to Him? Will we demonstrate to Him the manner in which we conduct our meetings? Will we show off our new dance routines or theater pieces? How about our many different special groups for the youth, young couples, singles etc.? Will our patterns, practices, and plans be of interest to Him? No!

What God will be interested in seeing is how His transformation work has progressed in each individual. His attention will be focused on the spiritual growth in each and every one. What He will want to examine is how each one of us has been changed into His glorious image.

Therefore, since these things are His goal, should they not be our focus also? Should we not be using our time and energy building up that which is on the heart of our Lord? Should we not leave behind building up things which will not last and concentrate on those which do? Let us ask ourselves honestly: Will our organization stand the test of Judgment Day? Will our groups and activities shine forth as the brightness of the sun on the day of the Lord? How much of our effort then is simply useless and wasted, when we could be building up that which will last for eternity?

In the church of Christ today, many have another goal. They are striving to build up an organization which is large, growing, and successful. In all fairness, I think it would be true to say that most of these organizations believe that spiritual growth is one of their goals. They imagine that maturity will be a result of their efforts.

Perhaps some think that they will join together a group of people or "church" and then they will use this organization as a means to edify individuals. They suppose that they will use their group to further God's work. Perhaps their motives are good even if their practice is deficient.

The problem with this method is that joining this group together and then holding it together must be done

by human, natural means. Instead of simply ministering Christ, we are faced with the task of providing various props and activities to attract people while we try to work on their spiritual state. We must try to keep them interested in something other than the person of Jesus Christ while we try to help them spiritually. This is really an awkward way to do the work of God. Also, as we will see later on, it is not doing God's work in God's way.

WHAT ARE OUR MOTIVES?

Another important question which we all need to consider carefully before the Lord is: what are our motives? We need to honestly examine our hearts. When we are attempting to put together a group, our motives then become divided. Yes, we want to serve others in the name of Jesus, but we also want them to join with us in our group. No doubt, we believe our group to be the work of God, so perhaps it is difficult for us to see that building up our organization is not the same as building the house of God. But it is not.

If we have a motivation of wanting to build up our particular group or "church" it then becomes impossible not to have a kind of spider web hidden behind us. We speak of Jesus and the things of God, but we want people to join with us. We secretly want to catch them in our web.

But when we are only and sincerely interested in edifying someone in Christ, all double motives disappear. We then become free to simply build the house of God. We then have a great liberty to serve others with no hidden agenda. Whether they join with us or not does not need to become a consideration.

With this kind of attitude, we can serve others who do not agree with us. We can share Jesus with those in other "churches" without secretly trying to persuade them to drop what they are doing and join with us. We can minister without ulterior motives. We can simply speak what the Holy Spirit is speaking at the moment and love others with no strings attached. We can live Jesus Christ in great

simplicity among other believers and those of the world. When our only motive is to build up the house of God then we can serve and build up others freely. This kind of purity of purpose allows us to live in a kind of childlike innocence and also in great liberty. When our goal is to edify individuals, then we can remain lowly servants. But when our motive is to gather a group together, then many other factors enter in.

Let us reason together about this. If we wish to form a group or “church,” it must be set apart from the church as a whole. If it is not, then it does not have its own identity and therefore cannot be recognized as a group. Consequently, we must have some kinds of methods to separate men and women from the rest of the body of Christ and convince them to adhere to us, our practice, or our teaching.

These methods include, but are not limited to: emotional and mental persuasion, political maneuvering, use of strong personality, a good sales pitch, and the exhibition of spiritual gifts. Using various such means, we then convince a number of people that our ideas, practices, and doctrines are best and that they should adhere to us, thus forming some kind of identifiable group or “church.”

This, my dear brothers and sisters is something made with human hands. Therefore, it is a place in which God does not and never will live. It is not something which is made according to the heavenly vision so it cannot satisfy His heart’s desire.

HOW GOD’S CHURCH WORKS

As we live and work for God with our focus being the edification of one another, it may be that He will join some peoples’ hearts together. It certainly will happen that their love for one another will grow. There is no doubt that their communion with one another will become so enjoyable that they spend a lot of time in each other’s presence.

As they build up one another, God will knit them together in love (Col 2:2). Naturally, they will want to meet together for worship, prayer, and mutual edification. This

is something which God puts together, not a result of natural, human effort.

Someone looking at this from the outside might think of this as an organization. But in fact it is something organic, something living, something which God has done and not man. This “form” is a result of God’s life growing up in and living through individuals.

This group has no walls or barriers to keep people in or out. It is not separate from the rest of Jesus’ body. Those participating in this communion are not held by any sort of artifice, doctrine, human leader, or practice. They are simply living by the life of Christ and serving each other. The result of this is the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as He fills His temple, which of course is these individuals who have been built together by Him.

The early church was a result of just this kind of ministry. The disciples were preaching and teaching Jesus Christ. They were sharing Him with the world and ministering Him to one another. Automatically, they wanted to be with others who loved Jesus. The Lord then knitted them together in a manner which could be looked upon as being a group.

But this was not a result of human effort. It was not Peter, James and John using their gifts and ministries to try to attract followers. It was not a result of an effort to organize anything. It was a spontaneous result of the ministry of the Holy Spirit to individuals.

Truly the Lord our God does not live in a house made with human hands. If what we are doing is a result of our own plans, energy and effort, then God will not dwell there. If our group is a product of administrative talent or organizational ability we can be sure that He will not call this His home. If what we are doing is really something natural and earthly, even if we have decorated it with “spiritual” labels, it will be burned up on judgment day.

It does not matter how good it looks, it does not matter what others think of our work, anything which is made with human hands will never be the house of God. It is only a human imitation.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is an extremely serious consideration. While we may have thought of various “churches” and religious groups as being holy or something very special in the eyes of God, it is time, no it is even past time, that we looked at them through the eyes of God. With His holy word open before us, let us carefully and prayerfully examine what we are doing in His light. The traditions of men along with all the rituals, practices, and “services” which go with them, are not and never will be the temple of the living God.

In these last days with the coming of the Lord drawing ever more near, it would be wise for us all to examine our works before God. In His light, let us honestly consider the work of our hands and let Him expose or change anything of which He is not the author. May we, by His mercy, be found by Him to have constructed our works out of gold, silver and precious stones.

How we need to see a heavenly vision! How we need to ascend the mountain of God and look into His heart. How we need to build according to His heavenly plan and not according to earthly ideas and concepts. It is by following this supernatural revelation that our work for God will be vital, penetrating and genuinely fruitful. Further, it will accomplish much which is of eternal value.

5.

LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH

*N*ow we come to one of the most important aspects of our discussion. It is perhaps the most misunderstood part of God's eternal building. Unless and until we have a clear comprehension of how the body of Christ is governed, much of our work will be in vain. Without such clarity of vision we are left with using human means. Lacking a heavenly revelation we have only earthly methods on which to depend. Without divine materials, we cannot build something in which He will be pleased to dwell.

This is a very difficult subject primarily because virtually everyone arrives at the discussion with many preconceived ideas. What is commonly accepted and practiced today in the church is thought of as the standard. Even unbelievers have strongly entrenched notions about what church leadership is all about. For example, if you mention the word "pastor" almost everyone thinks of someone who runs a church and preaches there every Sunday. The examples in the world around them have indoctrinated them. Consequently, it is very difficult to speak about something new or different.

In New Testament times, there was no such established pattern. There had never been such a thing as a church. They did not have thousands of examples to copy

and so their minds were in a kind of virginal state. What I would like to ask of all readers is that they attempt to arrive at this same kind of innocence concerning our subject of church leadership. Let us imagine that we too lived during the times of the book of Acts and that all the things which the Holy Spirit was doing were brand new and fresh. Perhaps in this way we can lay aside for a moment all the baggage of what we think we know, and open up to God. Through His mercy, it may be that a clearer vision of God's government of His house may be shown to us.

It cannot hurt to open up for one moment. You can always go back to what you thought and practiced before. If what you read does not speak to you, if the Holy Spirit reveals nothing new or different, you have lost nothing. No one else needs to know that you secretly took a little time to review your work for the Lord to see if in some way you might have missed something or if there may be some way to improve.

THE GOVERNING PRINCIPLE

In beginning our discussion, the first and foremost principle which we must come to understand is that Jesus Christ is the head of His body. This means that He is the one and only government. Isaiah 9:6 reads: "...and the government will be upon His shoulder." He is the one who is running everything. He is the one who is making the decisions. He is the one leader. He is the head. We read: "And He is the head of the body, the church" (Col 1:18). Further we are taught that He is the "head over all things to the church" (Eph 1:22). Also we see that He is to have the pre-eminence in all things (Col 1:18).

Let us pause here a moment and meditate on this analogy of the body. God uses this word "body" as a figure to reveal to us something about His will and authority. In a human body, the head runs everything. No other member gets to make decisions. No other part is qualified to guide the others. Although the body is extremely complex and has many different types of members and organs, the head

directs the functions of them all. The eye may be very keen, but it never gets to run the body. The heart may be healthy, but it never needs to make decisions. The legs may be strong, but they do not give direction to the other members. Although there is a system of nerves which transmit the will of the head to all the other parts, these nerves never become capable of thinking, reasoning, and then making decisions on their own.

So it is in the body of Christ. Jesus has been placed by the Father as the head of everything. Until today, He still retains this position. It is God's intention that Jesus govern every movement of His body. Every work, every word, every facet of its being is supposed to be governed by the Head. No other member can substitute for Him. No one else gets to usurp or share part of this authority. Jesus Christ is perfectly capable of upholding every molecule of the universe. So also, He is able to function as the head of *all* things to the church.

Yet today, the church appears to be a kind of Hydra. Hydra was a mythological creature with very many heads. Everywhere one looks, there are many, many different men and women claiming to have authority. They are governing, running, and directing some kind of church or other with abandon. Perhaps without realizing it, many believers are competing with Jesus to be the head of at least a part of His church.

Every day which passes, another "head" sprouts up to claim to have a mandate from the Lord to run a part of His operation. Many of them are insisting that believers submit to their authority since it has been received from God. But to which of them must we submit? Which of the thousands, or even tens of thousands, of authority figures which we see in the church today is really the right one?

THE PROBLEM OF INVISIBILITY

Perhaps a large part of the problem we have with understanding and following the government of the true Head is that He is invisible. We cannot see Him with our

physical eyes. But the natural man trusts in visible things. He likes things which are tangible, something he can see, taste, feel, and hear. To him, these are real. The spiritual world, on the other hand, is a little too mystical and therefore unreliable.

However, according to the Bible, the spiritual things are in fact the most real. They are more “real” than the physical world in which we trust so much. II Corinthians 4:18 reads: “...for the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.” Here we need to readjust our thinking. Our reliance on the tangible and physical, must be replaced with our complete dependence on our invisible Lord.

Through our faith, we must develop an intimate relationship with Jesus. We must learn to know Him, to hear from Him, and to follow Him. This is absolutely essential for every believer. No one else can do this for you. Each and every Christian needs to become a real follower of Christ.

It is not sufficient for anyone simply to conform to some biblical standards. It is not enough for someone just to fit into some kind of group, accepting their customs and goals. It is not God’s intention that we merely give our mental acceptance to some set of doctrines or practices. His thought is that we would come to know Him personally and intimately. Furthermore, it is His intention that through this close, real relationship He would be able to guide us in all of our living.

In this way, He can be our head. As we know Him and follow Him, His government becomes ever more real in our lives. He can direct our daily activities and show us His will and His ways. Even more than this, He can begin to guide our thoughts and our emotions. His rulership can begin to affect our attitudes and our opinions. Our desires, our expectations and even our fears can begin to be subject to His authority.

Just as our human head guides not only our body, but every aspect of our psychological life, so too Jesus can reign over all of our living. In this way, the life and nature

of God can be manifested in us and through us. This is real Christianity. This is the true house of God.

However, it is painfully obvious that not all believers are managing to live in this intimacy and obedience. It is sad but true that many who call themselves Christians have very little intimacy with the Lord and have almost no idea of how to hear from Him and follow Him. It is here that there arises a great temptation which manifests itself in two aspects which we will attempt to detail here.

Firstly, there are those who do have some relationship with Jesus. They have a measure of consecration and faith. They are succeeding to a greater or lesser degree to hear from God. So when they see others who are wandering around somewhat cluelessly without any direction from the Head, they want to help them.

But if they are not careful, while trying to help these others, they themselves become the head. Little by little, they begin to substitute for the Lord in the lives of these individuals. They begin to give counsel and guidance. They orient these others toward the goals which God has shown to them. They teach, they preach, and they lead. Soon they have a whole group of followers.

The problem here is that often these followers have not been brought into an intimacy with Jesus. They have not succeeded in establishing a relationship with Him which is guiding their lives. Instead, they have begun to rely on and follow human leadership. As a result, they are not being transformed into the image of Christ but are simply being conformed to the image of the leader and/or group which they attend.

It is very possible that the counsel and guidance which they received has been both biblical and sound. It is hoped that the teaching they have heard has been well grounded in the word of God. However, all this can be done without bringing someone any closer to God. It is very possible that they have merely become dependent on another man.

It could be that these individuals even appear to have changed a little bit. Perhaps some of their grosser sins have disappeared or gone underground. It may be that their

clothing styles, haircuts, and habits have been modified. In the eyes of the group they are now considered “good Christians.”

But if they have not developed the kind of communion with the invisible God which has become the source of their living and direction, all this change is in vain. If they have not arrived at a total submission of all of their being to the authority of the Head, they have missed the real goal.

If they have not developed a daily, intimate walk with the invisible Savior, they have not really been helped at all. These folks have been conformed to some standard but not transformed into the image of Jesus.

I believe that the vast majority of such leaders begin with the best of intentions. They want to help the people of God. They feel sympathy for those who do not enjoy the relationship with Jesus which they have. And so they set about working to help them. But if they are not careful it is extremely easy, whether they want to or not, to induce in others a dependence upon themselves.

It is very simple to begin to substitute themselves in the place of Jesus in the lives of others. Although we may think we see some changes in their lives, if they are not becoming intimate with Jesus and learning to really follow Him, all this is useless. Unless we have received a heavenly vision, it is very easy to build something which will not endure the test. It is all too possible to expend much time and effort constructing a house in which God will not live.

THE PROBLEM OF PRIDE

Sometimes things which are done with the best of intentions do not end well. We may mean to do the right thing but end up erring. If we begin building without a heavenly revelation, this can easily occur. Within the heart of every man and woman lurks one sinister sin – pride.

This is something of which we may not be aware, yet it is there just the same. So when others begin to look to us, when we are honored with titles and positions, when pres-

tige and respect begin to come our way, we are in a very dangerous position. If and when we accept such things, we have fallen into the “same condemnation as the devil” (I Tim 3:6). (Another translation is that we have fallen into the same snare as the devil did.)

Jesus did not accept honor from men (Jn 5:41). He took no position of authority. He refused to be made king (Jn 6:15). He avoided fame, telling those whom He cured to keep quiet about it (Mt 8:4; 9:30; Mk 7:36; 8:26). His is an example we do well to follow.

If we too do not refuse *all* such attention from men, we will stray from God’s path. If we do not learn to avoid getting into positions where men look to us instead of to Jesus, we will fall into serious error. As we begin to understand the importance of the headship of Christ over His body, this truth will become more and more evident to us. If we exalt ourselves or allow other people to exalt us, this demonstrates that we have not yet understood how to build up the house of God.

In the New Testament we encounter an interesting concept. It is the idea of an “antichrist.” In the Greek language, this prefix “anti” has two meanings. The one with which we are most familiar today is the meaning “against.” Today we think of an antichrist as being someone who is against Christ. But in the days of the early church this word had an even more prominent meaning. This meaning is: “instead of” or “in the place of.”

Therefore, an antichrist would be someone who was taking the place of Christ. Instead of Jesus being the head and source of our living, an antichrist would be someone who was substituting for Him in this relationship. A modern antichrist would be someone to whom others look for their guidance and direction instead of Christ.

In the future someone called “antichrist” will sit “in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God” (II Thess 2:4), in other words taking God’s rightful place. So today many are, wittingly or unwittingly, taking the place of Jesus in His church. Instead of Him being the Head over everything and everyone, they have become the leaders.

MEN TEND TOWARDS A HUMAN DEPENDENCE

Secondly, many of God's people like to have a human leader. In Jeremiah 5:31 we read: "The priests rule by their own power; and My people love to have it so." As we have seen before, people trust their physical senses. Therefore, a human head or leader may seem like a wonderful thing for them. They can see him, hear him, and then obey him (or her). This is a natural tendency of mankind. Since the fall of Adam and Eve, this has been so. Following someone invisible is a little difficult. Following a human leader is much easier.

So it is very common for such individuals to look for and look to those who have a relationship with Jesus. They set up for themselves a kind of intermediary who hears from God for them and then passes along the instructions. This person seeks the Lord for them, gives them counsel and advice, takes care of problems for them, and even marries them and buries them.

Thus, instead of learning to know and follow Jesus, these men and women are joined to another head. Their dependence is placed upon someone else. Their focus is upon some kind of leader or other to whom they look for their spiritual food and guidance. This is not the plan of God. This is not His bride. This is not His house. This is not His body. It is a human substitute for all the wonderful spiritual things which He has in His heart.

These two tendencies – the one in which someone with some spiritual life wants to help others and the one in which the human being prefers to depend on someone tangible – work together to create an unhealthy spiritual situation. Instead of really helping others, we may instead be hindering them. Without a deep understanding of how to build, it is possible to be constructing something which is blocking the work of God instead of advancing it. It may even be that what we think is a great work for the Lord is really a substitute for what He would really like to do. Let us investigate this possibility further.

God's thought is to establish an intimate relationship with every believer resulting in their being able to sense and follow His leadership in every aspect of their living. Therefore, when we wish to minister to others, this too must be our goal. Our objective must be to help expose and eliminate in every believer's life anything and everything which is hindering their relationship with Jesus.

Also, we must encourage them in every way to obey Him, to know Him, and to love Him. We must foster within them the idea of total consecration to His will and work. We must constantly pray and consider how to stir up one another to seek His face more and more. It is our privilege to exhibit through our life, words, and works the nature of Jesus in such a way that it will draw others into an intimacy with Himself. This is true ministry.

ANOTHER GOAL

But it is possible for us to have another goal. It could be that our vision is faulty and that we are trying to put together some kind of group which is dependent on our gifts and ministry. It may be that the devil has succeeded in subtly deviating us from God's path and we have begun building an earthly organization instead of the house of God.

When this occurs, our motives change. Wishing to attract members, we modify our message. Instead of seeking deep (and probably uncomfortable) conviction of sinners, we want folks to feel welcome. In the place of exposing where believers are not right with God, we want them to come back and become regular members. In place of the ministry of the Holy Spirit whose main job is to convict the world of sin (Jn 16:8), we have various entertainments and inoffensive oratory. When our vision is deficient, then we begin to act and work in ways which are in conflict with the eternal purposes of God.

Jesus never modified His message to make people feel welcome and comfortable. He always spoke the truth regardless of the reactions and results. When our only goal

is to bring others into a relationship with Him, when we do not have our own pet projects and plans, then we too are free to speak His word without fear. If we are only building up individuals and not trying to put together some kind of group, then we can minister Jesus with great liberty. When we have only the house of God in view and not some kind of earthly success, we can more easily be led by the Spirit of God. We can speak the truth in love (Eph 4:15).

THE WORDS OF JESUS

As we are trying to understand the government of God in His body, we must constantly keep in mind the teachings of Jesus. When we read the book of Acts and the epistles and see what was taught and done in those days, we must remember to filter all this through the words of our Lord recorded in the gospels. Without this balance, it is possible to think that we perceive some practice or teaching which is out of line with what Jesus taught.

In fact, much of what is taught and practiced today in the church goes directly against His words. Part of the reason for this is that many people are coming to the scriptures with a certain point of view, a basketful of preconceived ideas which they have gained from the practice of modern Christianity. Therefore, they take certain phrases and passages from the epistles and twist them to conform to their already entrenched notions.

The early apostles did not have this extra baggage. They had spent years walking together with the Lord and His instructions to them guided the things that they did and taught. These brothers were not modifying His teachings. They were not improving upon them as they went along. They were not putting into practice things which violated what they had learned from their Lord.

Therefore, we too must understand all that they said or did in this light. It is essential for us to alter our way of understanding this subject to conform to the gospel record. This is much safer than trying to alter God's word to fit or justify our practices.

Jesus' teachings laid the foundation for the exercise of all authority in His church. Anything which was said or done later on which was a violation of His instructions was a mistake. Further, anything which is being taught or practiced today which also is in violation of His teachings is a serious error. This point must be very clear to us. What our Lord taught was not simply some kind of suggestion. No one is or was free to modify this later according to their own desires or whims.

The foundation which Jesus clearly laid out concerning the exercise of authority is absolute. We must work in accordance with His instructions or we will be found to be acting in disobedience.

It is unfortunate but true that many Bible translators have arrived at their work with some modern-day preconceptions. They have understood leadership and authority as though looking through the lenses of the practices of their day and time. Consequently, in many versions of the Bible, some key verses about authority in the epistles have a kind of emphasis or slant which does not harmonize with Jesus' teachings.

As every writer knows, the way words are used is very important. The very same words, put in different order or used with a different emphasis can convey quite different ideas. Therefore, as part of our investigation, we will examine some of these verses to see if there are some other translations which give a more cohesive understanding of this important subject.

SOME BASIC PRINCIPLES

When Jesus taught His disciples, He laid down some very basic principles concerning authority in His kingdom. We will take each of these items individually and see how they apply to our situation today. Yet we must do so with the following understanding firmly in mind. No teaching or practice which we think that we find in the New Testament will ever contradict or supersede the teachings of Jesus. All things which came after His earthly ministry,

including the book of Acts and the writings of the epistles, must be interpreted and understood in the light of what He had already said.

Perhaps the first principle which draws our attention is that Jesus prohibited the use of courteous or honorary titles among His people. This means that we are not to use any special names, designations, or terms to single out individuals as being special. We are *never* supposed to separate any one brother or sister for special reverence, respect, or courtesy, which is effected by the use of titles.

We read in Matthew 23: 8-10: "But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'." According to Vine's dictionary of New Testament words, this word is derived from the word "rab" which is literally "master" which is in contrast to a slave. Adding the suffix "ei" then means "my master" indicating the reverent subjection of the speaker. Such titles or labels, including the accompanying elevation of those so designated, were and are absolutely forbidden among God's people.

Further on in this passage Jesus prohibits the title "Father." Calling someone "father" is an indication of special respect and esteem. This means that we are not to single out any individuals for this kind of earthly honor. Then He goes on to exclude the special designation of "Teacher" among His people. This is the Greek word "didaskalos" which means master or teacher thus indicating some form of superiority of those so titled. Some ancient Greek texts use the word "kathetes" here which means "discipler," "guide," or "leader." Clearly the use of such titles is in direct opposition to the clear teachings of Jesus.

(Some have tried to argue against this most obvious truth by citing the verse in Romans 13:7 where we are taught to give honor to whom honor is due. But when we read the clear context of this verse, we easily understand that this is referring to our attitudes toward earthly, governmental authorities such as kings, presidents, etc. (vs 1-6) and not to our relationships in the church. Once again, nothing which appears in the epistles can be understood to contradict the teachings of Jesus.)

This truth which we have been investigating also applies to all other religious titles as well. The prohibition against titles must include words such as "Pastor," "Reverend," "Bishop," and many other such terms which are in common use in today's church.

When we think about this rationally, it cannot be that Jesus had some kind of prejudice against only a few such titles. Surely He was teaching also against the practice of using any and all special titles to indicate some kind of superiority. He was showing us that only He is worthy of such respect. He completes His thought by saying: "For One is your Teacher, the Christ," "for One is your Father, He who is in heaven" (Matt 23:8,9,10). He explains that we are all on the same plane. No one is to be elevated above the other in any way. In conclusion, He says: "You are all brethren" (vs 8). Therefore, we cannot honor any other man or woman by using such respectful or courteous titles for them. This practice is clearly outside the will of God.

But what is the reason for this? Why is our God teaching us not to do these things? It is because elevating someone above the rest, in whatever manner and for whatever reason, creates another head in the body. It creates another font of authority. It bestows upon such a person the aura of being more able to communicate with the Lord than the rest.

Consequently, those who are not so endowed begin to look to that special person instead of to Jesus for their direction and spiritual food. Little by little a kind of "priesthood" or barrier is established between the Lord and His people. This is exactly what Jesus does not want to ever happen in His body.

AUTHORITY OVER ONE ANOTHER IS PROHIBITED

It may be surprising for some of you readers to learn that Jesus also prohibited any one of His followers from exercising authority over another. Although this is common practice in the church today, it is something which

Jesus forbids. He says: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you” (Mt 20:25,26).

Essentially He is saying, “The world does things in this way, but you cannot.” The earthly way is for one human being to exercise authority over another, but in the church, this is forbidden. “It shall not be so among you!” Here Jesus is not merely banning abusive authority, but *all* authority over one another.

In Christ’s body there is no room for any other authority figure beside Jesus. He is the one and only head. Only He is authorized by the Father to lead, direct, and command His people. No one, absolutely no one else ever gets to take up some kind of position of authority over the others whether it be small or large.

This truth is repeated in Mark 10:42,43 where we read: “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you.” If you do not understand this most basic truth then you will have a lot of trouble constructing the true house of God.

It may be that you are already thinking about the apostles, prophets, pastors, and teachers in the rest of the New Testament. Quite possibly many questions about this are popping into your mind. But please be patient. We will get to these questions as we go along with our subject. First, we must establish very firmly Jesus’ principles. Then we can go on to see how they were worked out in the early church and how they can be put into practice today.

Not only is the exercise of authority over one another prohibited, it is even forbidden for the best of motives. I like to believe that most of those who are acting this way in the church today have good intentions. They believe that they are using their authority for the benefit of others. They are trying to help them. They are benevolently exercising authority over the others for their good and well-being. Interestingly, this attitude and motive also is expressly forbidden by Jesus.

In Luke 22:25,26 we read: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.'" You see a benefactor is someone who is doing something for your benefit. Supposedly you are profiting from their actions. Their exercise of authority is doing you some good and bringing you some benefit.

But concerning this activity Jesus states: "But not so among you." We must not do this. This practice should never be found among the people of God. Instead of really being beneficial, it is impeding the flow of supernatural authority. It becomes a substitute for the true headship of Christ. Again we remember His words: "You are all brethren" (Mt 23:8).

There can be no other head or source of authority in the body of Christ even if it is done with good intentions. When we allow this, it creates a confusing situation. Believers then do not know to whom to look for guidance. Should they seek Jesus directly, or simply rely on their authority figure? Since human authority is more tangible, the tendency is for this source to become the prominent one. Therefore, we must always guard against these tendencies. Rising up to take authority over others or looking to human sources, both must be avoided.

BECOME LIKE LITTLE CHILDREN

When Jesus was on the earth with His disciples, there often arose among them a discussion. It seems that this was a frequent theme of their conversations among themselves. They were always trying to decide who was to be the greatest. Who was going to be above the rest? Who was going to rise up to be the most recognized, the most important, or the most respected?

Jesus answered this discussion with a powerful illustration. He took a little child and put him in their midst. Then He said: "Unless you... become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 18:3). Further He says: "Therefore, whoever humbles himself as

this little child is the greatest" (Mt 18:4). Here we find a most important principle which must govern our thoughts and actions concerning the government of God's house.

Here we see that we must humble ourselves. This is absolutely essential. If we do not, we will find ourselves in opposition to the will of God. This is in direct contrast to exalting ourselves or letting others exalt us. Humbling ourselves means that we do not accept praise. We do not look for accolades and respect. We are not seeking recognition, power, or control over others.

Ours must be a lowly way. Do not look at the world around you. Do not pay attention to what other Christians are doing. We must look into God's word and follow the instructions which we find there. Only in this way will we receive praise from God on that Day.

A little child is humble because he does not know much. He does not have great power. He is very dependent on his father and mother. He runs nothing. He controls no one. His is a lowly position where he has no great respect.

Please let me state this emphatically and clearly. Unless you also arrive at and stay in this very same position, you cannot be living under the government of God! You cannot be thought of as entering into and living in His kingdom.

These are Jesus' own words. This is exactly what He has taught us. There is just no way to get around this clear fact. This was our Lord's response to His disciples' ambition for authority and control. It is still His response today. If you have arrived at or let others put you in an elevated position with respect to others in the body of Christ, in a very essential way you have strayed from the kingdom of God.

Further Jesus stated repeatedly, "He who is greatest among you shall be your servant" (Mt 23:11). And, "...let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" (Lk 22:26 RSV).

This clearly means that instead of wanting to or trying to ascend in some kind of hierarchy, assuming command

and control of any group of believers, we must do exactly the opposite. We must descend to become their slaves. Our objective must be to lift others up even to the point where they become “greater” than ourselves. Instead of becoming the greatest, we must become the least.

Jesus Himself showed us this example at the last supper. There He took off His robes and put on a towel. Then He began to perform the function of the lowliest kind of servant. He washed the disciples’ feet. God incarnate did not insist on a position of respect or authority. He humbled Himself before His Father and before His disciples. He became a servant. This position is where we also must find ourselves.

Without a doubt, most Christian leaders know this principle. They read their Bibles. This is no new idea or secret teaching. What seems to be lacking is the way to put it into practice. To begin, we must have a firm grasp on one idea. It is impossible to be “over” someone else – this means to have a position of authority over them – and be a slave at the same time. It is absurd to think that you can be over and under simultaneously. These two positions, the one of authority and the one of a slave, are opposite one another. You cannot be both things at the same time. To become one, you must abandon the other. To be under, you must stop being over.

To become a servant or slave, you must lay aside your garments. You must renounce your position of being above or over. You must let go of all your titles and importance. You must humble yourself in a way which will challenge your ego, your education, and even your income. You must be willing to act and live in a way which others will not understand or approve.

Building up the house of God in His way may possibly challenge your faith at the deepest level. But as your brother, I would like to encourage you that the rewards are great. The spiritual treasures which can be gained in obedience to our Lord are beyond description.

How then might such a ministry manifest itself? How shall we act? What should we do? Let us imagine that

among those with whom you have fellowship, you become a slave and they are your masters. How might this work?

To begin, we know that a slave does not run the household. He is not the one in authority. He is not telling the master what to do. He is not organizing the life of his master or controlling any of his activities. He does not receive more esteem than his master. He does not earn more than his master. He does not have any authority whatsoever over his master, to discipline him, direct his life, or control his family or marriage. His position is very humble.

HOW THIS MIGHT WORK

Let us suppose that this slave has a relationship with Jesus that makes his life an example. He is not only humble, but also full of love. He spends time in God's word and so is full of revelation. He is honest, obedient, faithful, kind, and full of the many other virtues of Christ.

Therefore, his master(s), who are the other Christians, become curious. They want to know what makes him like that. They are hungry for more light and God uses him to share with them. His life is such an example of purity and truth that the master(s) want to be like him. From observing his life, the master(s) begins to trust the slave and ask his advice and counsel.

Due to his relationship of trust with his master, this slave might even occasionally offer his opinion or advice, if the master is willing to hear it. Thus, the slave becomes a source of God's light and nourishment for his master. Yet he never leaves that position of being a humble slave to assume a position of authority or control.

Here we must stop for a moment and analyze a Bible verse. No doubt there are some readers who are remembering I Thessalonians 5:12 where we read in the NKJV: "We urge you, brethren, to recognize those who...are over you in the Lord and admonish you."

This is one of those occasions where a Bible translator might have arrived at his work with a preconception and

could easily convey a wrong sort of idea. Here we must apply the principle of filtering everything through Jesus' teachings. So when we read about someone being "over" someone else, this does not fit with what we have already studied. Therefore, somehow we must arrive at a new understanding of this verse.

The Greek word translated "over" here is "proistemi" which means "to stand before" hence "to lead." "Over" is a very poor and misleading translation. Here there is no thought of being "over" but simply out in front in the spiritual walk.

Thus, the translation here gives a wrong and unscriptural impression to the reader. The true meaning here is that someone is showing by their life an outstanding example of intimacy with Christ for others to follow. Such "leadership" should never in any way be construed to be being "over" or dominating anyone.

NEW TESTAMENT LEADERSHIP IS BY EXAMPLE

Certainly there is leadership in the Christian life and among believers. But how is this done? This must be a different kind of leadership than we see in the world, since it must follow all the principles of Jesus which we have been studying. New Testament leadership is by example. Those who might be considered "leaders" are those who have an intimacy with Christ which is obvious. It is changing their lives. It is impacting their families. Those around them are aware of the character of Jesus which is being manifested through them.

These then become examples which the others follow. They want to be like them. They become imitators of them (I Cor 11:1) in that they too want to have that same intimacy with Jesus. Thus, these believers are considered "leaders" because they are "out in front" in this race to gain Christ. They are demonstrating to others how to grow in Jesus. On the other hand, they are *not* leaders because they are "up in front" of a group of believers exercising authority over them.

Naturally, when someone has such an exemplary life, others will be curious. They will want to know how these humble people have come to such a wonderful place. If the others are really in search of righteousness, they will want to understand the things which God has revealed to such a person.

It may be that they will ask questions. They will want advice and counsel. They will open themselves up to receive from that individual all the things that God has put within them. So then this slave can serve these others by teaching, advising, loving, and admonishing. However, all this is done from a position of lowliness and humility. Their attitude is as being the “younger.” Nothing is done from a position of power, authority, control or in any way being “over” the others. This is true New Testament ministry.

Further, nothing which this slave does violates the will of his master(s), who are the other believers. He does not insist on his will or way. He does not order anyone to do anything about which the other is not fully convinced (Rm 14:5). He is not organizing their lives. He is not running their meetings, planning their activities, or in any way exercising authority over them. His remains a lowly position.

He does not receive praise and accolades from men. He does not let anyone put him in a position of authority. His emphasis is always upon Jesus and never upon himself. He is not dissatisfied with lack of attention or when others do not recognize his words and work. Since he has no other goal than to glorify Christ, he is satisfied only when his Lord is pleased.

JUDGES AND KINGS

The judges in the Old Testament were an institution from God. The kings were set up by man – a worldly institution. In fact, when the children of Israel petitioned Samuel for a king, they specifically stated that they wanted to be like the other nations – like the world around them

(1 Sam 8:5). In contrast to this, the government of God was manifested through the judges.

From the judges then, we can extract some important revelation. To begin, we notice that the people who sought out the judges for counsel or judgment came of their own free will. They were never coerced or forced. They came because they wanted to hear from God. The judges were anointed and used by God and so people sought them out.

In contrast to the kings, the judges ran nothing. They did not govern the country. They did not organize a standing army, raise taxes, initiate public works, etc. With few exceptions due to times of national emergency (perhaps once in 20 years when they did call God's people together to battle), their normal way was to simply make themselves available to the populace. Thus they could serve the people if and when they were needed.

Gideon and others merely seemed to stay at home most of the time. If and when people needed them they had to go and seek them out. Another judge, Jair, appears to have had a kind of route around the country to be more accessible (Jud 10:4). Deborah had a tree under which she sat, probably in a public place, where she was available to those who sought the Lord for direction (Jud 4:5). In the daily life of the population, they organized nothing. They controlled no one. They were servants not rulers. These things should speak to us today.

When Gideon was used by God to work a great deliverance, the people were really impressed. Following the natural human tendency to want a leader, they tried to make him their king. They said to him: "Rule over us, both you and your son, and your grandson also; for you have delivered us from the hand of Midian" (Judges 8:22).

But Gideon wisely refused this kind of elevation. He understood at least a little about the ways of the Lord. So he replied: "I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you" (vs 23). Gideon refused to be elevated to a position where he would substitute for the government of God in the lives of these people. How does this compare with what you are doing today?

MORE CONFUSING VERSES

Another verse which many will remember that seems to suggest some kind of authority “over” others is found in Hebrews 13:7 where we read in the NKJV: “Remember those who rule over you...whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.” The Greek word translated “rule” here is “hegeomai” which means, according to Vine’s *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, “to lead.” Again, what this really means is “to be out in front spiritually.”

As we have been seeing, biblical leadership does not involve any kind of “ruling over.” It functions exactly as the end of the above verse states, ie. “whose faith follow” and “considering...their conduct.” Leaders have an exemplary faith which we should imitate. How they live their lives, their “conduct,” is something worthy of our consideration. (The same Greek word is encountered in Hebrews 13:24 and should be understood in the same light.)

So we see that the phrase, “those who rule over you” is not really the correct translation. In fact, it conveys an idea which contradicts the teachings of Jesus. Therefore, it must be rejected. New Testament leadership is by example, not by “rule.” There is no thought here of assuming command or control over others. There is never to be any substitution for the direct headship of Christ over every man (I Cor 11:3).

Instead, there are some whose walk with the Lord and faith are worthy of imitation. These are those who are living in communion with God. Therefore, they can be sought for advice and counsel when and if anyone wishes.

In Hebrews 13:17 we find an even more confusing kind of Bible translation. Here it seems as if the writer is teaching us something completely contrary to Jesus’ words. We read in the NKJV: “Obey those who rule over you.” Again the word for “rule over” is “hegeomai” which we have already discussed. But here an even more aggressive idea is put forward by the translation.

Supposedly we are required by God to “obey” someone else. It seems as if the writer is insisting that there are some human beings who, because of their position, are worthy of our absolute obedience. Some have even suggested that we should obey without question the directions of various Christian leaders. If we must obey someone, then logically they must be in a position of authority over us. But in the light of Jesus’ clear words, how could such a thing be?

Here again Vine’s dictionary helps us with a better translation. The Greek word for “obey” is “peitho.” Vine says that this means, “to persuade, to win over,” “to be persuaded, to listen to” and then as a consequence of this, “to obey.” He further clarifies this saying, “The ‘obedience’ suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion.”

You see, when someone has a life which exhibits Christ, we are urged to listen to what they say and allow ourselves to be persuaded by them. This is because we respect their life and character. This does not mean that we obey anyone blindly. It does not mean that we simply do what they say. Instead this indicates that we carefully consider the words of someone who is really intimate with God. If and when they are speaking from God, we will do well to follow their advice.

If we are not fully persuaded but yet blindly obey someone speaking from God, then our obedience is something superficial. When our heart is not completely in agreement, but we obey out of some kind of religious duty, this is a violation of our will. Such “obedience” does nothing to further the purposes of God or to change our life.

You see, even if we are doing what is right, yet our mind is not persuaded, this cannot be pleasing to the Lord. When our obedience is superficial, we are not being transformed inwardly. With this kind of practice, we are only being conformed to some kind of standard. When our submission is not from the heart, it cannot yield spiritual fruit.

Therefore, these verses do not indicate some kind of authority or power structure which is contrary to Jesus’

teachings. Instead, it must be seen in harmony with them. In this way, a slave who walks in intimacy with God might make a suggestion or might give some counsel when someone has sought it. This servant does not have to leave his position of being lowly and beneath someone else. He never must change to being “over” them.

When this servant obviously has a relationship with the Lord, we should pay careful attention to his words. We must consider prayerfully what has been said. This is because there is a greater possibility that his words are from God Himself. Therefore, we should be very open to be “persuaded” by them. But this in no way indicates that we must obey a man. Unless and until we have been persuaded that it is indeed our Lord who is speaking through this particular servant, we cannot be expected to obey.

This same attitude of simply being a servant to others was expressed by Paul. In II Corinthians 1:24 he insists that he and the other apostles did not have any kind of “dominion over [their] faith,” but were merely “helpers of [their] joy” (KJV). Pay careful attention to this. They did not have dominion over these brothers and sisters. They were not rulers, governors, or authority figures. They were not controlling these others, either their lives or their meetings. Instead, they were lowly “helpers.”

Further, they did not behave pompously with an air of self-importance. They were only lowly servants. In fact, Paul confesses that his presence was very unspectacular. When he was with these believers he seemed “weak” and his speech appeared “contemptible” (II Cor 10:10). He was very humble and unpretentious. He was with them “in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling” (I Cor 2:3).

Paul was not commanding and authoritative. He describes his attitude as being “lowly among you” (II Cor 10:1). Perhaps we imagine that Paul was a sort of swaggering, compelling, forceful authority figure whom everyone respected and obeyed. Yet a careful reading of the scriptures reveals something very different.

Peter also echoes these same sentiments. He urges those who are being used by God to lead, not to do so as

“being lords over God’s heritage.” Instead, they were to do so by “being examples to the flock” (I Pet 5:3 KJV).

These were not to exalt themselves. They were not to get themselves in any false position of being above the others. They were not even supposed to expect to receive any money (vs 2). They were simply to do their work by feeding the others the supernatural bread which is Jesus Christ. Their leadership was to be by example and humble service rather than by some kind of position of authority, ie. being “lords.”

CONDUITS OF AUTHORITY

It is clear that in the universe, God is the source of all authority. Any human beings or even any creatures which have authority have received it from God. He has allowed them to have authority or even put them in positions of power. Without His permission, they would have no power whatsoever.

In our world, we have many different kinds of authority figures. These include presidents, governors, judges, policemen, parents, etc. The scriptures clearly teach us that these authority figures are established by God and that we should obey them (I Pet 2:13,14).

Since the world is in rebellion against the Lord, He uses these individuals to act in His stead to somewhat subdue the rebellious and sinful tendencies of mankind. At the moment He has not yet returned to govern this world personally, so He delegates His authority to others to rule in His absence. Men or women who have received this authority from God are often called “delegated authorities.”

In the church however, God has designed a different way of governing His people. As we have been seeing, He is the Head. He is the One who is to lead, organize and control everything. Although His physical presence is absent from the world, His spiritual presence is (or should be) very real in the church. God’s true church is not ever governed by any delegated authority.

There are several reasons that a person in charge of some work or other might delegate his authority. One is that perhaps he cannot be present at some particular time. Another is that he might be too busy to attend to all the needs of the organization. A third reason might be that he has no interest or ability in some of the details of the work.

But Jesus has none of these deficiencies. He has risen from the dead. He is alive! And He is living and moving here today among His people. Our Lord is omnipresent. This means that He can be everywhere all the time. So He needs no substitutes. Also, He is all-powerful. Consequently He needs no help from others to govern His people. Further, He has a tremendous interest in every detail and aspect of His church and the lives of those in it.

Therefore, Jesus has no need to delegate His authority in the church. There is no necessity for others to act for Him in His absence or to compensate for His inability. Since He is alive, well, and present, He is perfectly capable of directing everything Himself.

Naturally, since He lives in the "living stones" of His temple, which are men and women, He will sometimes express Himself through these vessels. He will use them as conduits through which to manifest His authority. Since Jesus dwells in His body, He often speaks through the different members of His body.

When someone is frequently used by God in this way, they then become known as "leaders." Their intimate relationship with Jesus makes them useful to Him to reveal His will. Their transformed lives provide a clear pathway for Him to express His headship. These people are the vessels He often uses to speak to and lead His people. They become channels of God's authority.

However, one point must be very, very clear in our minds. No matter how often God uses someone as a vessel to manifest His authority, that person never becomes this authority! He never gets to have any authority himself. The authority never belongs to him. He or she remains always and only a humble servant through which the will of God is manifested.

This is the only biblical understanding which can possibly harmonize the teachings of Jesus and the practice of the New Testament church. It is the only way in which anyone can continue to be a slave or servant and yet manifest authority. This can only be when the authority does not belong to those through whom it is being manifested.

If someone could receive or have their own position of authority over the others, this automatically puts them in an unscriptural situation. Any kind of position of authority must by definition be over some or all of the others. Again, it is impossible to be “over” and “under” at the same time.

Many have seen that the exercise of authority in the church today often goes wrong. They see many harmful, erroneous and even ridiculous things being done in the name of leadership. Yet they have supposed that the problem is with the men and women who are exercising this authority.

They imagine if these leaders were only a little more transformed or better equipped or trained, or even better supervised by other even more spiritual leaders, they would do things right. If these leaders only had some long years of experiences and trials, if they only had the preparation needed, then they would act differently. Perhaps then they could handle being in authority over others.

But when we think about this logically, we quickly understand that this idea will never work. As we have stated, there are literally hundreds, if not thousands of Christian groups springing up around the world every day.

So where could we find so many prepared leaders? Where could we possibly find that number of believers who are so mature, so completely transformed, that they could be trusted with their own authority and yet exercise it in a godly way? If we were to need just one authority figure for each group, where could we find a supply of so many broken, humble people? Further, how could we get them to where they need to be?

The answer must be that we leave the leadership of the church just where it belongs – with the Lord. We must

teach one another how to submit to Him. We must help each other enter into and maintain an intimate relationship with Jesus. We must work to establish His authority in each other's lives.

Thus, people will be able to hear His commands. They will be able to sense His directions. Since such people are truly submitted to Jesus in their hearts, they will be able to hear His voice, even when He is speaking through other brothers or sisters. Whether it be through a leader, through a lowly, unspectacular and unrecognized member of Christ's body, or even through a donkey, they will hear His voice and obey.

The authority of the Head often flows through the members of His body. For example, when Paul the apostle taught, exhorted, or admonished others in his writings, we know that this was the Spirit of God speaking through him. He was being anointed to write these words.

Therefore, the authority manifested here was not his. It did not belong to him but was simply an exhibition of the authority of the Head. In the same way, today Jesus speaks through His people. His authority is often manifested through others for those who have ears to hear.

Perhaps, it would be worthwhile here to examine a word found in some English translations of II Thessalonians chapter 3, verses 4,6,10, and 12. It is the word "command."

Here it seems as if Paul is using some kind of personal authority to "command" the disciples to do something or other. The Greek word here is "parangelo." According to W. E. Vine in his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, this literally means: "To hand on [or pass on] an announcement from one to another."

Here there is no thought of commanding as if he had his own authority. Instead, he was simply passing on instructions which he had received from Jesus. He was a vessel through which the authority of God was flowing, not someone with personal authority which he was exercising. This Greek word, instead of contradicting what we have been seeing, confirms this new understanding.

THE EXAMPLE OF MOSES

Moses was a good example of such a conduit of authority. He walked in such intimacy with God that he spoke with Him “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex 33:11). When God revealed His will to Moses, then he acted. When His word came to him, he spoke. He was a vessel which was very much, and very often used by God to express His plans and His will.

Moses was initiating nothing himself. He was not planning and leading on his own. When others challenged him, he tried to explain to them that it was really God who was acting and speaking through him. He said, “You and all your company are gathered together against the Lord” (Num 16:11,28).

However just once, Moses took this authority upon himself. One time only he assumed a position of authority above the rest and acted from this position. Instead of allowing God to work through him, he acted as an authority figure himself. He struck the rock in anger instead of obeying God. Due to the situation, God honored him and permitted him success. Yet this act cost him his entrance into the promised land. Just this one instance of acting like God’s delegated authority instead of a vessel of transmitted authority came with the highest cost.

Perhaps we should carefully consider this example today. How important it must be to our Lord that He be the One who is leading His people! How critical it is to Him that His authority be maintained. Seeing what this one act of positional authority cost Moses, we should examine our own lives and activities today.

It is possible that many have become deceived. They are acting and speaking from a position of authority over God’s people. They are planning, organizing, and leading the others. Yet no visible judgment has fallen on them. So they assume that everything must be O.K. God must be approving of what they are doing. But these dear brothers and sisters are failing to see the future.

Today is the age of grace. Much of the time, Jesus is allowing us to make our own choices and go our own way. He is waiting to judge His people until He comes again. It is then we will have to give an answer for behaving in ways which contradicted His clear instructions. It is then that our works will be tested by His fire.

Significantly, we are told that on that Day, "Many who are first will be last" (Mt 19:30). You see there are very many today who are assuming positions of authority over others. They are putting themselves in first place. They are gaining popularity and followers. They are up in front leading congregations of God's people. Perhaps they imagine that they are having success. Apparently they are "first."

But when Jesus comes all these things will be exposed in the light of His countenance. The word which He has spoken will judge us (Jn 12:48). This means that His clear teachings which we have been studying – which most already know but are not following – will judge them. For "many" all their importance and position will be seen for what it really is – something earthly and human. All ambition, striving to be the greatest, and ugly pride will stand out with the utmost clarity. All craving for attention, power, and even money will be exposed as having been the lusts of the fallen flesh.

It may be that God uses you from time to time to manifest His authority. Perhaps you are a vessel which He can use to transmit His will to others. Hopefully, you have learned to be a humble servant and are not lording it over anyone else. Yet there is one additional thing which we must understand.

It is never up to us to enforce God's authority. We are not responsible to try to make people do what He says. Perhaps you are certain that God used you to speak some direction or revelation to someone else. Your part ends there. Whether they hear or not, whether they obey or not is not your responsibility. You did what God wanted you to do, now it is in His hands. He is the one who has spoken, therefore, He is the one who must take charge of the results.

APPOINTING ELDERS

But some will no doubt say, "But Paul and others appointed or ordained elders in every church. Therefore, don't we too need to appoint such authority figures" (Tit 1:5)? Once again Vine's dictionary gives us important insight. The Greek word "appoint" here is "cheirotoneo." This means literally, "to stretch out the hand." Vine writes: "Not a formal ecclesiastical ordination is in view, but the "appointment" [or the pointing out], for the recognition of the churches, of those who *had already been raised up and qualified by the Holy Spirit*, and had given evidence of this in their life and service."

To understand this clearly, we must realize the context in which this direction was given. In the early church, there was a situation much different from what we see today. There had never been churches in these different cities. The idea of church was a brand new thing. Furthermore, there were very many new believers who needed care, advice, and attention.

In Jerusalem, new converts could easily know where to look for direction and counsel. The twelve apostles had walked with Jesus. But in these other cities where the idea of church was a more recent thing, who were the ones whom God was using? Who was walking in intimacy with God and therefore could be sought out for counsel and advice?

Since many of these believers were in spiritual infancy, they did not have the discernment to perceive those who had more spiritual maturity. Therefore, Paul felt it necessary to point this out for them. He was not "appointing" these men to positions of authority, instead he was "pointing out" (stretching forth the hand to point out [cheirotoneo]) for the benefit of the others, those who were in communion with Jesus. These were people whose lives were a testimony of their growth and gifting. Therefore, they were most likely to be used by God as examples to the flock.

Another verse which causes some confusion because of the translation is found in I Timothy 3:1. Here the KJV reads: "If a man desire the office of a bishop." This would lead the reader to think that there is indeed some kind of standing or rank of being an overseer. The NKJV follows this error reading: "If a man desires the position of a bishop."

Yet this word "office" or "position" represents no word in the original Greek language. It is simply not present in the text. The addition of this word, without any basis, produces a completely erroneous understanding, one that is in conflict with Jesus' clear teachings. A better reading would be, "If any man desires to serve as an overseer." (This same situation is found also in I Timothy 3:10,13 KJV).

BIBLICAL TERMINOLOGY

In the New Testament we encounter many different words which today have turned into titles and positions in the church. We read about pastors, teachers, elders, prophets, deacons, and so forth. How then are we to understand them in the light of our present discussion?

Firstly, we must understand that such terms are never used in the Bible as titles. We *never* read about "Pastor" Peter, the "Apostle" Paul or "Elder" James. Instead they are descriptions of the service functions, gifts, and callings of these particular men. They are words used to indicate what kind of servants these men were, not the sort of position they had obtained. We find for example Paul, "a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ" (Titus 1:1) and Peter, "a servant and apostle" (II Pet 1:1).

How then can we understand these terms? As an example we can look at the world around us. In our society we have many different kinds of trades. We have carpenters, masons, plumbers, millwrights, programmers, etc. These words are a description of the kind of work which these people do. They are not positions of authority over the rest of society. Each one of them has some special

skill and ability in their area of service. In their work, they no doubt have some expertise which might qualify them to even give advice to others trying to do the same job. But these are not titles or positions, they are merely descriptions of what sort of service these folks provide.

Throughout the years since the New Testament was written, these descriptive words, such as pastor, elder, etc. have been twisted out of all context. They have come to mean something different and in many cases completely opposite to what they meant 2,000 years ago.

One example of this is the word "minister." Today, we think of this as someone who runs a church. However, the scriptural revelation of what being a "minister" means is much different. There are three different Greek words which are translated into this one English word "minister." The first one is DIAKONOS. It means "servant" or "attendant." This would indicate a simple household servant. Frequently, this word is translated "deacon."

The second word LEITOURGOS refers to someone who served the public in a special capacity at his own expense. The third word HUPERTEs originally meant "under rower" which was a lower order of seaman. It later came to mean any subordinate acting under direction from another. Certainly this kind of "minister" did not run the ship.

Some other words which are used to speak of those who are spiritual servants are: DOULOS, "a bond slave;" OIKETES, "a household servant;" MISTHOIS, "a hired servant;" and PAIS, "a servant boy." (Definitions from *Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.) There is nothing in any of these terms which indicates a position of authority or control over others. Exactly the opposite is true. We see here that the Bible often uses terminology for the servants of God which refer to the least esteemed members of society. They were the lowly servants of the household.

Other terms which bear investigation are "elder," "overseer," or "bishop." Elders were something which even the Old Testament people of God had. These were

men of advanced age and much experience. They had no such idea that there could be, for example, such a thing as a 20 year old “elder.” They would have thought this ridiculous. Such men, because they had lived exemplary lives and were known to have wisdom, were sought for counsel and advice. They did not govern the people. The New Testament elders function in much the same way.

Another term “overseer” comes from the Greek “EPISKEPOS” which means “to look over” or “to watch over.” It is the second half of this word “SKOPEO” which has been taken and transformed into an English word “bishop.”

The true meaning here seems quite straightforward. Those who are mature, have much experience, and are walking in intimacy with Jesus have a responsibility. They are sort of watchmen or “overseers.” When things begin to go wrong in some believers’ lives, they are the ones who notice it. They then have a responsibility before God to pray and see what the Lord would want them to say or do to serve in this situation.

This does not mean that they have authority to run someone else’s life. They know that only God can change someone or their situation. Yet, they can in all humility give counsel, warnings, or suggestions. Again, this has nothing to do with demanding compliance from others but simply serving them in this capacity of watching out for their well-being.

Also we might consider what it is that these brothers are or were overseeing. Does this word indicate that they were running a religious organization? Were they overseeing the activities of some church? Were they the ones deciding where and when everyone should meet and what part each member should play in the organization? Were they planning and directing all the activities of the group? No! Such an idea is never found in the New Testament. There was never a group of men running the church. Such direction is the work of the Head.

Instead, the “overseers” were simply watchful for the individual lives of the other believers. They were always

attentive to see that everyone was doing well with their relationship with the Lord. If and when any problem occurred, if and when anyone was in physical or spiritual need, they could then seek God for how to minister His life into this situation.

Still another word which we might discuss is “apostle.” This means someone who is sent by another to do a job. For example, you might send a plumber to your house to fix a leak. You might send the neighbor boy on an errand. In this case, it is God Himself who has sent out some men with a heavenly vision. It is their task to impart this revelation to any and all who are open and hungry to receive it.

The fact that God has sent these people certainly lends weight to what they have to say. Assuming that they are genuine and not false apostles, we should pay careful attention to their message. But they were not and are not sent by the Lord to run the church. They are not authorized to assume a position of control or importance. They are merely lowly servants of the other brothers and sisters. Those claiming to be apostles who do not understand this truth cannot be genuine.

The great majority of the church and even the world understands these terms in ways which do not harmonize with the message of Jesus. Therefore, it is my practice to avoid them. Even though they are in the Bible and therefore legitimate terms, they are almost universally misunderstood. If we use them, therefore, we run a great risk of conveying a wrong idea or impression. I have found it virtually impossible to reeducate everyone about the real significance of such words.

Perhaps instead we should revert to what John the Baptist said of himself. “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Jn 1:22,23). Here was John, of whom it was said that no greater prophet had ever lived (Mt 11:11). But when the people came questioning him about just who and what he was, he refused to exalt himself. Instead of insisting that he was somebody or something, he described himself as merely a lone voice, crying in the wilderness. He

took a very humble position. In our case then, to humble ourselves and to glorify Jesus can never go wrong.

Further on in this book we will be discussing how some of these service functions work. We will try to speak about how the genuine church can be experienced. But for now, we must move on to further questions about authority.

A TRUE SERVANT IS HUMBLE

A true servant of God and of the body of Christ can often be hard to recognize. This is because such a servant is humble. He does not exalt himself. He is not pushing himself and his ministry forward. He is not looking for opportunities to show off his gifts to others. He is not seeking recognition. He has no title or prestigious position. Therefore, he does not stand out as someone special. Unless we have spiritual eyes, it will be easy for us to miss this vessel of God.

This must be exactly the reason that the writer of Hebrews wrote about the necessity for us to recognize such people (Heb 13:7,17). He essentially urges us to pay careful attention to what they say. Since they were humble, they were not insisting on their own authority. Since they were servants, it was easy for others to neglect their warnings or counsel.

Therefore, it was natural for the others not to recognize the authority of the Lord being manifested in their lives. Coming from a worldly background, where people look to and admire those who have titles, fame, positions, and exude an air of importance, they had trouble recognizing those humble servants whom God was using.

It is possible that the situation in those days was almost the opposite of what we know today. The true spiritual leaders were often not recognized or listened to. People did not have the spiritual discernment to realize that it was the Lord who was speaking through them. So, the writers of the scriptures needed to urge people to see and hear the Lord speaking through the others. Well, on second thought, perhaps this is not so different from today after all.

DIOTREPES

This brings us to the example of Diotrephes. Here was a man who loved to have a position. He enjoyed controlling others. He reveled in the attention and power which such a situation conveyed upon him. He loved "...to have the preeminence among them" (III Jn 9).

Therefore, he had risen up to take control of the church. He became the leader. He was the man in charge. A consequence of this was that Diotrephes, just like all others in such a position, had to begin protecting the territory over which he had assumed control.

When others came around – anyone who was walking in "truth" (vs 12) i.e. someone who might expose his selfish ambition – he had to get rid of them (including John). He had to protect his flock from such "bad" influences.

It is almost inevitable that when someone assumes such a position of power, they enter into contention with others to protect their position. When you have no position or power, you have nothing to defend. But once you assume control over others, sooner or later someone else with a powerful gift or ministry will appear on the scene. They then might be seen as a threat.

In the case of Diotrephes, he used some age-old methods to defend his territory. His defense tactics were the same as many use today. He tried to undermine the testimony of any apparent threat to his position with criticism, backbiting, and faultfinding. He even ranted against John with "malicious words" (vs 10). No doubt, he maligned the others' character, their practices, and their doctrines.

Further, he would not receive anyone who disagreed with him. No one could have fellowship with his group unless they conformed to his ideas. Also, if anyone already in the congregation began to find fault with his ways, he threw them out (vs 10). Perhaps things in the church have changed very little since those times. Such ugly disputes for power and control are not unknown among the people of God today.

THE RESTORATION OF THE CHURCH

In this century there has arisen a new theological idea. This thought is that the genuine practice of the church needs to be “restored.” This would mean that we would return to practicing Christianity – including our daily life, ministry, and style of meetings – as they did in the New Testament. One of the originators of this movement was Watchman Nee. Since that time, many others have risen up to claim to be the standard bearers for such a restoration. Each one believes that they have understood the “New Testament pattern” more precisely and are working to conform the churches under their influence to this pattern.

For some, this pattern is the recognition of and submission to some apostles. They insist that by submitting to their authority, we will arrive at an early church experience. Part of their idea is that the church today is lacking apostolic authority and by restoring our submission to these apostles, the real church will be experienced.

Countless such apostles are roving the world, seeking groups who are vulnerable to their ideas and then conforming them to their particular emphasis. Their thought is that the more groups they have “under” them, the more the true church has been restored. Although the formula varies depending on the individuals, the general idea is that only through submission to their ministry can people really, genuinely be pleasing to God.

Others have a doctrinal basis. Some think, for example, that if we will only meet under the umbrella of being “the church in some particular city” (the “church in New York” for example), we would be meeting in the correct way. They think the secret is in the name we use to identify our meetings. The New Testament churches, they insist, had no name but were only identified by the name of their locality.

So if they could just persuade everyone to drop their individual names and meet with them under the banner of being “the church in the city,” the unity of the church

would be restored. This then would be the real New Testament experience.

More recently there has been a movement to meet in homes. It is thought that the problem with today's church is where we meet. The construction of cathedrals etc. is obviously unbiblical. The format of a leader on the platform and the rest in the pews inhibits the proper function of the body. Therefore, if we would return to the New Testament practice of meeting in homes, this would change everything. This would please God.

So now we have the "home church movement" being put forward as the answer to the restoration of the church. Books are being written and conferences held to propagate this "essential" practice.

The basic idea behind these and many other such efforts is this: If we could somehow return to the exact pattern and practice of the New Testament believers, God would be so pleased, He would rush down from heaven and bless us. If we could somehow get everything "set in order," this would be just what Jesus is anxiously waiting for and a revival would begin. If we could finally just imitate what the Christians did in the book of Acts, then we would be filled with the Spirit and power. What could God desire more than an exact reproduction of New Testament Christianity?

My advice to these dear brothers is: Forget about it. We will never arrive where God wants us to be in this way. We can never restore the church. It simply is not our job. Only He can do it. If we imagine that we can cause the church to return to the New Testament pattern and practice and that this will somehow please God, we are mistaken.

WE MUST RESTORE THE HEAD

The problem with this idea is that we are putting the cart in front of the horse. We cannot restore the church. Jesus is the only One who can restore anything. Therefore, we must instead restore Him to His rightful place among

us. We must restore the Head. When He is the head over all the things to our Christian experience, then, and only then, will the church be restored. As long as we have competing “heads” and other authority figures among us, we will always fall short of the goal.

Why do we not have the New Testament experience today? It is because we have lost our Head. We have replaced Him with men who have uniforms, titles, and positions. We have looked to authority figures who are earthly, human, and fallible instead of to the One who is supposed to lead all things.

We have put our trust in mere human beings in the place of our divine leader. Instead of the invisible God being the one who is in charge of our lives, our ministries, and our meetings, we have mere human beings as our guides. We have thought that we could relegate Jesus to the place of a kind of spectator while we go about doing biblical things to please Him.

If we want revival, we must restore Jesus to His rightful place among us. If we wish to experience what the early believers did, we must remove any and all replacement “authorities.” The only way for the body of Christ to function normally, is for the true Head to be governing every attitude and action. It is time for the men and women of God to rise up and refuse all earthly authority.

The hour has come for believers to repent of the dependence upon human leadership. It is also time for us to repent if we have been guilty of taking Jesus’ place among His people. Today is the time for us to return to our true King and enthrone Him as the author and finisher of all our church meetings and relationships. Now is the time to restore the government of God among us. We can depend upon Him to return us to the genuine New Testament pattern. In fact, this is the New Testament pattern.

6.

LET MY PEOPLE GO!

*A*fter reading the previous chapters of this book, some people may wonder if I am advocating the absence of any and all institutional authority among God's people. They may be thinking that I am urging the total cessation of submission to positional authority and human dominion in the church. They may have gotten the idea that I am suggesting the complete end of believers' submitting themselves to any pastor, bishop, discipler, or Pope, merely because they have some title or religious position. If you are thinking this, then you have clearly understood the message. This is absolutely correct. Here I am teaching complete liberty for the children of God.

But some will no doubt say: "Won't this result in chaos?" "Won't believers then begin to do any old thing they please?" "Without specially trained leaders from seminaries, etc, wouldn't such liberty produce all kinds of heresies, sects, sin, and any number of other evils?" "Without official leadership wouldn't the church just fall apart?"

There are many things which need to be said in response to these questions. These are valid concerns. However, it is often not easy to change human concepts. The fixed idea that many have in their minds concerning how the church must work may not change overnight. Therefore, our discussion will take time. We will try to

cover the many facets of these questions one at a time. It may be that your particular concern will not be addressed immediately. But please be patient as we examine these things together.

One thing must be admitted by any honest person looking at the situation of the church as a whole in the world today. It is not healthy. It is not well. Sin is rampant within her. For example, in the United States, sexual immorality – adultery and fornication – is as common within the evangelical church as it is in the world. Divorce rates are actually higher within the church than outside. Many church members are having secret abortions. Every day more and more leaders are discovered with hidden sin. New divisions constantly appear. Fresh heresies and sects arise with increasing frequency.

There are many church members whose lives are a mess. Many of them have been that way for years and never seem to change. The transformation of the lives of not a few seems very slow or non-existent. A great number of church attenders are rebellious, self-seeking, unloving, and unholy. Many are dishonest, untrustworthy, covenant breakers (divorcers), gossipers, backbiters, criticizers, and disobedient. Unfortunately, in many church groups, this is true of the majority, not the minority. Something is seriously wrong!

Certainly there are some bright spots. All is not lost. Everything is not dark. There are some who are being genuinely converted. It is possible to find some who are truly seeking the Lord. Certainly, in terms of numbers, the church is growing rapidly. I do not wish to be overly critical, but merely totally and completely honest about the true situation among God's people today.

While we are being completely honest, there are some clear facts which we must admit. The many problems which we see, including sin, division, and heresy, have not been stopped or cured by our religious organizations. Our reliance on trained leadership has not prevented these things. Our dependence on men has not solved the problem. For example, how many leaders of deviant religious

sects today began as leaders in some church or other or even attended seminary? How many of them are today teaching false doctrines or even heresy?

Our officialized church government has not halted the spread of error, the tendency toward sin, or the problem of division within the church. With all the talk and teaching today about submitting to some leader or other, the overall situation is only getting worse. In short, human leadership, positional authority, and organizational control have clearly not worked to change the sinful tendencies of the human heart. This is something which we must be honest enough to admit.

As natural men we tend to look to institutions such as the police, the court system, the government etc. to subdue the evil tendencies of mankind. We look to schools to educate and impart values to our children. Perhaps we also imagine that this same sort of institutional structure will aid us in our efforts for God. Maybe we hope that similar types of organizations might help control the sinful tendencies of believers too.

However, even in the world, such things do nothing to change the hearts of men. For example, it may be that the threat of prison helps to subdue the flesh, but it does nothing to truly alter it. In the same way, positional authority in the church does nothing to transform the soul of man. It may serve to suppress the evil tendencies of a few, but it can never achieve the objectives of God.

Perhaps then, the time has come to look in another direction. Possibly, it is high time to stop our dependence on human leaders and institutions and look somewhere else. If we can honestly admit that what is being done is not working, we should then seek another answer.

Therefore, it might just be the hour to begin to trust in Jesus. Maybe it is time to turn back to the risen Savior as our one and only authority. It is possible that He could run things well. By some chance, He might be able to deal with the sin, divisions, and errors which are so rampant around us. Truthfully, we need another Head. We desperately need another Authority in our church experience. We must

have Someone powerful enough to change the human heart. It is only by true submission to Him that we will find the solution to the many problems in the church today.

We, the church, have tried the human authority way for almost 2,000 years. It hasn't worked. So now it is time to try God's way. Let us therefore, cast down all the idols. Let us remove any and all practices from our midst which hinder, limit, or interfere with the authority of the true Head. We must abandon totally our dependence upon man or men and turn our hearts again to the Lord.

Anything and everything which substitutes for Him in the life of every believer must be cast aside. How we need a great repentance! How much God's people need to rend their hearts before Him and cry out for His leadership and authority in their midst. Our individual lives desperately need to be submitted to His lordship and our church gatherings are crying out for His direction.

RESTORING THE TRUE HEAD

This is the great need of today. We must restore the Head to His rightful position among us. We must enthrone Jesus as Lord of our lives and our church experience. He is the cure for our ills. He is the answer to every problem in the church. His leadership and His authority will resolve all questions of sin, heresy, and division. It is He and He alone that we need. No new program of house meetings or discipleship will do the job. No returning to Judaism or "learning to submit to authority" will meet the need. No great manifestations of gifts or miracles can possibly effect the change that is needed. No insistence upon certain doctrinal truths will cure the problem.

What I am advocating here is indeed something very radical. What we need is a new kind of reformation or even revolution within the church. Martin Luther was considered a radical in his day. Indeed he did go a long way to help the church escape from the bondage of Catholicism.

But he did not go far enough. More change is needed. We must pick up where he left off and continue with this

reform until nothing human and earthly is left. We desperately need to press on with the cleansing of God's temple until no substitute altars and objects of worship remain. Moving in the fear of the Lord, we need to return to Him with all our hearts. If we leave any "Canaanites" in the land, eventually their influence will work to bring us back into idolatry and bondage.

Moses cried to Pharaoh in the name of the Lord saying: "Let my people go that they may serve Me" (Ex 7:16). Far too many of God's people today are also in bondage to various taskmasters. They are burdened down with following the dictates of human leadership. They are enslaved to an organized system of religious practice. Many and various leaders are reigning over them, urging them to use their time and effort to build up the leaders' own "great works for God."

Such submissive members are often used in the construction of worldly monuments which declare their leaders' success and pride. Almost invariably, the more successful a "church" or "ministry" becomes, the more lavish and grandiose their buildings seem to be. This requires the labor and money of the people of God. I believe that in these last days Jesus is desiring to set His people free from such bondage.

Honestly, we have nothing to lose by going this new scriptural, if unfamiliar, way. It is painfully obvious that the church of our day is not without "spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph 5:27). She is very far from what she needs to be in order to be ready to meet her King. If we are afraid to "risk" trusting completely in God, then we are left only with what we already have. This, my dear brothers and sisters, has not gotten the job done and never will.

What we need here to proceed is a great dose of faith. We need to believe that if we stop our doing, leading, and organizing in the house of God that He might be capable of doing it. We must believe that Jesus is capable of being our Head. We must trust in an invisible Lord. We have to have faith that since He is upholding the entire universe, along with every atom in it, He could possibly lead every mem-

ber of His body. If we do not believe in His ability to do this, then we will go nowhere.

“Without faith it is impossible to please Him” (Heb 11:6). It is imperative that the body of Christ return to a walk of faith with the risen Jesus. By faith, we can sense His leadership and follow Him. No visible, tangible, human substitute can ever help us arrive where we need to be.

IS THERE NO KING IN ISRAEL?

Some may object to this new way of following an invisible leader by quoting the verse in Judges 21:25 where we read: “In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.” Using the examples we find in the book of Judges of how far off people can get without leadership, they will insist that the idea of going without human leadership cannot work and will only produce confusion. Let us take some time here to examine this idea.

It is true that when there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in their own eyes. The situation in those times was a real mess. Many wild and weird things happened. The people were completely without government or control.

But today our situation is completely different. Today, there is a King in Israel! We do have a Leader! We are supposed to be in touch with and submitting ourselves to a King. We have a very real, alive, and present Teacher, Guide, Master, Pastor, and whatever else is needed. There should be no lack of authority and leadership for any believer. The government of God, or the kingdom of God, is at hand. This means that it is present and available here and now. The only question is how much each of us are willing to submit ourselves to Him.

If we are genuinely submissive and submitting to Jesus, He will guide us in every aspect of our living. He will direct us in our relationships with one another. He will even lead us when we are meeting together in His name.

Jesus is willing and able to do all this and more. Simply by subjecting ourselves to Him, we will find new vistas of His truth and glory opening up every day in our lives.

But if we are not truly willing to subject ourselves to His control, if we are somewhat resistant to His rule, if we are rebellious in our hearts, then this invisible government will not work. We will not listen to Him, seek Him, or obey Him. He will not really be the Lord of our lives.

However, if this is the case, then substituting Jesus' leadership with some human variety will not work either. If believers are refusing to submit to God, they will not be helped by submitting to man. The solution for rebellious believers is to learn to repent and genuinely obey Jesus. If they are unwilling to do this, there is nothing whatsoever that other believers can do to help them.

THE EXAMPLE OF ETHIOPIA

Perhaps many imagine that if the weight of human authority were suddenly lifted from the church, chaos would result. Others might think that most believers, without the support of Christian institutions, would simply fall away. Maybe meetings would cease to happen, evangelism would grind to a halt, and ministry would vanish. Yet we have several examples in recent history which seem to speak something else. Please allow me to repeat a story which I have heard along this line.

Some years ago in the country of Ethiopia, the Communists took power. As part of their strategy to create an atheist state, they closed down all the church buildings and imprisoned all the pastors. They thought that they could put an end to all this religious nonsense.

So what happened? What was the result of this complete removal of all such positional authority and religious props? Did the church fall apart and disintegrate? Was disorder and confusion a result? No! Instead exactly the opposite occurred. Revival broke out. Without human institutions and earthly authority, everyone had to begin seeking the Lord for themselves. They had to pray. They needed to

seek out fellowship with one another. They had to learn to get in touch with God for themselves, hear from Him, and obey Him. With no one to carry them along, with no religious institutions to supply them with programs, activities, and entertainments, they were left with only God upon whom to depend.

According to the report which I heard, when the Communists took over, there were about 5,000 believers in the country. Within a short period of time, perhaps several years, this number exploded to about 50,000. The removal of the religious apparatus, the absence of all the props of human leadership and authority, turned out to be a great blessing. God was actually able to lead His people. Amazingly, He was capable of being the Head over all things to them. And His headship turned out to be much more powerful and effective than the human variety.

These folks could not plan any meetings. If they did, there was a good chance that the authorities would find out and arrest everyone. So they had to follow the Holy Spirit. They had to sense when and where to go to meet with other believers. Surprisingly, when they arrived at the house of some brother or other, many others were already there meeting together.

Instead of depending on a man to organize and run their church experience, they had to seek God. Every day, they had to hear from Him, where to go, to whom to minister, with whom to pray, with whom to share the gospel. Theirs was a life of total dependence on Jesus.

And it worked! There was no confusion here. There was no chaos. Instead, all the members of the body worked together in harmony, simply following the leadership of the one Head.

This is exactly how the church worked in the book of Acts. We know that the believers were meeting daily from house to house (Acts 2:46). The apostles were teaching daily in the temple and also in homes. No doubt, many gifted brothers and sisters were circulating among the others, teaching, encouraging, praying, healing, prophesying, working miracles, etc.

But who was organizing all this? Was it Peter who was scheduling the visits of pastors to various homes? Was it James or John who was planning the different home meetings and getting a little teaching ready for each home group leader to give? Who was in control? Who was running the church? It was Jesus! It was the Holy Spirit who was leading and orchestrating all the activities of the church.

They did not need human beings to do this. They did not need to depend on man. There was no confusion. It was not a great mess. No one needed to manage everything and tell the others what to do. There was no necessity for a lot of organization and planning. Yet somehow everything worked. Evangelism happened. Needs were met. The believers were edified and strengthened in the faith.

The many ministries and meetings probably seemed to happen in some kind of co-ordinated fashion. This is because they were all being directed by the same Person. The risen Lord Himself was among them, leading every aspect of the church. He, the Head, was directing every movement of His own body. Of course it worked!

How we need a dose of this kind of Christianity today! How much we, God's people, need to return to Him as our leader, teacher, and guide. If we would only, by faith, look to Him for the guidance in our everyday lives and our corporate experience, there is no limit to what He might do in our midst. The truth is that, instead of helping God with all our authority figures and structures, we are actually hindering His work among us.

RESTORING THE HEADSHIP OF CHRIST

We, God's people, need to return to a walk of faith. We need to repent of what we have done to supplant His government and restore Him to His rightful place among us. It is high time, no, it is past time for us to cast aside all substitutes, anything which takes His place among His people. Only in this way will we begin to experience New

Testament Christianity. Only by returning to Him as our head and leader will we know His power and glory in our midst. True revival will only result if and when we restore all power and authority in the church to Jesus Christ. He is able and ready to lead His people.

You see, when we try to establish authority figures, we create a kind of bottleneck in the church. This is what I call the “funnel problem.” Men are finite. Their time, attention, and energy is limited. Their capacity, imagination, and even revelation about the work of God is restricted. So when we lift them up as our head, the activities of Christ’s body become very truncated. With man at the helm, the members are not free to follow Jesus. Everything must be checked out with and “funneled through” the leadership.

Suppose, for example, sister Ruth feels that the Lord wants her to start a Bible study for women at her house. Before she does this, she must ask the pastor for his approval. She doesn’t want to be seen as being rebellious. She does not want others to think she is challenging the authority of the leaders, so she must go and ask first.

But the pastor is busy. Perhaps he has just had a fight with his wife or a family crisis. He is reluctant for Ruth to start a Bible study without his supervision. What might she teach? What might happen? If anything goes wrong, he will be responsible and have to put out the fire. So, he says to her, “Look, I don’t have time right now to handle this. Perhaps another time. We will look into this,” or some other such response. Thus Ruth is not really free to follow Jesus. Human leadership becomes a bottleneck for the flow of God’s directions.

This is just one of thousands of examples. This kind of problem is endemic with any kind of human authority. All of the members of the body of Christ have gifts. Therefore, they are all to become ministers, exercising their gifts for the benefit of the others.

But no one man or even a group of men is capable of supervising all this. Only someone infinite could co-ordinate and direct it. So, when man is in charge, a huge part of this ministry disappears. The funnel at the top of the

authority pyramid restricts it. No one is simply free to follow the Lord and do what He says. In this way, human authority, instead of helping the work of God, greatly hinders it.

How many men and women of God are backslidden and/or pursuing the things of the world because there was no room for their gifts and ministry in the church? They did not fit into the program. The activities of the group simply did not permit time or space for them. Their gifts and callings were not recognized. Maybe the organizational structure only left room for a few gifted members, while the rest could only sit passively in the pews and listen. Perhaps the leader felt threatened by their anointing or gift, so he slowly squeezed them out. These and many other such evils are a result of human authority and earthly structure in the church.

But what a difference it is when Jesus is in the lead! Then all the members are free to function as He leads them. Their gifts and talents are needed. It is precisely their joint of supply (Eph 4:16) which some other member is lacking to overcome some sin, to be healed of some disease, or liberated from some demonic force.

With Jesus directing all the movements of His body, every need is met. The power of the Holy Spirit is more in evidence, since each one is responding to and obeying Him. The body is built up much more quickly and efficiently because each one is doing their job without restrictions. Everything is co-ordinated because one Head is in charge.

Perhaps brother Philip the evangelist could be a good example here. He felt that the Holy Spirit was telling him to go out into the middle of the desert and stand there (Acts 8:26). This seems like a strange kind of leading.

So what did he do? Did he go and ask permission from Peter? Did he get advice from John? Did James counsel him something like this? "Look brother, this seems a little strange. What could God possibly want you in the middle of the desert for? Probably this was just your imagination or an evil spirit. We need your gifts here where the

believers are, not in the wilderness. No, I don't think you should go."

Instead, Philip obeyed God. Consequently, He led a servant of the queen of Ethiopia to Christ and quite possibly this whole nation was impacted with the gospel at that time. The result of his obedience was spiritual fruit. This is precisely how it could work today if we gave God the chance to lead us Himself.

WHAT! TURN EVERYBODY LOOSE?

So if we simply let everyone loose, teaching them to submit to and follow Jesus, what would happen? On the positive side, I believe revival could break out. Many gifts and ministries would be released. Many believers would be challenged as to whether or not they really had a commitment to the Lord. The body of Christ would be edified much more quickly and efficiently. The power of God would be seen in His church. Even more than this, He would come and make His home among us.

On the negative side, there would be mistakes made. Some would sin. Others would be misled. Still others would backslide. No doubt, there would be some error and/or heresy. Certainly, in the New Testament times, such things also occurred too.

But such sin and error is no different from what we have today. The negative things which might happen are already happening in great fullness in the church of our time. So there is really no risk. The only risk is not doing what God is leading us to do. The only peril is in disobedience. Two thousand years of human control in the church has not brought us to the goal. Let us then take our hands off the controls and let Jesus Christ reign supreme over us.

If suddenly all believers were free from human authority, then they would either have to sink or swim. They would be faced with the necessity to seek God for themselves. They would have to learn how to hear from Him and follow Him. They would be pressed to know His word and be able to sense His presence.

Many might suppose that most would sink. However, I believe we would be surprised by how many would learn to swim. It is not as if there is no help for the weak ones. God would never let anyone whose heart was open to Him perish. Further, there exists in the body of Christ many gifted members who would minister to those who were in trouble.

Yet this ministry must not be to bring anyone back into bondage to human leadership, but a helping of the weaker ones to get to know Jesus for themselves. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and His ministry through His body, I believe that anyone who really has a heart to follow Jesus would certainly learn how to swim.

THE DANGER OF ORGANIZATION

In the New Testament almost nothing was organized. There we have very few examples of “central planning.” In fact, it is impressive how little organization they had. Yet this author is not insisting that it is unbiblical to organize anything, ever. Truthfully, it is impossible to live without any form of pre-planning. For example, if I call up a friend and invite him over to dinner, we have then organized something. If I agree to meet someone at a particular time and place, our meeting has then become organized to some extent. As we live, we will always need to have some form of organization.

The danger of organization is this: once it is set in motion, it can very easily stay in motion. It can take on a life of its own. Once the essential elements of any work or effort are set in place, it is easy for things just to keep going on and on. The Ford motor company is a good example of this. Henry Ford is dead. He has been dead for a long time. Yet the company which he organized is still going on to this day.

Many works for the Lord are also in this category. We may concede, for the sake of argument, that some work or other was initiated by Jesus. Perhaps He led some child of His to labor for Him in some specific way. But how about

today? Is this still His will? Is He still in charge of everything? Or has the Holy Spirit moved on and someone is still trying to make something work which is really now an empty form.

Part of this danger is that people tend to like things to be well organized. They like things to be predictable. They feel comfortable with something well structured and well run. That way they have little need to seek the Lord for themselves. Their flesh can relax and trust that everything will be taken care of. Familiarity feels safe and secure and many people really like that feeling.

When things are organized, believers do not have to be in living, constant touch with Jesus. They do not have to be exercised to seek Him moment by moment. They do not have to be ready to obey. They do not have to be willing to say something or do something for Him. With an organization, they do not have to be ready to change their activities, their employment, or even the place where they live. They can simply sit back and let the organization run their meetings and their lives.

But our Lord is "new every morning" (Lam 3:23). While He was on the earth, He was constantly doing something different. His life was far from routine. Every day, the disciples could be surprised by what He would do, where He might go, or what He might say. Therefore, we can be sure that His leading in the church and in our individual lives will be this way also. We must have the flexibility to move and change with Him at any moment.

The experience of the children of Israel in the wilderness is an excellent example of this. They were following the living God who was manifested in the column of fire and in the cloud. When He moved, they were supposed to be ready to move also. This cloud or pillar of fire would move at any moment, day or night. They had to be always ready (Ex 13:21,22; 40:36,37).

Perhaps they would stay in one place an hour, a week, months or even a year. But at any moment, God might move and they had to move with Him. They had to be ready and willing to pack up everything in an instant and

go. Even the tabernacle which God instructed Moses to build was made with this in mind. It was portable. It was easily dismantled and ready to move. This readiness to abandon our established practices and behaviors, meeting times and places, any and all ingrained religious habits must be our attitude also.

Therefore, the key to any organization of meetings, ministries, or works for God which we do is that we must be led by the Holy Spirit. It is His direction which must initiate anything. It is He who must be leading us in the doing of whatever is done. Further, we must be acutely sensitive to Him to dismantle anything which we have previously organized. We must be constantly attuned to Him to stop anything which has been put in motion.

It is essential that we preserve His rulership over everything, especially over anything which tends to become organized and therefore routine and predictable. Otherwise we will soon be left with an empty shell. We will only have something which God once used and blessed at some time in the past but today is a mere form or formula.

One of the very few examples of anything being organized we find in the New Testament was the appointment of deacons in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-7)). There, a problem arose. Some widows were being neglected when food was distributed. Evidently, this was something which was being done in a sporadic, haphazard way, and some non-Jewish members were being neglected. So they selected some men to take care of this work.

But please note what kind of men they chose. Almost anyone can distribute food. Even an unbeliever could take charge of this kind of work and even run it fairly. However, they were careful to select men with a certain virtue. They were especially "full of the Holy Spirit" (vs 3).

The apostles and others were concerned that this work be something which was directed by God. It was not enough to simply meet the need. They wanted to be sure that what was done was initiated, conducted, and if necessary terminated by the Lord. So they selected men who

knew how to follow Him. In this way this practical necessity could remain under the control of the Head.

GLORIOUS LIBERTY FOR GOD'S CHILDREN

We have been called into "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). We have been freed from sin. We have been released from the law. As we understand the ways of God more perfectly, we will even become free from the bondage of being "under" religious authorities too. The children of God are not supposed to be subject to any variety of earthly servitude. Paul goes so far as to say that due to this tremendous liberty "all things are lawful" (I Cor 6:12; 10:23) for a believer. A Christian is completely free to do whatever he or she chooses.

In the beginning, God gave Adam and Eve free will. They could do anything they wished. Only one thing was prohibited. But even this was freely available to them. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was right in front of their eyes. Their Lord even gave them the liberty to make the wrong choice. He never interfered, but let them make their own decision.

In exactly the same way today, every Christian must have total freedom to chose their own way unhindered by any religious authority. Should we give less liberty to one another than God gives to us? Are we in a position to restrict the complete freedom of others in a way which the Lord never does? Clearly the answer is "no." Just as our forefathers were allowed in the garden to freely choose, so today every believer must be permitted complete free will.

However, this great liberty becomes a test for us. Our choices will expose us. What exactly is in our hearts? Where do our affections lie? Are we really seeking Jesus and His kingdom with all our hearts or are there some other things lurking in our souls? Do we truly desire to please Him in all things, or are we playing around with His forgiveness and grace? How are we using our liberty?

Complete freedom will expose just where your heart really is in relationship to Jesus Christ. What you do, say,

or think when there is no human authority figure watching over you reveals what is really inside.

If, when you realize your true position of freedom, you stop praying very much, this says something. If you no longer meditate in the word of God daily, seeking His will and revelation, this too speaks. If you abandon your habit of daily seeking out other brothers and sisters for fellowship and prayer, this also is revealing.

If meeting together with other believers to worship our Lord and share with one another does not draw your heart, this exposes where your heart really is. If walking hand in hand with Jesus and being "all pleasing" (Col 1:10 KJV) to Him in every aspect and detail of your life is not your focus and delight, then this certainly speaks loudly. If there is anyone who is not really committed to the Lord, if by some chance there are a few whose participation in the Christian community is not based upon submission to and love for Jesus, true liberty will show it for what it is.

You see, these faults cannot be cured by submission to man. They cannot be fixed by insisting on obedience to positional authority. In fact, it is often only when such authority is removed that the real attitudes of the heart are exposed. Many times, submission to human authority only serves to cover up these and many other problems. We easily begin to do "eye service" and become "men pleasers," instead of "doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph 6:6).

The goals of Christians can easily become trying to satisfy the demands of our human leader and/or some particular religious group while actually neglecting those of our Lord. If our authority figure is satisfied with our conduct, we naturally assume that Jesus is also. When the standards of our particular religious group are met, then it is easy to suppose that we are right with God. In this way, such submission works to hide sin instead of expose it.

But God sees deep into the recesses of our heart. He knows what is there, even if it is lying dormant. No discipler or pastor can do such a thing. Yet "all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Heb 4:13). God knows it all. You may hide it

from others. You may even try to hide from yourself. But Jesus “searches the minds and hearts” (Rev 2:23).

EXPOSING SIN

A large part of the work of God in our lives is to expose such sin. His purpose is for us to see what we are really like, repent for our sin, and be transformed by the work of His Spirit. The job of the Comforter whom Jesus sent was just this, to convict the world of sin (Jn 16:8). Perhaps this is one reason we are given such great liberty. It exposes just who and what we really are.

How you use your liberty shows what is in your heart. It reveals whether or not you are really right with God and walking in intimacy with Him. Therefore, total liberty is an absolutely essential experience for every believer. If you have never enjoyed it, then it is something you should seek to know. As you walk in it, you will begin to see yourself in the light of God. Your choices and actions will reveal just who and what you really are.

If your heart is really seeking after the righteousness of God and His kingdom, this will be shown. If there are other priorities within you, this too will be exposed. It is the Lord Jesus Christ who has given you this liberty. It is His will that you experience it. Only in this way can you see yourself in His light and be transformed into all that He is. Without such liberty, the work of God cannot really be completed in your life.

Yes, anywhere there is liberty, there is a danger. There is the danger of people misusing it. Liberty gives us the option to simply please ourselves. It is all too possible for a Christian to abuse God’s goodness and use it as a means to satisfy the flesh and to sin. Paul exhorts us to be careful not use our liberty “as an opportunity for the flesh,” to fulfill its sinful desires (Gal 5:13).

He teaches that we should instead use our freedom to become servants of the other brothers and sisters. We should freely give ourselves in His love to help them grow up into God’s fullness. Further, He warns us that because

of our liberty, there is a danger of becoming entangled again in the yoke of bondage of sin or the law (Gal 5:1).

Paul's instruction is that we were freed from the law, but not simply to be without any government whatsoever. He says that we were liberated from the law so "that [we] may be married to another, even to Him who was raised from the dead" (Rm 7:4).

So we see that the goal is not to be without any restraint or authority, but to willingly submit ourselves completely to Jesus. The object of our liberty is not to become some kind of "free spirits" wandering around doing whatever we desire, but to choose to willingly subject our body, soul, and spirit to Him.

By giving us complete liberty, God is testing us. Our total freedom then becomes a sort of litmus paper to see what is really in our hearts. In this age of grace, our Lord is not imposing His authority on anyone. He never pushes beyond our willingness to submit. Any tiny amount of resistance on our part stops His work in our lives.

With liberty comes responsibility. We become answerable to God for our choices. When someone else is running our life, then it is easy for us to imagine that they are responsible for the results. But when we are at liberty to choose, then it is we who will bear the burden of the consequences. Someday when Jesus returns He will judge us for what we did with the liberty which He freely gave to us. Each and every one of us should be living with this coming judgment day in mind.



7.

THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

GOD'S POINT OF VIEW

*I*n order to live and work in harmony with the thoughts of God, we must first see things from His point of view. But just what is this point of view? It is this: when God looks down from heaven, He does not see thousands of different "bodies of Christ." He only sees His one body. The Bible states specifically that: "There is one body, and one Spirit, just as you are 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 you all" Eph (4:4-6). There is really only one church. This is God's viewpoint.

While we, from our earthly vantage point, may see the many divisions, "churches," denominations, sects, etc. which divide this body, in reality it is really only one. No doubt God realizes that these different segments exist. He must be aware of them. Yet, when He looks upon the earth He sees only one church, one bride. Therefore, in order to work in harmony with Him, we must adopt His viewpoint. We must begin to see the church as one also.

You may notice as you walk with God that, although He is aware of divisions within His body, He visits every part. He loves each and every member. He ministers to

every group, church, denomination, and sect. His loving care, His abundant grace, His power to deliver and heal, His work of sanctification is available to all without exception.

Virtually every group of real believers, no matter what their doctrinal stance, tradition, custom, practice, or emphasis, experiences the presence of God to some degree or other. Therefore, we can perceive that our Lord visits and ministers Himself to any gathering of Christians who are open to Him and ready to receive from Him. He is not bound by their divisions. He is not stopped by their doctrinal walls. He is not impeded by their peculiar practices. Instead His love compels Him to minister to them using whatever openings are available to Him.

No doubt these divisions grieve Him. It is very likely that He would like things to be different. It is certain that such factions are contrary to His expressed will. Yet, in His lowly way, Jesus visits and ministers Himself to every single part of the body of Christ.

Now let us contemplate this very carefully. Since our Lord behaves in this way, how should we conduct ourselves? Are we better than He? Are we more holy than His Holy Spirit? Can we divide ourselves from others because they are divisive? Are we allowed to be more discriminating in deciding to whom we will minister or with whom we will have fellowship than He is? Certainly the answer to this must be "No." Therefore, we must adopt God's heavenly perspective when we move forward to work together with Him in constructing His bride, His church.

Others may have their divisions, yet we need have none. Some may have their walls and barriers, yet for us they need not exist. Many may isolate themselves from the rest of the body, criticizing the others and feeling superior because of their teachings, leadership, or practices; yet for those who are intimate with Christ, these things need not impede us from loving them and serving them.

In these days, it is impossible for us to break down all the different walls of separation which exist in the body of Christ. We cannot eliminate all divisions. The problem is

too great and widespread. Yet there is one place where we can eliminate all such barriers. There is one place where all division can cease to exist – in our own hearts. Being filled with and motivated by God’s love, we can adopt His own viewpoint. We can overlook these man-made impediments and then, whenever and wherever we can, minister Jesus Christ to any and all of His people.

We, God’s people are free. We are free to love all. We are free to receive all, embrace all, serve all, and even meet with any and all. Our attitude towards every member of the body of Christ and even all the different gatherings of His people can be the same as God’s. We can love them and minister Christ to them.

ONLY ONE LIMITATION

The only limitation to this manifestation of unity comes when we begin to co-labor with others in building His house. We have been clearly exhorted to only build according to the heavenly vision. Therefore, we are not free to launch ourselves into any and every construction scheme which we encounter. It is not wise to involve ourselves in human works and efforts. We cannot help others build up something which will not satisfy God’s desires.

Yet, while we may not be able to join with many different Christian groups to build what they are building, we can still love and serve them. While we may discern that their construction is not eternal and therefore we cannot invest our time in co-laboring with them in this effort, it is still possible to overlook this impediment and minister the Spirit of Jesus Christ whenever and wherever possible. In many cases, it is possible to find ways, just as God does, to share His eternal life with them.

Perhaps by our working in this way, when the outward shell of human endeavor is burned away by Jesus’ presence at His coming, something precious and eternal will remain. We may be able, through the wisdom and power of God, to have built up something solid and lasting in spite of their earthly constructions.

It is true that we must be very careful not to become involved in and bogged down by human organizations, yet it is also true that by God's wisdom we can minister Christ in almost any situation. We must never lose our vision of God's house and become encumbered by worldly religious works. It is essential that we always discern every situation and be careful to only build with God's materials in His way. Yet, just as Jesus finds ways to minister Himself to others in the midst of various faulty constructions, so we too can work together with Him to love and serve His body.

When we see the sin of others, when we perceive that the divisions which exist are contrary to God's will, we do not need to run and hide. Neither do we have an obligation to exclude these "sinners" from our sphere of love and service. There is no necessity for us to avoid all contact with them because we are afraid of being contaminated by these divisions. This is a merely natural, fleshly reaction.

Jesus' ministry gives us an example to follow. We read that He ministered frequently in the synagogues of His day (Mt 4:23, 9:35). Yet these gatherings were not biblical. Nowhere in the Bible did God instruct the Jews to build and meet in synagogues. These were a merely human, religious invention. So, did Jesus avoid them? Did He turn up His nose and think, "I will not involve myself in this unscriptural, ungodly, human work"? No. Instead, He went there to minister Himself to the people on a regular basis (Lk 4:16).

It is true that this synagogue system did not change due to His ministry. It is certain that the majority were not transformed by His words. There were undoubtedly many times when Jesus was not well received. Occasionally, they even tried to kill Him. Yet He persistently went because He knew that there were some present who were hungry for Him. Jesus loved these people and He used every opportunity to minister Himself to them.

Jesus did not become the leader of some synagogue. He did not try to "work within the system" to bring about change. He did not become encumbered with human

works and religious practices. Yet He did use whatever opening presented itself (Lk 4:16-21) to serve them with the bread of life. We, His people, are also free to live and work in the same way as He did.

HOW THE BODY IS DIVIDED

The church of God is one. There is an inherent spiritual unity in the whole church which includes every believer from the time Jesus Christ died on the cross for our sins until today. Although this is so, the church is actually divided in several ways.

Firstly, the church is divided into two categories: those in the church who have died and gone to be with the Lord, and those in the church who still remain upon the earth. The physical reality of death divides the church into these two categories.

But even the part of the church which “remains” here on earth, is divided up into separate parts. What we are speaking about here is not the problem of division, but the facts of physical limitations. One of these limitations is the fact of geography.

So, secondly, the body of Christ is divided up geographically. People live in different countries, in different cities and in various villages. Since it is the nature of men to gather themselves together in communities, the church is also divided physically in the same way. Thus, the one true church is separated into the church in each community. Obviously then it is impossible for these believers in these disparate locations to associate together, meet together and serve one another on a daily basis.

Therefore, we see that the one church of God is divided up into local units. For example, the Bible speaks of the church in this city or in that city. These are not really separate churches, but simply the part of the one true church which is living in some particular place or other.

Such geographical separation in no way implies that the Christians who live in these different cities should be divided from others in other places spiritually. All this

indicates is that there is an earthly, practical dividing up of the church by communities.

The fact that this physical separation should not involve any spiritual separation is shown plainly by the Bible's teaching about hospitality. The scriptures teach us that we are to entertain strangers. We are to open our homes and our hearts to brethren who are passing through our city (Rom 12:13, I Tim 3:2, Tit 1:8, I Pet 4:9).

These verses show us that we should have the same love, the same openness, and the same spiritual unity with every Christian regardless of where they live. Thus it is plain to see that real unity extends beyond the physical division of the church by localities. Although the church is geographically divided, the unity of the Spirit still prevails.

LIMITATIONS OF PRACTICALITY

Thirdly, within any given city, there may be many thousands of Christians. Depending on the size of the city and the number of Christians, it would probably be impossible for them to know one another. It is even more impossible for them to meet together and have fellowship on a daily basis. For this reason, in practice the church of God is further divided. The members of the one church may frequently gather with a smaller group or groups when they meet for worship, prayer, etc.

However, these Christians are still members of the one church in their city which is only a smaller part of the one true church. Again we must realize that this division of the church in regard to church meetings is only physical and must never lead to spiritual disunity.

This then is the limitation of practicality. Even though in the same city, it might be impossible for all believers to meet together in one room or auditorium, yet the principle of unity remains the same. Although certainly these believers might meet in separate homes or other locations, their commitment of service and love must be to all and not merely to a distinct group with whom they have more frequent association.

FREEDOM TO MEET WITH ALL

Here we must also give our consideration to another common error. It is often taught and practiced that where we meet with other believers is some kind of absolute. It is a kind of a holy place to which we must be committed. If we meet with group "X" for example, then we should not meet with group "Y."

But such thinking was never and is not in the heart of God our Father. In the book of Acts we read that the believers met "daily from house to house" (Acts 2:46). This means that one day some gathered in one house and the next day in another. But surely there was some overlap here. Certainly each and every gathering was not a distinct and separate entity. No doubt some who met in one home also met in other homes with different believers depending on the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Let us consider this fact. Perhaps brother "Joe" meets on Tuesday night with a group in someone's house. Does this mean that he cannot meet on Wednesday with another group in another house? Certainly not! Brother Joe is a member of the body of Christ. He is free to meet with any and all believers in the entire world. He has the liberty to congregate with different believers every night if he so chooses. No brother or sister is under any biblical constraint whatsoever to confine themselves to only meeting with a particular group. If and when they do, this constitutes division on their part.

OUR HEART ATTITUDE

Even though the body of Christ is "divided" by geographical and practical constraints, there remains the question of our heart attitude. To maintain a biblical position, we must also maintain a heart of love for all of God's children. We can never become exclusive in our attitude or actions. Our love must be the same for all, whether we meet frequently with them or not.

This is to be our stance. We must love all, receive all, serve all, embrace all, and minister to all. In order to be pleasing to God our hearts must come to, and remain in, this disposition. We need to receive and retain our Father's heavenly point of view. In His sight, it is all one body (Eph 4:4). Our obligation is to live, act, and move in this reality.

It actually makes no difference if others agree with us. It may be that they do not even like us. Things may arrive at a point where other believers actually fight against us or even wish to kill us (Mt 10:21,22). But our heart attitude must remain that of love and forgiveness. Our Lord's instructions are even to love our enemies. This must also apply to brothers or sisters who become our enemies also.

To have spiritual unity means that the bond of brotherly love is never broken. Please allow me to further clarify this with an illustration. Perhaps two believers live in the same city, yet do not know each other. One may be meeting with the Christians with whom he is acquainted, and the other with those whom he knows.

Yet if they were ever to meet each other, there should be love, oneness, and unity between them. They should accept and love one another just as much as those they already know. This is only possible if they do not have any heart attitude which is divisive or anything else which would disrupt the genuine unity of the body of Christ. This is genuine spiritual unity. It is something which is inherent in every Christian and possible for each one of us to experience. Although oneness is firstly spiritual, it has a very real, tangible, earthly expression – brotherly love.

THE CHURCH IN CORINTH

In the book of First Corinthians we read about a group of people, the church in Corinth, who evidently did not have this experience of unity. The church in that city was divided up into several factions or camps. Paul wrote a portion of his epistle to the Corinthians for the purpose of rebuking them and exhorting them to be one in the Lord. How this passage reminds us of the situation among so

many Christians today. We read in I Corinthians, chapter 1, starting with verse 10: "Now I plead with 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. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? or were you baptized in the name of Paul (I Cor 1:10-13)?"

How easily these verses could have been written to the church in almost any city today! Such division is the common situation among Christians of our time. In fact, many Christians are taught that it is proper for them to be divided in this way. How pitifully short this falls of scriptural Christianity.

Each group says, "We are of this persuasion," or "We are of that persuasion": "I am a Charismatic," "I am a Pentecostal," "I am for baptism by a certain method," or "I follow a certain leader." And so this is how we find much of the Church of God today – divided, arguing, and disagreeing one with another. One group of Christians perhaps is suspicious of the other's motives, teachings, or methods. The next group may be jealous of the other one because they have more members or a fancier building. All these things only divide the church of God.

Arguing, bickering, and dissension of this nature among the members in the body of Christ is evidence of spiritual infancy and carnality. Let us read again in I Corinthians, this time in chapter 3, beginning with verse 1: "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ."

"I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, 'I am of

Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not carnal" (I Cor 3:1-4)?

The problem among Christians today, in every city, is not that there are many different meetings. This is a matter of necessity. The problem is that each one of these meetings takes on a separate identity. Each one of these groups begins to adhere to a certain doctrine, leader, practice, or way which differentiates it from other meetings of genuine Christians in that city.

Each one builds some kind of wall or barrier to keep "their sheep" separate from all the rest. For every group the point of separation may be a different thing. However, the result is the same – the dividing up of the church in every city into smaller sects or factions which have little or nothing to do with each other. This situation is not of God. It is what Paul labels as carnal and infantile. Such division destroys the proper functioning of the body of Christ and hinders God's work on the earth.

Allow me to be so bold as to ask a question. Is there any real difference between saying "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Christ," and saying "I follow the teachings of Luther," "I am a Baptist," "I am for a certain arrangement of the presbytery," or "I am of the Church of Christ"? How closely the situation today parallels that in the city of Corinth. Yet how strongly we as men justify what we are doing in spite of the plain teaching found in the scriptures.

Granted, this is all done for good reasons, humanly speaking. Some are trying to protect what they consider to be "the faith." Others may be attempting to save a certain truth that they have discovered from impurity. Still others might be endeavoring to protect their members from wrong teaching. Yet the result of all these well-intentioned reasons is to disobey the scriptures and divide the church of God.

It might be instructive for us to remember here that Paul wrote his epistle to "the church which is in Corinth." This city was full of religious divisions. There were several different, disagreeing factions. Yet in spite of these divi-

sions, Paul recognized that this was really only one church which in fact was a smaller part of the one true church which exists today.

As we have been seeing, the church in each city consists of every true born-again believer in that city. Furthermore, all Christian meetings are really just meetings of that one church. Therefore, we should strive to live in this reality. Our meetings with other Christians should not be something which are separate and distinct from the meetings of the rest of the Christians in the city in which we live.

By this I mean that we should never have some kind of closed, separate membership. We should never insist that anyone meet only with us, forbidding them to participate in other Christian meetings with other believers. Our walls should be down and our doors open. Our hearts should be open likewise to each and every Christian with whom we may come into contact. This is genuine unity.

THE BASIS OF UNITY

Christian unity is not based upon mutual agreement on doctrines. For example, there no doubt will be many who do not agree with what I am teaching in this book. But our obligation to love one another transcends such disagreement. Our love for others is based on the fact that we have a commitment to Jesus Christ and to all those who belong to Him.

True unity is not the same as unanimity. The honest truth is that we will never all agree with each other doctrinally. There will always be differences of opinion. Not all have the same revelation. Some lack spiritual understanding. Others have not grown spiritually enough to receive certain truths. The writer of Hebrews, for example, had many things he wished to teach the believers but they were too infantile to receive them (Heb 5:11-13). Still others are stubborn, opinionated, or just plain wrong about many things. Therefore, doctrinal agreement can never be the basis for our unity.

True unity is also not uniformity. It is true that we are exhorted to “be in the same mind” and to “speak the same things” (I Cor 1:10). However, this goal cannot be achieved by insisting that everyone agree with us. This ideal can only be reached through the work of the Holy Spirit in each individual. If we insist that those with whom we have spiritual relationships speak, act, and think only along certain predetermined lines, we may achieve an appearance of uniformity, but will never have the true unity which Jesus desires.

We are instructed by God to maintain the “unity of the Spirit” until we all arrive at the “unity of the faith” (Eph 4:3,13). So we see that the unity of common understanding will only come with growth, maturity, and perhaps even the second coming of Christ. But in the meantime we are exhorted to maintain a spiritual unity – the unity of the Spirit – with every member of the body of Christ.

True unity also is not conformity. Many groups of believers pressure their members, either subtly or openly, to conform to a certain set of practices and rules. These may involve dress codes, a set of activities, an arrangement of authority figures, or even a peculiar, distinctive manner of speaking, social interaction, or even preaching.

Yet this too is not real unity. The natural man can be taught and conditioned to conform to many different standards. The army is a good example of this. There, everyone dresses, speaks, and acts the same. In some Christian groups, these things are also in evidence. But this does nothing to enhance our spiritual growth or change us into the image of Christ. Neither does it constitute true unity. The unity for which God is looking is that we all are changed to be like the same Person, Jesus Christ.

JESUS' PRAYER

In John chapter 17 is recorded a special prayer. Here Jesus is interceding for those who had received and would receive Him. Part of His prayer is that those whom the Father has given Him would be one (Jn 17:20,21).

As a younger Christian I believed and taught that Jesus was pleading with His Father that all believers would get along. I imagined that He was asking for His church to be without sect or division. I supposed that Jesus was petitioning for the kind of "horizontal" unity which would produce a visible expression of the one body which God indeed does see.

However, after some years of walking with the Lord, I find that my understanding of Jesus' prayer has changed. If indeed Jesus was asking for a worldwide unity of all believers, then until today, the Father has not heard Him. If all believers getting along with each other and meeting together was His request, then for almost 2,000 years, Jesus' prayer has gone unanswered.

Perhaps some imagine that at last, now at the end of the age, suddenly something is going to happen to cause this great get-together of believers to occur. But the fact is that the situation will probably only get worse as the end approaches. At the end of this age, Christians will even begin to hate one another to the extent that they will turn each other in to the authorities to be killed (Mt 24:10). In this age, Christ's prayer will never be answered by an outward show of unity.

So how then are we to understand Jesus' prayer? What was it for which He was asking the Father? To begin we must see that Jesus is one with His Father. He said: "I and My Father are one" (Jn 10:30). The Son has always had (except for a brief moment on the cross) and still has the most intimate communion with the Father. They are in constant fellowship. The union which they have is so complete and intimate that men's minds become exhausted and their words fail when trying to describe it. The union and communion which Jesus and His Father have are beyond human comprehension.

Theirs is a complete, intimate, and eternal unity. So absolute is this intimacy that Jesus insists that He who has seen Him has actually seen the Father (Jn 14:9). This unity is so thorough that when Jesus was on the earth, His words and works were simply an expression of His Father (Jn

14:10). Incredibly, Jesus was not even motivated by His human life which He received from Mary but was always living by the life of the Father (Jn 6:57). Jesus and the Father have complete unity of Spirit, heart, and mind. All of their thoughts and feelings and actions are in harmony. There is no independence of mind, emotions, or deeds in this relationship.

This is a relationship of eternal love. The Father loves the Son and has given Him everything (Jn 3:35; 10:17). All that the Father is and all that He has belong to the Son (Jn 13:3).

This intimacy between Father and Son is so extreme that we are taught that Jesus is the expression of, or the “image” of, the Father (Col 1:15). So exact is the manifestation of the Father through the Son that we are taught He is the “express image of His [the Father’s] person” (Heb 1:3). The scriptures even go so far as to teach that the Son is a full and complete expression of all that the Father is. We read: “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col 2:9). And also: “For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell” (Col 1:19).

This little meditation is an attempt to help the reader understand for what Jesus was praying. He was not praying for us to get along with each other, as important as this might be. He was not asking the Father for all Christians to meet together under one banner or under one roof. He was interceding for something much superior. His prayer to the Father was a petition for something which is so great as to be almost unimaginable. Jesus was asking that we would be brought into this same intimate union and communion which He has with His Father.

That’s right. Jesus’ desire is that His followers could be brought by God to participate in this holy union and communion. He was asking that we too might enjoy the intimacy which He has with His Father. His petition was that this holy oneness which He and the Father have would be expanded to include His disciples also.

With this sublime thought in mind let us read together: “I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who

will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us" (Jn 17:20,21). This verse is not speaking about believers trying to get along with one another but of something much higher and holier. This is not a "horizontal" unity but a "vertical" one.

Then Jesus continues: "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one." And how is this oneness to be achieved? "I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one [or in this oneness]" (Jn 17:21,22,23). You see Jesus is truly one with His Father. And He has loved His people so much that He is yearning for them also to enter into and participate in this holy oneness with Himself and His Father.

This is really good news! It is an important, if little understood, part of the gospel message. Jesus has invited those who believe in Him to be born again and then be transformed to such an extent that they can participate in His union with His Father. This is the place of His bride in God's family.

What is the result of our becoming one with Jesus and His Father? It is that our lives become changed. Our nature and character become different. Just as Jesus is the "image" or full expression of the Father, so we can become, through this unity with Him, an actual expression of Himself. As we grow in Christ, we become more and more one with Him. His thoughts become our thoughts. His feelings, opinions, desires, and purposes become ours also. When this process is complete we become a small expression of Jesus. Then we can affirm with Paul, that "...it is no longer I who live, but Christ [who] lives in me" (Gal 2:20).

This modification of our character and nature then becomes a testimony to the world. When it is no longer us doing the living but Jesus actually living, moving, and expressing Himself through us, this is the proof that Jesus is real. When this oneness with God occurs, it is then "...that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me" (Jn 17:23). It is then that "...the world may believe that You sent Me" (Jn 17:21).

Christians merely succeeding in getting along with each other will never convince the world that Christ is real. Every group or club has some sort of cohesiveness. But what will be the real evidence that Jesus is the Son of God and that He has all power in heaven and earth is when His followers enter into the kind of union and communion with Him that He has with His Father.

THE RESULT

One result of each believer becoming more one with Christ and the Father will be that they will grow into a unity with one another also. Our unity with Jesus will produce a unity with other brothers and sisters. Perhaps a bicycle wheel could be a good analogy to help us understand this. As the spokes of this wheel get closer to the axle they also get closer to each other. In the same way, as each one of us becomes more intimate with Jesus, we will automatically have more unity with each other also.

Yet this unity with each other is not, as we have already seen, some kind of unanimity, uniformity, or conformity. It is a consequence of the work of God to bring each one of us into unity with Himself. It is not a result of insisting that believers try to get along with each other, being supervised by some kind of leadership or system, but a product of the work of the Holy Spirit.

It is true that unity is a part of God's desire for His children. It is also equally plain that this unity cannot be achieved with immature, childlike Christians. Our previous reading in I Corinthians gives us ample evidence of this fact. Infantile believers will never experience real unity. Their tendency toward self-centeredness will always work against genuine oneness. They will disagree about petty things, fight for some position of authority or other, envy each other, speak badly about one another, be easily hurt by one another, and many other such things. Baby Christians will never succeed in being one. Their natural, fleshly tendencies will always prevail because they are still stronger than the inner, spiritual man.

The only solution which will bring us together is spiritual maturity. We all must seek to grow in Christ so that His love for His children becomes our love. We must mature spiritually so that our unity with Jesus and the Father translates into a unity with one another also. This way is perhaps prolonged and difficult but it is the only way that we will achieve true unity with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

True unity comes from intimacy with the Father. As we walk in communion with Him we sense His heart. We begin to understand His feelings and desires. We come to know His love for each and every one of His children. The result of such intimate communion will be that we will be able to have unity with others.

It is the responsibility of mature believers to demonstrate and maintain this unity. They are the ones who have "known Him who is from the beginning" (I Jn 2:13). They then must be the ones to lead the way in showing others how to love, forgive, support, believe, and have unity with the rest of the church. It is by following the example of mature believers that the younger ones can succeed in living in love and unity. Such leadership in the area of love and unity is an essential part of the true church experience.

True unity is real proof of our spiritual maturity – if we are able to love the brethren. This love will not only be for those who agree with us and meet with us, but for all. This love will even be manifested toward those who disagree with us or even hate us. Intimacy with God, manifesting itself in Christian maturity, is the only factor which can produce true unity.

8.

COMMITMENT

*T*he most common glue which men use today to try to hold the body of Christ together is commitment. Virtually every church group wants the believers who meet with them to make some kind of commitment to that particular group. This may include a commitment to a doctrinal position, commitment to the leader or authority figure, commitment to some practice, commitment to a purpose or "vision," or to any number of other things.

The variety of items to which believers are urged to commit themselves is endless, yet the way it works varies little. Christians are exhorted often and forcefully to commit themselves to some "church," group, or segment of the body of Christ in a way that separates them from the rest.

This commitment of these individuals to the group is the adhesive used to hold members together. It is the insistence upon this commitment which the leaders use to capture and hold members to their group. Once someone is convinced of the correctness of their way, doctrine, or practice and then commits themselves to it, they are considered to be "members" of that particular group.

In order to be free to leave the group, members are required to somehow unmake this commitment. In some institutions, this is quite easy. In others, the commitment demanded is very strong and some individuals find it extremely hard to extricate themselves when and if they wish to. Instead of each one being free to follow the lead-

ing of the one true Head, these believers have fallen into bondage to the dictates of a human organization.

Often, adherents to one group are discouraged, through various means, from any intimate relationships with other groups. They are exhorted to remain faithful to the “church” where they have a commitment. They are told not to be “church hoppers” going from one meeting to another. Such members are expected to participate in the activities of their group and to avoid others which might be seen to be in competition with them. Thus, the freedom for these believers to live in and experience the one true church is limited.

Since some kind of commitment is the basis for the unity of so many Christian groups, let us spend a little time and investigate this subject together.

TWO KINDS OF COMMITMENT

The Bible teaches us two kinds of commitment. The first is that we should be totally committed to God. He asks from us and is worthy of our full allegiance. We read: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind” (Lk 10:27). Certainly, this speaks of a complete commitment of our being to our Creator. You cannot love someone with your entire being in this kind of way without at the same time committing yourself totally to them.

Further, we are urged to offer ourselves as “a living sacrifice” (Rm 12:1) on His altar. This too speaks of a kind of commitment which is complete, leaving nothing in reserve. Surely, every reader can agree that our God is calling us to, and is worthy to receive, the entire commitment of our heart.

We are speaking here about love and commitment in the same breath because they are intimately related. You cannot have one without the other. An example of this is the marriage union. Any two people can have sexual relations together without a marriage covenant. But real love involves a deep, lifelong commitment.

If we say that we love someone and yet are unwilling to make any kind of commitment to them, this makes a lie of our words. This shows that we really love ourselves more than the other person and are only using the other for our entertainment and/or gratification.

Without such a commitment, any time that the other ceases to please us, giving us the kind of feelings and service which we want, we are free to leave. Thus we have taken from them all that they had to give and then left them high and dry when they ceased to satisfy us. The idea of love without commitment is a farce.

This is also true in our present discussion. If we say that we love God but do not have a complete commitment to Him, then our love is defective. To the degree that we truly love Him, we will give ourselves to Him. If and when we are holding ourselves back from an unconditional yielding of our entire heart to Him, this reveals that our love for Him is also incomplete.

Our love for Jesus is what really binds us to Him in absolute surrender of all that we are, all that we have, and all that we hope for. It is our love for Him which causes us to open up unreservedly to Him so that He can control all of our thoughts, our feelings, and our decisions. It is this deep passion we have towards our Lord which draws us to live in complete transparency and openness with Him. This is a true love commitment. It is this commitment which is the basis of our union or unity with God.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CHURCH

This then is the foundation for any genuine experience of the church. Without any external forces, such as authority figures or organizational structures putting demands upon us, our love for God alone is the only thing which causes us to walk in His ways. If we love Him, we will serve Him. If we love Him, we will follow Him, and we will seek Him. Meditation in His word, times of prayer and seeking His face, looking for every opportunity to serve others in His name, and even manifesting His life and

nature, are all the results of our love for God. Our lifestyle and daily living reveal our relationship with Him.

The experience of the true church can only be known by those who love God supremely! This is an extremely important truth. Anything less than a complete commitment to Him will not work. All that the church is, is flowing out from Him. He is the source of both the life and the leadership of the church. Therefore, if we are not constantly walking in intimacy with Him, this flow of life and direction will be interrupted. Unless we remain firmly attached to the Vine, the flow from this source will be sporadic or lacking. This will cause our experience of His body to also be partial and defective.

If our heart is captured by other things, we will seek them instead of, or parallel to, our relationship with Jesus. With the passing of time, these other things which we love will draw us away from Him. To continue on with a spiritual walk, we must continually repent for and forsake anything which competes with our love for Jesus. It is only by walking in love and complete commitment to Christ that we can experience the fullness of the reality of His body.

Demas was a man with a divided heart. He was one of Paul's coworkers (Col 4:14, Phm 24). Demas had labored for some years with Paul to advance the kingdom of God. But deep within him, there was a secret desire. Hidden inside his heart was a love for the world. And so, when this longing came into bloom one day, he forsook the work of the Lord and went to try to satisfy his longing for goods, wealth, and perhaps even fame. We read: "For Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (II Tim 4:10).

If our heart is not "single" (Lk 11:34 KJV), we will not be impelled to seek our Lord every day. We will not be looking for how to satisfy Him by serving His body. We will not be spending our time, money, and energy for the construction of His eternal dwelling place. Instead, we will end up serving only ourselves.

Consequently, the one true church which is led by and filled with Jesus, will not be our experience. Many other

motivations and desires will command our time, energy, money, and attention. When we are freed from the bondage of other taskmasters who make demands upon us, what do we do? Where is our heart? If our commitment to Jesus is lacking, then this will impact our ability to experience the spiritual reality of the true church.

A LACK OF COMMITMENT

The absence of a complete commitment to the Lord is a common ailment in the church today. When each one of the members of Christ's body is not seeking and following His leading every day, the living church does not and, in fact, cannot function. When the intimate connection to the Head is broken, the flow of life and direction is interrupted as well.

Just as a human body cannot work properly when the members are not connected to the head, so it is with the body of Christ. Unless each one maintains an intimate, constant relationship with Jesus, He cannot guide them and express Himself through them. Thus the manifestation of His body – which is the only true church – is not seen or is seen in a very limited way.

This lack of commitment becomes manifest when nothing of spiritual significance occurs. Where this lack is evident, very little evangelism is done. The ministry of God's life one to another is absent. The use of the gifts, helping, giving, and all the other evidences of the Holy Spirit's work are in short supply. When the members are resisting or out of touch with their true Head, then the life of the body does not flow through them. Thus the expression of the true church is limited.

The result of this deficiency is that men often try to employ human organization and structures to compensate for this lack. Some sense a need for more action. They realize that the church is in a stagnant state. But lacking a heavenly vision, they begin to use earthly means and methods to try to correct the problem. They begin to rally believers together around some doctrine, direction, or

leader. They begin to organize activities and meetings to try and stimulate Christians to do what they think they should do.

An infinite variety of natural means are used to try to make the body appear to do what it should be doing naturally and automatically. Leaders and organizations begin to manipulate the activities of the members to try to achieve what is lacking. The results of such efforts are a mechanical imitation of the living church.

Instead of curing the problem, such human means often only serve to hide the core issue. Innumerable believers today are being carried along by religious organizations while they have very little, if any, commitment to Jesus. The structure of the group provides for them meetings and activities which give them an appearance of serving Jesus. Their consciences – which should trouble them due to their resistance to God's true leadership – are assuaged by the group, which considers them "good members."

Their participation in the group becomes a substitute for a real walk with the invisible God. This becomes a kind of crutch for their Christianity. The adherents are provided with a vehicle which carries them along day by day, but does not really resolve the deepest problem of the heart. Such a religious structure does nothing to expose any hidden resistance to the complete government of God in people's lives.

Frequently, such organizations become a kind of god for the members to love and follow. They become a substitute for the real headship of Jesus. Some begin to love "their church" so much that it makes it impossible for them to hear God's truth concerning *His* church. It is not uncommon for such religious participants to resist, fight against, and even hate anyone who might suggest that God has something better for them.

Their religious organization has provided for them another way to assure them that they are right with God instead of their actually *being* right with God. Consequently, they cling to it with all their might. They are experienc-

ing what can be called “justification by church.” Instead of being justified by a right relationship with Jesus, they feel they must be right with God because they are in good standing with their group or church.

THE REAL CURE

The cure for those who do not have a complete consecration to Jesus is not to supply a substitute. It is not to fill their lives with religious activities. It is not to apply natural, human pressure to try to make them conform or participate. It is to help them come to Him, repent of whatever is getting in the way, and then give themselves utterly to Him.

It is absolutely necessary for every Christian to arrive at and maintain a complete surrender of the control of their lives to Jesus Christ. Unless and until believers come to this point of commitment to their Lord, they cannot really experience the true church in her fullness.

Since the real church experience is something which flows out of the side of Jesus, only those who are constantly drinking of Him will be able to enjoy all the benefits. Unless we are connected to this divine fountain of life we cannot know the supernatural results. When our hearts and minds are distracted or captivated by other things, then the flow of His Life is restricted. Consequently, our experience of the one true church will be limited also.

The true church is a spiritual entity. To participate in her therefore, we too must constantly be in the Spirit. We must continually be full of and led by the Spirit of God. This requires a complete commitment of our heart, life, and soul to Him. If we are only walking in the flesh – that is being led by our thoughts and feelings – then we will find it difficult to enjoy true spiritual experiences.

Being tied to the earth by our heart’s desires, we will be impeded from knowing and enjoying the spiritual realities. Only by offering our whole being up to God continually can we walk in His fullness and therefore enjoy all that He is doing in His body. The undiluted experience of the

church is only known by those who are completely in love with Jesus.

Consequently, it is of the utmost importance that we work to bring all believers to this commitment. It is essential that our ministry to others include this all-important ingredient. If we desire to work together with God to build up His eternal house, we must seek Him for how we can draw others into a complete surrender of all that they are to Jesus.

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

This same complete commitment of our heart and soul to Jesus is required to experience real spiritual growth. Unless and until we are really ready for Him to work in all of us, our progress will be limited. This is because when the Holy Spirit begins His transforming work in us, He wishes to do a complete work. He wants to change our entire being. Whenever He encounters any resistance, His work within us stops. God will never go even one millimeter beyond our willingness. When we have areas of our hearts which we are not ready to open up to Him, He cannot move.

God never forces Himself upon anyone. He will never do something to us or in us which we are not one hundred percent willing for Him to do. Therefore, our spiritual growth is stopped by our lack of consecration. When and if He encounters any resistance on our part, then He simply waits for our hearts to change. While He certainly will work to draw us into the kind of total commitment which is necessary for His work to continue, He will not violate our will in any way.

I once knew a person (not myself) whose life was a testimony of such an experience. This individual received God's new life and was born again. Yet they were full of different resistances to the work of God. Stubbornness, fears, pride, and many other such problems were lurking within this spiritual child. The thought of a total, unhindered yielding of their heart to God brought panic to this

believer's mind. This then brought this Christian many emotional conflicts and stresses but almost no spiritual growth. The Spirit of God was always trying to draw this one into complete submission yet this person fought against this kind of transparency with Him tooth and nail. This condition lasted about 20 years.

Yet, through His mercy, one day God's love began to conquer this individual. This believer's heart was being slowly melted by His grace. So one day this person decided to take an important step – the opening up of their heart completely to God. At that moment supernatural salvation began to take more effect.

The transformation process, which had been so truncated, began to move forward. As more consecration was made, real, tangible changes began to be manifested in this life. All the benefits of true submission to Jesus began to become real to this person. Their genuine walk with Jesus and experience of His complete salvation only began with a complete commitment to the Lord.

The experience of this believer is not unique. Through the years I have seen a number of similar cases. Real, spiritual progress only can be realized by those who have yielded their lives completely to Him. This commitment then is the basis for a genuine walk with the Lord and also the foundation for the true church experience. Without it we are only fooling ourselves, often being carried along in our Christian life by many artificial, religious props and devices which do nothing to really change our lives in an eternal way.

THE SECOND COMMITMENT

BROTHERLY LOVE

The second type of commitment which the Bible teaches us is commitment to one another. We are taught to love our neighbor as we love ourselves (Lk 10:27). This love too speaks of commitment. We must have the same kind of obligation to care for our neighbor as we do to care

for ourselves. This responsibility is especially true in the church among believers.

We are required by God to have “the same care for one another” (I Cor 12:25). We are exhorted to “love one another fervently with a pure heart” (I Pet 1:22). Everywhere in the New Testament we are urged to exercise brotherly love. This, as we have been seeing, is a kind of deep commitment to others. The New Testament is so full of exhortations regarding this kind of love commitment to the other members of the body of Christ that it is almost impossible to list and study them all.

But how is it possible to love all the different people whom Jesus has chosen to put in His body? Sometimes it seems that He has chosen people who are some of the most difficult to love. Yet, He requires that we love them just as much as He has loved us. We read: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (Jn 13:34). This seems to be an impossible task, yet it is an essential element in the experience of the one true church.

The source of such supernatural love is God Himself. God has a deep, passionate love for His people, His church. Before the world began, God must have looked into the future and beheld His bride. While gazing upon her, a deep, passionate love must have been born within Him. The intense love which He has for her has been His motivation for all the work which He has been doing for and in mankind throughout the ages. This is the “...love of God which is in Christ Jesus” (Rm 8:39) when He came to earth to die for her.

Therefore, when we are walking every day in intimate communion with Him, we will sense His love for every one of His children. Our fellowship with Him will result in our absorbing and then expressing His tender sentiments. As we know Him more every day, this unfathomable love which He has for His people will begin to fill our hearts. With the passage of time, this divine love will begin to become the source of our motivation in our work together with Jesus.

So we find that there is a second commitment which we need to make. It is both biblical and essential. It is a firm, complete commitment to love all the other members of the body of Christ. It is necessary for each one of us to make a conscious, clear commitment before God to love all of His children. When we make this commitment, this puts us in a position to receive the love of God for others. As we agree with God concerning His attitude towards His body, this opens the way for His love to flow through us.

Without such a commitment, it is very possible that our human reactions to others will prevail. It is probable that our natural man will begin to express itself. In order for us to live in and experience the true church, this deep commitment needs to be made. If we do not, sooner or later, something will happen – someone will do or say something to hurt or offend us – which will cause us to stop loving them, become closed to them and pull away. We will then turn our backs on them and a division in Christ's body will occur.

If we are to have divine love flowing through us in each and every circumstance, we need to make a commitment before God. This is a commitment to love all His children. Then, when our resources run out, as they no doubt will – when we can love no longer, when we cannot bear the burden – we will sense His supply of supernatural love. When we are committed to others, He will always supply us with His love. Since His love never fails, it is always available for us to experience.

When our commitment to God and to His people is lacking, if we have not come into a deep understanding of what living the gospel of Jesus entails, we will not be able to enter into the fullness of all that He has for us. Many of the spiritual benefits and pleasures of His house will not be our experience. Our failure in this area will rob us of many spiritual enjoyments and maturity.

Those who miss these precious things are in a real kind of danger. They are very likely to seek a substitute. If they fail to make the two commitments which we have been discussing, they will also fall short in their spiritual

lives. Their experience of the living house of God will be faulty. Lacking this experience it is possible that they will seek to fill the void with some kind of religious organization, leadership, or structure. If the spiritual reality is not our experience, the natural tendency is to seek out something easier.

So we understand that in order to experience the reality of the one true church, there is a second commitment involved. This is a commitment to our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is not a commitment to an institution, group, method, leader, or way, but a commitment to other individuals. We must commit ourselves to love them fully, utterly, and completely. This includes individuals of all kinds, both those who are more agreeable and those who prove to be very difficult to love.

WHOM MUST WE LOVE?

The church of Jesus today is very large. There are many millions of believers who are part of her. We have been seeing that God requires us to love all of them. Yet, loving millions of people at the same time is only theoretical and not practical. Although our heart attitude may be right before God, being willing to love all, there is simply no way to express this love in a real way.

In the city where we live there may be thousands or even millions of other Christians. There is no possible way we can meet with all of them, minister to all of them, serve all of them, or care for all of them. Obviously, our capacity as finite human beings is limited. So how then are we to exercise this love?

Jesus taught us to love our neighbor (Mt 22:39), but who is this neighbor? It is those other Christians whom God brings into our lives. As we walk with the Lord, He brings us into contact with other believers. If and when we are sensitive to Him, we will know when it is He who is orchestrating these contacts. We will be able to sense that it is God who is bringing these people into our lives. We read that He "...has set the members, each one of them, in

the body just as He pleased" (I Cor 12:18). As we have seen in previous chapters, Jesus is the one who is building His body. He is the one who puts one stone alongside another stone in His building. He is the one who knows how to do this construction. Our part is to be sensitive to Him and respond to what He is doing.

These are not always people whom we might choose. These are not necessarily people we like, that please us, or even that we think are easy to befriend. What is important is that God is bringing someone into our lives. It may be for their benefit and growth. Possibly, they need some kind of ministry which we can give them. Or perhaps, we will learn from them, either from their portion of Christ or growing in patience and long-suffering from their lack of Christ. Certainly, we will grow through the experience whether it is a blessing or difficult.

When God brings someone to us, then we are required to love this person. It is our obligation to commit ourselves to serve them. We are not free to pick and choose whom we will love and serve. As servants of God, we must obey Him in our commitment to those whom He puts before us. Our role is to express the love of God to whomever He brings into our lives.

We can have confidence that God knows what He is doing. He is the architect and the builder of His house. He knows which relationships are strategic for His purposes. He understands which parts are important to each other. He knows how such spiritual relationships will work together to edify the rest.

God will bring us co-workers. He will bring us people with many problems and needs. He will bring us some who need our portion of Christ, some who will disappoint us, some who will challenge us, some who will bless us and some who will help us. Our responsibility is simply to commit ourselves to love them with the love of God.

Our responsibility to love others does not stop with only those who agree with us. It is not limited to those with whom we meet regularly, those who like us, those whose company we enjoy, or those whom we imagine we can

convince of our position, doctrine, or practice. Anyone whom God brings into our lives, we are required to love and serve in a humble way, and leave the results to God. As we do this, Jesus will build His church in an invisible, hidden way which one day will be revealed in all her glorious splendor.

This commitment of love is not something which is temporary. These relationships must not depend upon our emotions or whims. Since it has its source in the eternal God our commitment to others should also be an eternal thing. These individuals whom God brings into our lives are not disposable. They are not to be discarded like used tissue when they cease to please us or when they do something which hurts or offends us.

Just as God does not discard His children every time they sin or disobey, so we too must make a thorough commitment to others to love and serve them. They may choose to turn their backs on us, but we are not free before God to turn away from them. Our commitment to other brothers and sisters must be like that of Jesus Christ.

In today's world, men and women have become very accustomed to and even addicted to instant self-gratification. So many of us have become used to having what we want the way we want it, when we want it. But if we are to experience the one true church, this self-love must be denied. Our natural feelings and reactions to so many things which others do and say must be replaced with Jesus' divine reaction of love.

The commitment which we make to others must be deep and abiding. It must be made as a conscious, sober decision in which we become willing to lay down our own lives for others. It is a commitment which puts others before ourselves. It is a decision which mirrors the heart of our Savior when He came to give His life for us.

THE REAL CHURCH GLUE

Brotherly love then is the glue which will hold the one true church together. It is this love for one another which

will cause us to maintain our fellowship. It is this eternal love which will impel us to serve Christ's body. It is this unending love which will induce us to lay down our lives so that others can grow up into all that Jesus is. It is the love for God and for one another which will cause us to maintain relationships, desire to meet for worship, edification and prayer, and to use our gifts and ministries to build up the body.

Here there is no need for positional or institutional authority. There is no room for some kind of substitute framework or "commitment" to try to hold people together. This is not something artificial. It is nothing which man can produce or even imitate. This is not anything which has been made with human hands. It is the place where God dwells and will dwell for eternity.

The evidence of the reality of the one true church is brotherly love. This ageless love of God being poured out through and onto His body is the proof that God Himself is at work. It is the sure sign that He is the One who is in control and He is the One who has done this work. Man cannot imitate it.

Such love produces the most enjoyable kind of "church." The scripture reads: "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard...It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing – Life forevermore" (Ps 133).

The intimacy of living together and relating to others in the love of God is one of the highest human experiences. It is one of the most truly enjoyable things which we can know. The intimacy with one another which this produces, the transparency of lives and relationships which comes forth, is simply wonderful. There is nothing which can compare with living with others in God's love.

This is the goal. This is the experience of the one true church. It is the kind of living into which Jesus is calling us. It is meant to be part of our reward for our faithful obedience to Jesus. Every Christian is meant to be able to partic-

ipate in and fully enjoy this spiritual communion with one another.

If we fail to enter into the kind of relationship with Jesus which produces this love, then we will also fail to experience the one true church. If we do not walk in intimate communion with the Father, then we will never succeed in knowing the reality of His body. The love of God is the only adhesive which will work when we are constructing the genuine house of God.

Any other method to try and hold the people of God together is false. It is an imitation. It is a human effort to try to produce something which should be the automatic fruit of a spiritual life. If we really know God intimately, we will love the brethren. This love is the only substance which can be used to hold the people of God together in a real, eternal way. Therefore, it is a large part of our work to stir up one another to love as Christ loves (Heb 10:24).

It is our privilege to demonstrate through our lives this godly love so that others will have an example to follow. It is part of our function in the body of Christ to exhort and encourage each brother and sister to know this love and to express it. This is the highest and holiest calling.

GIFTS ALONE WILL NOT SUCCEED

Many people today are trying to build up the church and hold it together with their spiritual gifts. They are doing their best to edify other believers with their ministry. But some also make the mistake of thinking that this will be sufficient. They try to build the church by attracting others through the use of their gifts and then try to get these others to commit themselves to them and their ministry as a means of holding these believers together.

Dear brethren, it is not enough simply to have some kind of spiritual gift. It is not sufficient to have an "anointed" ministry. Just being able to preach or teach, cure the sick, predict the future, or cast out demons is not adequate to build up the true church. All these things can be done by those who do not know how to live in God's love.

Incredibly, they can be accomplished by some who are not really living in intimacy with Jesus. Here the scripture is quite clear. If our “ministry” is merely an exercise of our gift but not a result of the flow of eternal love in us and through us, it is an empty, vain thing. In fact, it is “nothing” (I Cor 13:2).

It is not uncommon in the church today to find men and women who are using the gifts which God has given them to promote themselves. They are exercising the spiritual abilities which they have received to impress others and therefore exalt themselves. They want to be seen and heard. They want others to think that they are really spiritual.

Yet, all this is simply evidence of their immaturity. They are lacking in God’s love. Real love does not behave in this way. It “does not parade itself.” It is “not puffed up” (I Cor 13:4). Those who are motivated by the love of God are not self-seeking. Their motives are only to minister the life and nature of God to other believers and a perishing world.

The exercise of spiritual gifts without love is an empty religious exercise. It like the sound of a bell or trumpet which quickly vanishes away (I Cor 13:1). The kind of ministry which will produce lasting, eternal results is the ministry done in love. It is the love of God flowing in us and through us which will build up the eternal habitation of the Most High.

GROUP COMMITMENT

As we have mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, there is a third kind of commitment upon which so many are insisting today. It is the commitment of a believer to a certain “church,” group, or ministry. What about this idea of the dedication of our lives to a specific group? Do the scriptures teach us that we should commit ourselves to a certain church, ministry, or way? Absolutely not! On the contrary such commitment is forbidden.

The alignment of ourselves with any subgroup other than the body of Christ as a whole is strictly prohibited. It

is what the Bible calls "division." It is the cause of "factions" within the body. It is a kind of activity which is destructive to the cause of Christ. Paul rebukes the believers in Corinth for doing this very thing. There they were aligning themselves with certain leaders. They were saying, "I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos," "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ" (I Cor 1:12).

Paul teaches us that such commitment to a subgroup of believers is carnal and childish. It demonstrated that these Christians were still infantile and fleshly. They did not yet have the maturity to see things according to God's point of view. They did not have a heavenly vision of His one true church. Nowhere in the word of God are we urged to give our allegiance to any group, church, or ministry beyond the simple exhortation to love one another.

The alignment with or commitment of ourselves to a specific church or group is against the clear teachings of the New Testament. When we do this we automatically set up a kind of barrier between ourselves and other Christians. Our allegiance to anything other than Jesus Christ and His entire body, creates a sort of delineation or "denomination."

Literally, a denomination is a distinction and separation of something by the use of a name. For example, we give people a name or even nickname to differentiate them from others. When we form separate groups within the church and give them names to distinguish them from the rest, we create "denominations."

To a greater or lesser degree, such a practice cuts us off from the ministry which the rest of the body has to offer us. Conversely, we also limit our availability to the others to contribute our portion. Such divisions in the body of Christ limit the flow of His love. They inhibit the ministry of Life which the members give to one another. When believers band together in groups which are separate from the rest of the body, they greatly limit the work of God. For this reason, such commitments are contrary to His will.

We have no need to rely on such commitments to try to keep a group together. We must not look to such earth-

ly means and methods to try and secure members or keep believers in our group. The love of God will do this. Remember that it is He that places the members in the body as it pleases Him (I Cor 12:18). We can trust in His ability to do this in a way which will benefit everyone. If we live in love, Jesus Himself will cause His body to grow and prosper.

The commitment of believers to a group or organization frequently substitutes for the two essential commitments which we have been discussing. By committing themselves to a group, Christians often neglect their commitment to Christ and to one another. As we have seen in previous chapters, such carnal commitments are often easier to make and maintain than the two spiritual ones which we have been discussing here.

A fleshly group commitment can be made and maintained without any commitment to love God totally and love our brothers and sisters as we love ourselves. Anything which is or which becomes a substitute for God's best way should be avoided.

9.

MEETINGS OF THE TRUE CHURCH

God is Spirit (Jn 4:24). He exists in a realm which is not physical. It is a “place” which is outside of space and time. It is a spiritual dimension. Since His resurrection from the grave and His coming in the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:28), Jesus too lives in this spiritual realm. Although He is certainly present in this world right now, His presence among us and within us is not physical, but spiritual.

Furthermore, we too, after we are born again, become spiritual creatures (Jn 3:6). Having been “born of the Spirit” we have entered into this new realm which is not earthly or physical, but spiritual. This spiritual “place” is somewhere where a believer can “go” and in which they can live. Since we have this new spiritual capacity, we can enter the sphere where God is and have contact and communion with Him.

If we wish to experience the presence of God, we must enter into this spiritual realm where He is. Although God can be observed in His creation and by His visible acts, including miracles, healings, etc., He cannot be actually known personally except in this spiritual dimension. For example, the children of Israel saw God’s “acts” since they witnessed them during their exit from Egypt and their

journeys through the wilderness. Through these signs, they learned a little bit about God. But Moses was privileged to know Him intimately. He knew His “ways” since he spent time in God’s presence (Ps 103:7). We read that the Lord spoke to Moses “face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Ex 33:11).

The realm of the “Spirit” is the only place where God is knowable. There is a great tendency among human beings to think that He can be found through some series of formulas, teachings, or practices. Others imagine that He can be found in some kind of cathedral, temple, or religious building. Yet, this is not true. Jesus Himself explained this to the woman He encountered at Jacob’s well (Jn 4:21-24). She wondered about the correct location to worship. In her mind she was perplexed about which physical place or doctrinal position was proper to please the Most High.

But Jesus told her that a change had taken place. A new era had dawned. Through the work of Christ, human beings were no longer confined to the physical plane but would, and in fact should, contact God in a new way and in a new position. From now on, true worshippers must worship God “in spirit and truth.”

Jesus explained that the presence of God cannot be found anymore in “Jerusalem” or on “this mountain.” This means that today entering into the spirit is not a question of location, practice, doctrine, creed, or artifice. Entering into the spirit does not depend upon being in a certain place (a religious building for example) or upon where we stand concerning a series of Bible doctrines. Being in the spirit is a question of actually entering into the presence of God which is in the Spirit.

Being “in the spirit” does not signify that we have some special kind of emotional experience. It does not mean that we are overcome by ecstasy, joy, or physical sensation. It is not a result of working up some kind of feeling by loud singing, dancing, clapping, shouting, etc. Instead it means that we are entering the presence of God in our spirit. It means that we are in spiritual communion with Jesus. Although God can and sometimes does give us pleasant

emotions when we are in His presence which we might begin to associate with this experience, such feelings are not a dependable sign that we have arrived. They are not what we should seek.

Being “in the spirit” does not signify that we are in a certain mood or that we are being carried along with the emotion of a particular situation or event. It does not mean that our feelings are aroused or that we are somehow stimulated by our surroundings or by being together with a group. It does not imply that we are simply in harmony with others around us or with our environment. Being in the spirit simply means that, due to our openness to Jesus, we have entered into the realm where He is and are in communion with Him. This experience may or may not come with any specific sensations or feelings.

Being “in the spirit” also is not a rational, logical, intellectual phenomenon. It does not depend upon our being “right” about many things. To arrive at this experience, does not require that we study, memorize, and analyze various doctrines and Bible passages. It does not depend upon our understanding. Although, when we are in the spirit, God does speak to us and we may receive much enlightenment in our mind, entering into His presence is not a mental exercise.

The key to being able to enter into the presence of God and remain in His presence is that our hearts and lives are yielded completely to Him. Instead of our mind and emotions, our will is the important ingredient here. When our entire being is submitted to the control of the Holy Spirit, when our soul and body are His, when we do not have secret barriers, resistances, fears, and sins, then we can easily and frequently enter into the Spirit. We can live in God’s presence.

As we come to a place in our Christian experience where we have given our entire life completely to Jesus, walking in the spirit becomes easier. When we are confident of God’s love for us and so entrust ourselves totally to His leadership and care, when our faith is such that we are ready for Him to do anything He wishes within us and

through us, then entering into and living in the Spirit is easy and natural. Unless and until every believer arrives at a point of complete submission of their will to Jesus, they will have trouble entering into and remaining in the presence of God.

So we understand that there is a specific “realm” or sphere in which God dwells and into which we can enter and even live. This is like a kind of “fourth dimension.” It is the place the Bible calls being “in the Spirit” (Rm 8:9). This is where the reality of God is and where God becomes real to us.

We will not have space to examine in great detail what it means to be “in the spirit” in this volume. Therefore, I would like to again encourage any readers who are unsure about what this signifies to read my previous book entitled *From Glory to Glory*, especially the part about the dividing of the soul and the spirit. There you will find two entire chapters devoted to this important subject.

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE CHURCH

All of this has a very real application to our present topic: the experience of the church. The church too is a spiritual being. She also exists in the spiritual plane or realm. Although there is a physical manifestation of the church in the tangible world in which we live, the reality of, or the experience of the church is only in the Holy Spirit.

Yes, since believers have physical bodies, the church does appear in the natural world. What her members say and do has an effect here on this earth. But the source of her life and inspiration is spiritual. In essence she truly belongs to another realm. The natural part of her that appears physically today, i.e. the natural bodies of the members, will soon pass away and be replaced with a spiritual one which corresponds to her true nature.

Therefore, in order to be of value in God’s kingdom, all the words and actions of this spiritual being must originate in the Spirit. The source of her speaking and doing must emanate from the presence of her invisible Head.

Anything which has its origin in the natural, earthly realm is of no value in promoting the eternal purposes of God. Only that which springs from her communion with Jesus in the spirit will stand the test of judgment Day.

THE CORPORATE EXPERIENCE

As we have been discussing, it is possible and even necessary for every believer to know, enter into, and even live in the Spirit. But even more than that, it is possible for believers to enter into the Spirit together. When two or more Christians enter into the presence of God collectively, then this is the experience of genuine church (Mt 18:20). This is the substance of what the true church is. When believers succeed in opening their hearts to God when they are with each other, they can enter into His presence corporately. They can be "raised ...up together and made ...[to] sit together in the heavenly places" (Eph 2:6).

This fact is crucial. The only place where the reality of Christ is, is in the spirit. So too, the only place where we can know the reality of His bride, the church, is also in the spirit. This reality is simply not found in any other place.

Those who are in the spirit are being guided by and filled with the Holy Spirit. It is this leadership and sustenance which produces the church. This is the essence of the one true church.

It might be that some Christians are meeting together. They might sing songs. Perhaps they pray and preach. It is possible that they have some kinds of "ministries," such as outreaches to the poor, youth groups, a choir, or any number of other activities which are frequently associated with "a church." But if these things are not the result of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, if they are not being sustained by the real presence of God, if they are not truly an expression of the Divine Life, then they are not really church. They are only a human imitation.

I do not mean to offend anyone by saying this. It is only that I have a yearning within me for all of God's children to experience His fullness. It is so important for every

believer to know both the reality of God's presence and the wonderful experience of the true church. To know this, we must know where to look. We must know how to arrive at the destination which we are seeking. We must enter into the Holy Spirit, into the very presence of God together.

Today, there are many, many merely human substitutes. There is so much which is being done in Jesus' name which seems good. There is a great plethora of Christian activity which is being hailed as "a work of God." So many of these things may appear to be "scriptural" from an earthly point of view. They may seem to be right and good.

Yet literally millions of believers all over the world are walking away from their "Sunday morning services" unsatisfied. Their spirits have not been truly nourished. While the leadership and even those around them might proclaim that this is the will of God, countless numbers of believers are still going hungry and thirsty for more of the reality of Christ.

This is simply because they are looking in the wrong place. They are seeking the solution in the wrong realm. They go from church to church, ministry to ministry, looking for a "church home" – somewhere that makes them feel right and satisfied. But the solution to this is not in a new place, a new preacher, or a new practice or creed. The answer is in the spirit. The realization of their desires is in this other dimension: the very presence of God Himself.

How much believers need to learn to live and walk in the spirit! What a great necessity there is today for believers to apprehend how to enter into the presence of God together! How enormous is the urgency for Christians to know how to meet together, being led by and filled with the Holy Spirit! We must enter into the spirit when we are together so that we can experience the reality of the church.

When we are in Him, and only when we are in Him, will we be satisfied. This is because all that He is is only available to us, individually and corporately, when we are in this invisible, spiritual dimension.

Such a corporate or "together" entrance into the Holy Spirit can be effected by two or three believers. For exam-

ple, whenever we are with other Christians and all are walking in the spirit, there will be the sweetness of spiritual communion. Spontaneously, we will be sharing with the others what we have been seeing, hearing, and knowing about our God.

This is almost automatic. When the others are open to the Lord and we are also, this flow of life from one to another is natural and instinctive. No one has to organize anything. Such things do not need to be pre-planned. When we are walking in the flow of Divine Life, when others around us are also open to this same flow, spiritual communion with them is spontaneous.

When two or three are together, they can pray, they can sing, they can share the wonderful things which God has done for them, they can minister their portion of Jesus to the others. Such spiritual encounters can happen any place and at any time. The only requirement is that the participants be in the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, it is possible and even common for believers to get together and never enter this realm. They might eat a meal together, play some sports and even engage in interesting conversation. They may even sing, pray, and listen to some discourse about a biblical subject. But if they fail to enter into the presence of God together, all this has no eternal value. They have not experienced the one true church. This failure is because they remained in the natural, physical, soulish realm. They did not succeed in entering into the Holy Spirit.

JESUS CAN LEAD OUR MEETINGS

One important key to enjoying spiritual meetings when we gather with a group of Christians is that Jesus can lead our meetings. He can actually conduct our corporate activities just as a conductor might direct a symphony orchestra. This experience is not meant to be something which happens once in a while, but something which should be a normal and constant part of our church experience.

When we and others with whom we are meeting are in the presence of God, we can sense His directions. In the Spirit, we discern when He wishes us to speak, sing, pray, or even to be quiet. In our spirit we realize what it is that Jesus is doing and saying at any particular time. In this way, we can flow along with what He is wanting, harmonizing with the will of God moment by moment.

Such direction by Jesus in our Christian gatherings is essential. Without it, we are only left with human guidance. When we fail to enter into the spiritual dimension and discern the authority and leadership of the Holy Spirit, we can only employ natural techniques to conduct our meetings. Although we might seem to approximate the spiritual reality, such church experiences are ultimately unsatisfying and useless. Truly, "the flesh profits nothing" (Jn 6:63).

Today, Jesus is invisible yet He is very real. Although He is intangible in the natural, physical realm, He is abundantly perceptible when we enter into the Spirit. When He does come to our Christian gatherings, He does not come to watch or to be entertained. Neither is He intending to sit in the "back pew" to make sure we are doing things correctly. Instead, He comes into our midst as our Leader and King. He comes not to watch but to lead. His role is not to observe, but to guide and direct everything.

When we succeed in entering into His presence and thus allow Him to fulfill His role in our midst, these meetings will be extremely satisfying. He knows the need of every member. He understands how to minister to every heart. So, when He is the leader, He can inspire someone or other to speak, pray, prophecy, or even sing to minister to these needs. Probably He has prepared these people beforehand to fulfill this very task.

Only God knows what is in every soul. Only He understands the aches, the needs, or even the joys which are there. Therefore, when He is orchestrating all that is said and done, true spiritual ministry is effected. Human needs of every variety are truly being met. This truth applies to our worshipping and/or singing as well as to

any preaching, teaching, or other ministry which occurs. For example, each one can have a psalm, hymn, or song. When a person is inspired by the Spirit to suggest a song or to begin singing, then singing it will be an anointed, spiritual experience. It will be a blessing to all. It will be something which Jesus has chosen, with words which will meet some needs and an anointing which will uplift every spirit.

We read: "How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, *each of you* has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification" (I Cor 14:26).

If, on the other hand, people merely call out their favorite tune or someone selects everything in advance, the opportunity for Jesus to lead is diminished. Consequently, the blessing also becomes less or even nonexistent. The more we can succeed in allowing Jesus to lead us when we meet, the more blessed and uplifted our experience will be.

The same thing is true concerning any preaching or teaching. No one should be dominating every meeting with their eloquence and gift. There must be room for all to have a chance to contribute. We read: "For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged" (I Cor 14:31). The word "prophesy" here means "to speak for God," which can include preaching and teaching as well as ministering "prophetically."

No one man has all revelation. No one besides Jesus Christ has all the gifts and ministries. God has designed the body so that members are dependent upon each other. The portion of every member is required so that the whole can be edified. Therefore, when two or three or even more are together in the presence of the Lord, there should be opportunity for each one, guided by the Holy Spirit, to minister their portion of Jesus to the rest.

As the Spirit of Jesus moves among the members of His body, He will lead one or the other to minister according to his or her gift, ministry, or revelation. Following the direction of the Holy Spirit, each "joint" of supply (Eph 4:16) can be used to edify the others.

Here there should be no confusion. Everything should occur “decently and in order” (I Cor 14:40). Since there is one Head which is directing the activities of the various members, a divine harmony is seen. When Jesus is the author, then there is a supernatural synchronization of everything which occurs. Although the Director is invisible, when all the members enter into the spiritual realm where He is, then everything is done in an orderly manner.

THE LOCUSTS HAVE NO KING

There is an interesting verse in Proverbs which speaks to this subject. We read: “The locusts have no king, yet they all advance in ranks” (Pr 30:27). These swarms of insects have no visible leader, but they move together in harmony as if they did. There is some invisible impulse which is guiding them. In the same way, the Leader of the body of Christ is not seen by human eyes today. But, if and when the members of His body move and minister following the leading of His Spirit and they are “tuned in” to His authority, then there is a wonderful harmony seen. There is nothing contradictory or discordant. There is no need for believers to be competing to be seen or heard.

We are taught that each one can “prophesy” or contribute their portion. “But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent” (I Cor 14:30). You see, when the Spirit of God is leading a meeting, then everyone must be sensitive to His every direction. No one can dominate the others, using the time for only their revelation and ministry, but always must be ready to yield to someone else who takes up the thread of the revelation which God is giving and contributes his portion also.

There is no need for human organization. There is no requirement to plan and program everything in advance. There is no necessity for someone or some group of men to try to control the rest. In fact, such efforts will be shown on judgment day to have been a great hindrance to God’s work. Jesus is infinitely capable of leading His church in her meetings. It is only essential for every member to learn

to enter into and be led by the Holy Spirit. It is necessary for each one to be moved by God's eternal Life. When the members are directed by the one Head, then all their movements and ministries are in harmony with each other.

A person who is moved by the Spirit in a gathering of believers should minister or speak "as the oracles of God" (I Pet 4:11). They should be careful, according to their spiritual maturity, not to include any fleshly opinions, ideas, or directions. They should only minister according to the proportion of their faith (Rm 12:6). Further, they should be vigilant not to continue on talking or singing when the Holy Spirit has already moved on.

It is very common for someone, when they feel the attention of the group upon them, to become enamored with a feeling of importance. It is easy for the flesh to be stimulated when we are used by God. Consequently, it is not infrequent for different members of the body to go beyond what God wishes to say and continue rambling on, enjoying the limelight. This is detrimental to all.

On the other hand, sometimes it is hard for a more timid member to say anything. Perhaps he or she is naturally disposed to be reticent or shy. Such members need to be encouraged to contribute what they feel the Lord is giving them. They need to be taught that their part, be it ever so small, is something of value to all.

If and when the stronger members of the body dominate any and all gatherings with their gifts and ministries, it is almost impossible for the weaker ones to grow in sharing their portions. Therefore, the stronger ones should be very sensitive to give the weaker members an opportunity to function in the meetings.

BUT SOME ARE BLESSED IN OTHER PLACES

Some Christians will no doubt dispute the necessity to meet in the manner which we have been describing. They may argue that they and others have certainly been blessed and received ministry in meetings which were structured and organized. Perhaps a "one man ministry" situation

has brought them some spiritual benefit. These meetings did not match the “body” experience which we have been describing, yet they were beneficial.

In no way would I dispute such an assertion. God certainly is not confined to any particular way or formula. The “way” we meet is not the key. In many locations where believers get together, there is, from time to time, some opening for the Holy Spirit to work and move. We are not insisting that unless things are done according to a certain pattern, God will not be present. On the contrary, He will work in and through the organizations of man as much as He can. Since He loves all of His people, He will use every opening and opportunity which presents itself to edify them.

Of course, we must insist upon the truth that all ministry of any eternal value is done in the Spirit. But it is true that sometimes, in various circumstances, “organized” groups of Christians do succeed in entering. To some degree or another, they manage to allow the Lord to lead them. Perhaps the pastor or preacher has received a message from God. Possibly the leaders of the worship know how to flow along with the Holy Spirit. These and other situations can provide some amount of spiritual ministry.

The following truth is extremely important: To the degree that any group of Christians succeeds in entering the presence of God together, to that degree they experience the one true church. To the extent that they manage to submit to the leadership of Jesus together, to that extent they will know the spiritual reality of His presence. If and when someone is ministering something which they received from God and following His guidance, the others will be benefitted. Any gathering of believers, anywhere, can enter into and know these blessings.

What we are seeking here, however, is how to *maximize* this experience. Instead of these blessings being sporadic and unpredictable, we want to know them all the time. In the place of merely stumbling occasionally into God’s presence, perhaps not knowing how we got in or why we stepped out, we need to understand how to enjoy

this continually. We wish to maximize our experience of the Holy Spirit.

In order to accomplish this, one thing we must do is to remove all the hindrances. Any merely human obstacles must be discarded. For example, human organization will surely limit the ability of Jesus to lead. Pre-planned, formulated "worship" will inhibit this also. The dominating of the meetings by one man and ministry, no matter how anointed he may be, will at best be only a very partial manifestation of the body of Christ. All the merely traditional, religious props which might substitute for, or interfere with, the true reality of Jesus' presence must go! In this way, we can open up the opportunity for our true Head to take His place among us.

REMOVING OBSTACLES NOT ENOUGH

Nevertheless, we are not insisting that merely removing obstacles will be sufficient. Much more than this is involved. We must also succeed in entering into the presence of God. We must actually *be* in the Spirit. We must truly submit to the leadership of Jesus. If we do not, then simply meeting together in an informal manner, without all sorts of religious props and formulas, will not benefit us. Jesus is not attracted to some kind of "anti-religious" stand which we might take.

Here too, we will encounter a question of how much a group actually does enter into the Spirit. This will depend upon the individuals involved. It will vary according to the spiritual state of the participants. If these believers are walking with Jesus, if they are obeying Him in their daily lives, if they have no barriers and hindrances to His authority, then their corporate experience will be wonderfully enhanced.

But, if and when the participants do not enjoy a genuinely spiritual walk, if the members are soulish, self-centered, stubborn, proud, and resistant to God, then the gatherings will also suffer because of this lack. Merely "meeting in homes" or "coming out of dead religion" will not

compensate for this deficiency. Once again, I would like to repeat: to the degree any gathering of believers succeeds in entering the presence of Jesus and discerning His leadership, to that degree they will be blessed with the experience of the one true church. Conversely, to the degree that they fail to enter in and miss the leadership of their Head, their church experience will suffer.

Through approximately forty years of witnessing “home church” and other sorts of informal gatherings, we have enjoyed many wonderful experiences. We have been privileged to know many meetings which were led by and filled with the Holy Spirit. These God-filled meetings have given us a burning desire to have even more and for others also to enjoy this blessing. It has given us a taste of the genuine house of God.

Yet, through the years, we have also seen many “home” meetings which were devoid of the presence of God. They weren’t stiff, religious, and formal, but they weren’t blessed either. While the participants had perhaps succeeded in coming out of what they termed “the religious system” this seems to be as far as they got. They had not managed to come into anything more valid and real.

In many of these cases I suspect that the cause of the deficiency was that the individual members were not truly submitted to Jesus in their daily lives. They did not know how to, and so were not walking in the spirit, day by day. Perhaps they prided themselves that they had escaped some kind of ineffective, formal religion, but they failed to enter in to the spiritual realm, the Spirit, where the reality of the one true church is. Perhaps they had left Egypt, but they had never crossed over the Jordan and entered into the promised land.

ANOTHER ARGUMENT

Perhaps some may argue that many, if not most Christians are not mature enough to meet without human structure. They may assert that a majority of believers do not know how to enter into and live in the spirit, let alone

meet together in this way. Therefore, they conclude that such spiritual meetings will not work. They believe that man must take a hand in these things and provide some structure and organization.

It is unfortunately true that many, if not most, believers are not spiritual people. Only a few succeed in entering into the Spirit frequently and even fewer live in this spiritual state. But there is a good solution for this. Instead of providing a human, superficial structure to compensate for the problem, we must seek God for how to resolve the lack. We must be able to lead others into a relationship with Jesus Christ which is truly spiritual.

Those who know the secrets of a genuinely spiritual life, must hear from God about how to minister this reality to others. They must pray, seeking the face of the Lord, to have an anointing and the necessary wisdom to lead others into the presence of God also. They need to become servants of these others, showing them through their words and actions a "more excellent way."

One of the best ways to teach someone something is by showing them an example. In English there is an expression: "A picture is worth a thousand words." If a group of believers, be it large or small, can begin to enjoy the kind of truly spiritual worship we have been describing, then others visiting the meeting can see for themselves how such a thing could work. They can witness firsthand the possibility of the Head leading His body. Such a dramatic witness is much more powerful than a book full of teaching.

It should make a tremendous impression on us that God, our Father, is seeking such spiritual worship. He is actually looking diligently for men and women who will worship Him in this way which we have described. We read: "...for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (Jn 4:23).

If this is something which is important to Him, if this is something which is on His heart, then shouldn't we too be seeking it? Shouldn't we also devote our time and attention and even our lives and ministry to this end? If some-

thing is important to God, isn't reasonable that it should be important to us also? No doubt the answer must be a resounding "Yes!"

MATURITY BRINGS RESPONSIBILITY

It is only natural that in any gathering of believers there will be a difference in the level of spiritual growth among them. There will be those who are more mature and those who have little spiritual maturity. While they are meeting together, there will be those who are more sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and those who have less discernment. One consequence of this is that mistakes will be made. Once in a while, someone will miss the guidance of God. They may speak from their own heart or experience and not be led by the Spirit.

This then is where those who have more maturity have a part to play. Those who have true maturity and keen spiritual discernment must know how to keep the meetings on the Holy Spirit track. When someone goes astray and begins taking up a lot of time with something which is not flowing from heaven, they must gently, with much love and kindness, guide the process back into the Spirit. Their responsibility before God is to exercise a sort of "oversight," a kind of spiritual watchfulness so that the authority of Jesus will be maintained.

I am not saying that these more mature believers have their own authority. They are not to be in control of the meetings. Yet there are always some who are more sensitive to the Holy Spirit than others who do not have the same growth in Life.

It is essential that the authority of the Head be maintained! When it is not, then the entire meeting will descend from the heavens to the earth, from the spiritual to the natural. So those who have this maturity become responsible to help guide those who may not possess equal discernment to stay in the Spirit.

For example: let us suppose someone new comes into a meeting. Perhaps they have no clue about only following

the leading of the Holy Spirit. So, at an opportune moment, they begin to speak. Perhaps they give their testimony or some other thing. It is good that they have an opportunity. No one should be cut off quickly. But if someone begins to wander endlessly around some subject which is not springing from the Holy Spirit and therefore is not edifying to all, this must not be allowed to continue. The authority of the Holy Spirit *must* be maintained if we are to enjoy truly spiritual meetings.

So, someone with discernment can, in a natural and inoffensive manner, turn the direction of the meeting back to the Spirit. Occasionally, they might need to say something like: "I believe that we have missed where the Lord would have us be at this moment. Let us pray together and try to see what God would say or do now." Jesus can show them how to, in a kind and gentle way, bring the meeting back to His direction. Often a simple word or prayer, not necessarily directed at the offender, might be sufficient.

Of course, we will never have perfect meetings. We will always make mistakes. No one is perfectly mature and attuned to the Holy Spirit. But this is not fatal. This does not need to be a huge problem. We do not need to be extremely worried about this.

Our goal is to allow our Head to have as much leadership as is possible, given our particular spiritual growth and situation. If and when we make mistakes, our Lord understands this. He is aware of our weaknesses. The next time we are together with other believers, we will have another wonderful opportunity to seek His face again.

Another fact of which we should be aware is that often meetings will be different from each other. Probably no two will be the same. Since our Leader is a living person, His will is always new. Perhaps in one gathering we might spend our time praying. Another time, we might use most of our time in worship.

In another instance, perhaps the ministry of God's word would be emphasized. The next time, possibly all three of these things or even something else would be in evidence. Any meeting which falls constantly into one pat-

tern should be a warning to us. Those believers need to seek God for more of His leadership among them.

You cannot limit or predict God. He will never fit into our little box. It is impossible to know what He will do next. The more we are able to open up to Him and allow Him to be our source and guide, the richer and more satisfying our meetings and times with other believers will be. Each time we are gathered in His name, He will be there in our midst to guide us into what He has for us at that moment.

By the way, to meet in Jesus' name, does not mean that we have His name written on the door. It does not signify that we merely add the phrase "in Jesus' name" after our prayers etc. To be in Jesus' name means that we are actually in Him, and to be in Him means that we are in the Spirit.

If we take His name without the reality of His presence, this is empty and vain. There is no special magic in some words. We should never use Jesus' name as if it were some kind of incantation or magic spell. The power of the gospel is the fact that Jesus rose from the dead and therefore is present in this world today. He is the one who is powerful and real. To be in Jesus' name is to be in Him. It is in Him that the true power lies.

LAMB-SIZED MEETINGS

We have spoken about the importance for every member of the body to be able to share their portion when they are together. Obviously, this is only possible when the number of persons is limited. In a large crowd, it is impossible for everyone to participate. Due to this limitation, one brother has suggested "lamb-sized" meetings. The thought behind this is that in the Old Testament, the Israelites were instructed to kill a passover lamb. If their family was too small to eat a whole lamb, they were to join together with someone else. That way they got enough people to consume the whole lamb.

If and when a group of believers grows to a size where the participation of everyone is no longer possible, they

can then split up. There is no necessity for all believers to meet together every week. In the New Testament it seems that the Christians utilized homes for many of their meetings since these locations were available and convenient. A good sized home can contain any "lamb-sized" meeting.

Some may inquire about when believers should meet. This too should be subjected to the leading of the Holy Spirit. If and when Christians are walking in intimacy with Jesus, they will have a constant desire to gather with others. They will have a spontaneous urge to be with brothers and sisters who too love God. They will be desiring to share what God has been doing in their lives and what He is revealing to them. They will have a hunger to know how the Spirit is working in the lives of the others.

If such an urgency is not in evidence, this shows that the believers' relationship with the Lord is also needing attention. Simply organizing meeting dates and places will not solve this fundamental deficiency.

When several, or even many believers are seeking this, meetings will happen frequently. One brother might telephone a few others, inviting them to his home. Others may simply feel an urge to go to the house of another brother some evening after work. Perhaps they will be surprised to encounter others there who also sensed the same leading. Such meetings may occur at any hour or in any place. As we are following Jesus, He will orchestrate all of this.

In the book of Acts, we read that the converts met daily, from house to house (Acts 2:46). These people were enthusiastic. They had come to know the God of the universe in a personal way. This really impacted and changed their lives. It was important to them. It had glorious, eternal consequences. Therefore, their desire to be with others, receive ministry and share with the rest was insatiable.

No one was organizing these meetings. They were not being programmed, monitored, or controlled by the apostles. These believers did not need to be urged, cajoled, or commanded to meet. Their hearts and minds were captured by their experience with Jesus and so they met together as often as they could. They were constantly seek-

ing this opportunity. Christians today must have the same motivation.

If believers do not have this desire to be with others frequently, this is a sign of spiritual problems. When fellowship with others is not something for which their heart yearns, this is evidence that their communion with Jesus is also faulty. If being with and serving the body of Christ is not a priority in the lives of Christians, this is proof that their heart has been captured by other things besides the will of God. When the cares of daily living, work, family, entertainments, etc. overwhelm the spiritual impulse to be together with other believers, then the "thorns," about which Jesus warned us, have choked His word (Lk 8:7).

LARGER GROUP MEETINGS

When and if believers feel the leading of God to meet in larger groups, this can be a blessing. But it also brings with it some challenges. By necessity, when a greater number of believers meet together, only a few will be able to directly minister. This is simply a logical fact. Yet such meetings are not prohibited by any scripture.

However, the basic principle of everything being led by Jesus the Head is still the same. Those who are anointed by God to minister in worship, teaching, preaching, etc. in such situations must still be held to this same standard.

Anyone who senses that they are led by the Spirit to use their gifts in such a circumstance, must be careful that it is the Lord leading them and not their own ambition and desire to be seen and heard. Their true aim must be to serve others and not to gain emotionally, psychologically, or financially themselves.

One example of how such things might occur is the meetings of a Welch brother named Arthur Burt. Periodically he holds Christian conferences around the world. However, in his conferences, there are no invited speakers. Anyone present who feels that they have a word from God is allowed to speak. However, he imposes one restriction. He says something like this to the people gath-

ered: "When you step up front, you have five minutes to pump. If you don't hit 'water' within that time, sit down."

Larger gatherings of believers where only a few minister pose some tremendous, extremely serious challenges. One of these is that there is a very strong tendency among many believers to be passive and let others do the work. Such meetings can easily reinforce this tendency. Many Christians quickly come to rely upon others to take care of everything.

Another is that some more gifted members soon become a kind of hierarchy or clergy. Since they find it easy to lead and enjoy the opportunity to do so, they naturally begin to dominate the assembly. This very easily results in a situation which resembles the "clergy/laity" arrangement which is so rampant today which stifles the functioning of the body.

Another peril is that such meetings easily fall into patterns and with the passage of time the headship of Christ over ALL things fades away. Consequently, anyone involved in organizing any such gatherings should be constantly and acutely aware that they should avoid anything which becomes repetitious. They must flee at all costs everything which substitutes for the leadership of the Head.

Such larger assemblies of believers should only occur when Jesus mandates them, not merely on a regular, pre-programmed basis. The smaller groups, where everyone can participate must be the normal, frequent experience of believers. Larger meetings, when and if they occur, should merely be supplemental.

"MINISTRY MEETINGS"

In the scriptures, we also encounter another sort of meeting which might be called "ministry meetings." For example, while the believers were meeting daily "from house to house" in Acts, the apostles were also teaching "daily in the temple" (Acts 5:42). These were not meetings where everyone participated but where the apostles exer-

cised their ministries, teaching and preaching to larger audiences.

Elsewhere in the book of Acts, we are told about Paul preaching all night to a group of believers. Also, we learn that at one point Paul used a school building as a location to exercise his teaching gift (Acts 19:9). In still another situation, he rented his own house for this purpose (Acts 28:30).

These gatherings of believers were not “body” meetings. They were not situations where every member functioned, contributing their portion. Instead, they were circumstances where a man or men with special, anointed ministries were serving the others in a unique way. Perhaps this is what most “church” meetings of our time imitate.

But, instead of being an exhibition of the body, this is simply the ministry of one or more gifted men. We might refer to them as “ministry meetings.” This kind of gathering is both scriptural and important. If and when someone has a ministry which is so anointed, and therefore necessary for the body, he or she is free to do so. Again, this must be done according to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Such meetings should never become a substitute for the meetings of the body. The “house to house” smaller meetings of believers in which everyone has an opportunity to participate are an essential, integral part of the one true church experience. These gatherings should be the main part of our church practice. The stronger, more talented members must never become dominant in a way that supplants the functioning of the rest in these meetings.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

When the ministry of one anointed member is exercised, it must be done at the expense of that person. Since it is their ministry, they are responsible before God for sustaining it financially. I do not mean to say that others cannot contribute. What I mean is that the church or body as a whole is not accountable for this expense. This is the

responsibility of the person conducting the ministry. This person must have a genuine calling from God to do that particular work and therefore have faith that God will sustain it. If not, then they should not be doing it.

In no circumstance should this person put pressure of any kind on other believers to help them financially. No hints, subtle inferences, or outright pleas for money are allowed. They should never be taking up “offerings” before or after they minister. If an individual does not have the faith to conduct a particular work for God, then they should stop doing it. The body of Christ may certainly contribute to God’s work, but only as they are moved by Him to do so, not coerced by man.

It is actually scriptural for people receiving ministry to help financially those from whom they receive a blessing. We read: “Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches” (Gal 6:6). This “sharing” could certainly include financial help.

But biblically, this help should never be in the form of a salary. While occasional gifts are allowed, the idea of salaries moves beyond what is healthy and scriptural. If and when someone receives a “salary” – that is a fixed, regular, dependable sum of money – then they no longer need to depend upon God. Little by little, they begin to trust in man. Their vision inevitably turns from the Lord to those who are paying their salary.

It is virtually impossible for this not to occur. The person or persons who are supplying us with our daily necessities are the ones who control us. When God is in this position, all is well and good. But when men are the ones who hold the purse strings, then they are the ones in a position of power over us.

In such situations, the motives of the person ministering become compromised. They become a “hireling” (Jn 10:13) who must keep in the good graces of those upon whose money they depend. Instead of the necessity to maintain a good, intimate, obedient relationship with Jesus, they merely need to keep on the good side of those from whom they receive a salary.

They therefore are no longer free to say only what Jesus gives them to say. They become reticent to speak anything which might offend someone who might then stop supporting them. They are gradually transformed into “men-pleasers” (Eph 6:6). If and when someone is genuinely “living by faith,” it must be faith in God and not faith in the ability and good will of others to continue to support them.

DOMINATING MEMBERS

It is a great mistake for someone who has a powerful gift or ministry to organize “a church” around it. Although it is a very common practice for such a person to become the leader of a group in which most activities revolve around their ministry, this is not biblical. While the calling and gifts of this person may be genuine and valid, they were not given so that this person could become the sole source of ministry for any special group.

This practice fails the scriptural pattern in several points. Number one: it limits the “members” to one particular ministry. To be healthy, these people need the portion of the entire body. Number two: it exalts a man to an unbiblical position, taking the place in the assembly for which only Christ is worthy. Unconsciously then, many will begin to look to and depend upon this leader instead of Jesus.

Number three: it stifles the ministry of anyone else in the group whose gifts are also valid but not exceptional enough to compete for attention with the leader. Commonly, such persons become frustrated and seek fulfillment in other areas, or they set out to establish their own “church” where they can use their gift, sometimes dividing the first group in the process.

THE NICOLAITANS

As far as I know, in the New Testament there is only one thing which Jesus Christ says that He hates. This thing

is mentioned in Revelation in the letters to the seven churches. It is the deeds and the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, mentioned in Revelation 2:6,15. Since church history does not record any group of people called "the Nicolaitans" specifically, there has been much speculation about them. I believe the answer to their identity lies in the meaning of the word "Nicolaitan." Please bear with me as we investigate this possibility.

It is my understanding that the word NIKAO in the original Greek language means "to conquer, to subdue, or to rise above," while the word LAOS (from which we derive the word "laity") means the "people at large" or the "people assembled." Therefore, the word "Nicolaitan," which is composed of these two words, would refer to those who rise above and subdue the laity or the common people. This seems to describe just the situation which we have been examining.

From our previous discussions, it is easy to understand why Jesus Christ would not want this kind of arrangement. Such a situation stifles the functioning of His body, which is His expression on the earth. The immediate effect of it is that most members of the church are kept largely inactive and a man or a select group of men is elevated to a position of doing almost everything. So we have a few men trying to live the church life for the many. Obviously this is not possible; and it greatly hinders God's work.

JACOB'S DREAM

While Jacob was fleeing from his brother Esau, he spent a night in the wilderness. There he used a stone for a pillow. While he slept, he dreamed a wonderful dream. In the dream he saw "...a ladder set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it" (Gen 28:12). When he woke up, he realized that this was a special place. He named it "Bethel" which means "the house of God."

You see, when we are truly being God's house, when we are fulfilling the requirements of being in the Spirit and

led by our Head, in that place and at that time the heavens are opened. The presence of God becomes real to us. We actually experience being the “house” or habitation of God in a corporate way – the “Bethel” of today.

At these times there is truly an open heaven. The presence of God is very real. His authority or “throne” is known to us. Revelation, enlightenment, and spiritual understanding is occurring. Further, the ministering spirits, the angels, are coming and going – “ascending and descending” – bringing messages from the throne and perhaps “carrying” the praises and petitions of the members back with them.

Of course we are describing something spiritual here with earthly words. Perhaps exact details of this angelic traffic cannot be known exactly. Yet, in such heavenly situations, the proximity of ministering angels is very real. Perhaps we are not very aware of it, but it is occurring.

We, God’s people have the wonderful privilege of entering into His presence together. When we meet, we can enjoy an “open heaven” where the invisible things of His kingdom become real to us. As we enter into the Spirit together, the unimaginable wonders of Jesus and His will for us are available for us to possess. We, insignificant human beings, can enjoy the reality of being the habitation of the Most High God. May we never be satisfied with anything less!

Here I am including the testimony of a man, Nick Jensen who has come into contact with us. Although the following cannot be thought of as an exact example of what God would do everywhere in every situation, it certainly is a powerful testimony of what He actually did do in one place. Since our Lord can and did do this for these people, He can do it all over the earth in many different situations. I am including his letter, as he wrote it, with very little editing.

March 2nd, 1987

Dear Brethren, Greetings in Jesus Name.

GOD'S PILOT PLANT

Several decades ago a small group of Full Gospelers was congregating – as far as general touring maps are concerned – in absolute nowhere. Yet they were in the middle of the lush fields of Somerset in England, not far from the well known estate of Horlicks. The place: South Chard.

Their pastor had a call from the Lord to fast so that He could get through to his spiritual ears. At the end of several weeks of total abstention from any nourishment other than the bread from heaven, the Lord did speak to His servant. The outcome of that communication made South Chard known to believers from the four corners of the earth. What was that heavenly message? As with most orders from Headquarters this one was likewise short and sweet and read like this: "Leave your meetings to me."

So the next thing the South Charders knew, their pastor was striding in through the main entrance of their little hall on a Sunday morning at 10 o' clock carrying on his shoulder not a cross but a saw. He proceeded slowly to the front, to the free standing pulpit from where he had always directed the service and without much ado he proceeded to saw through it until the upper part fell to the floor with a bang. Satisfied with his work he sat down in one of the pews, never again to emerge as a conductor of a church meeting.

To say that the congregation was stunned was probably a bit of an understatement. Question marks were to be seen on all faces. Some even feared that the prolonged absence from food had disturbed some of the natural reflexes of their poor pastor. But there he sat. And there they sat, for quite a while, so they reckon, 'till one charitable old soul started to discreetly hum "Silently now I wait for Thee." With that a handful of God's people on earth had made their first faltering steps towards a true church meeting!

Reverend Sidoby Puree had abdicated in favor of the heavenly Conductor. Did it ever work?

Well let an outsider [Nick Jensen] describe what he experienced on an ordinary Sunday morning in South Chard.

The hall was packed with hugging, chuckling, laughing, shining, happy people. You would never have thought that this noisy place was the setting for a “church” meeting. Some stood, others sat and still others seemed to be all over the place telling jokes or something.

I was looking for the pastor or the choir leader to calm down the revelers and announce the opening hymn but no one ever seemed to be bothered with the general disorder, and no one ever came around to announcing anything. All of a sudden everyone seemed to have fully taken in the presence of the others when a holy hush followed the happy throng and a remarkable unprovoked silence became the sequence to the sounds of a marketplace.

Presently we heard the feeble voice of an elderly sister who on her own embarked upon the song: “Break forth into joy oh my soul, break forth into joy oh my soul; in the presence of the Lord there is joy forever more, break forth, break forth into joy oh my soul”. And please notice this: no one joined her in her overture – not even the organist! Only when she started her second round did the others join in, and only then did we hear the organ for the first time, as if to say: “I never initiate, I always follow”, and it religiously kept to that statement throughout the service.

Now, the chorus that had started so faintly quickly turned into an ever mounting crescendo stimulated by rhythmic, sustained clapping. No one in there seemed to have any respect at all for the universally accepted Pentecostal allowance for repeating of choruses, which is once or at the most twice. They just carried on enjoying the presence of the Lord and “broke forth” so repeatedly that I totally lost count of the encores. They all seemed to be heedless of the presence of the other worshippers for their singing was visibly directed solely by the Lord.

How they ever arrived at bringing an end to that opening chorus I really don’t know, but stop they eventually did. Barely had they done so when a prophetic word

came from Heaven – loud and powerful – with the Lord inviting His people to enjoy His presence to the fullest, and wow, what a fullness!

They sang both hymns and choruses all by heart, for there were no hymnbooks, chorus-sheets or overhead projectors of any kind. For learning they simply used the primeval means of repetition. In their opinion (I later learned) song books and projectors keep you from true freedom in praise and worship. Why? Because with the constant use of crutches you never learn to walk, and in this case dependence on texts represents a sure obstacle for complete release and abandonment to the Spirit.

They were seated in round-table fashion with quite a big open space in the middle, the reason for which I soon had to discover – with my eyes as big as the Round Tower in Copenhagen – for presently a quite corpulent young man seemed to float to the center and began dancing as if he barely weighed a hundred pounds. Many others joined in, but this time around the chorus must have been repeated some 37 times at least and Heaven became more real than Earth. Repetition wasn't the correct word to use, rather it was a continued buildup for joy expressed in song and dance.

After this jubilee a period of silence “broke out,” the length of which I was unable to determine, for it was only after a good while that I realized that we had – children and all – moved into something akin to eternity. Apropos children, they were sitting by themselves in the only reserved seats of the hall from where they had a better view of the proceedings. They were otherwise totally one with the grownups and quite a few contributions came from their quarters and they were never ushered out for special children's sessions, probably because prepared speeches, commonly known as sermons, were anathema at Chard's Church meetings.

Prophecies were in abundance. Scripture readings also occurred and short testimonies or exhortations were thrown in here and there in quite a varied but orderly fashion.

The meeting was dismissed just as mysteriously as it had once been opened, for when a certain brother had shared something from the prophets and gotten himself seated again, they – one and all – stood to their feet as we do when the chancellor’s retinue is leaving the hall, and that was it. The meeting was over. For the Heavenly Conductor had delivered His celestial manna and left, so why stick around for mere terrestrial morsels? And here again, please notice carefully, that no one was invited to say a closing prayer.

While the meeting was still in its progress I repeatedly asked myself the question: “Where are the leaders of this group of people?” “Where are those in charge?” For such men were genuinely conspicuous in their absence and that feature was quite a disturbing fact for an ex-Lutheran turned Baptist, active member of the thoroughbred, charismatic FGBMFI.

I battled with this phenomenon for quite a while till it eventually dawned upon me that the whole thing had been meticulously “tele-guided” from Heaven all through. I, a Spirit-baptized, Bible studied believer of 26 years’ standing had to concede defeat to a full blooded pagan who would immediately have proclaimed: “No human heads in there – God is amongst them for a truth!”

I left the South Chard assembly visibly shaken to the core of my being, for if this was what God wanted – and there could be no doubt in my mind about that – then we were all, to a man, guilty of manipulation [of the church].

“Father”, I said, “please give me a word for comfort”, and here is – of all Scripture in the Holy Writ – what I got: “HOW IS IT THEN, BRETHREN WHEN YOU GET TOGETHER, EVERY ONE OF YOU HAS...”, and I couldn’t but proclaim: “God’s Pilot Plant has been established and is to be found at least in one place on Earth, not on the map for sure, but gloriously real anyhow”.

The only question still hovering in my mind was: WHEN ARE WE GOING TO FIND THAT NEW PLANT IN THE PLURAL? [By this he means: “When are we going to find this happening all over the earth?”]

10.

LIVING IN LOVE

When Jesus was walking physically on this earth, He gave His followers a new commandment. He instructed them to: "...love one another; as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34). We have touched briefly on this theme in a previous chapter, but here we will discuss at length what this admonition means.

While this may seem like a straightforward and fairly simple commandment, in practice it is something which is humanly impossible to do. It may be easy to love others who are attractive, interesting, or agreeable to us. It is possible that we may be able to love others to some degree. But to love all of our brothers and sisters in Christ as much as Jesus loves them is far, far beyond our human capabilities.

Part of the problem is that God seems to select many who don't fit well with our ideas of who is lovable. At the very minimum, everyone whom Jesus loves is a sinner. Beyond this, many of them have serious problems and deficiencies. Others have personalities and dispositions which are disagreeable and/or offensive. Some have areas of their lives which are not yet transformed and so they are vulnerable to the work of God's enemy.

When we wish to walk in love, we encounter these and countless other challenges to the fulfillment of Jesus' simple command to love one another. Anyone who has

actually tried to love others has undoubtedly come into contact with other Christians who seem impossible to love.

Yet there is hope. Jesus not only gave us a new commandment. He also gave us a new variety of love. This new love is described in the New Testament with a special word – AGAPE. This love is not something which natural men have. It is not something that a mere human being can express. It is a special kind of supernatural love that only God has. This love is something which fills His heart. In fact, He is so full of this AGAPE love that the Bible says that “...God *is* love {AGAPE}” (I Jn 4:8). This word expresses His essential nature.

So if and when we decide to obey Jesus’ commandment and love others, we must receive this love from Him. Our natural, human love will never be able to reach the goal. Only the love of God Himself can possibly achieve this highest and noblest requirement.

In order to obtain this supernatural love, we must walk in continual communion with our Savior. Since He is its source, we need to keep “plugged into” Him in order to receive it. While we maintain our spiritual connection with Him, an endless supply of this love is available. Since He is the eternal, unending source of this love, we have access to all that we could ever want or need.

Receiving this love is not a one-time thing. Neither is it something we get through a series of especially “spiritual” experiences and then always have. For us mere human beings to walk in love, we must also walk in daily intimacy with the Source of this love which is God Himself.

This fact is so essential that the Word of God tells us that if we love our brothers and sisters in Christ, this is proof that we really know God. We read in I John 4:7,8, “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of [from] God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God [intimately]. He who does not love does not know God [intimately], for God is love.”

I have added the word “intimately” to help the reader understand what is being communicated here. The Greek word for “know” here can be used to signify the most inti-

mate relationships including those between a man and a woman (Mt 1:25; Lk 1:34). The supernatural love which we need is something which flows from an intimate, personal, constant communion with our Savior.

It is obvious that there are many believers – persons who truly have been converted – that do not love others. It is painfully apparent that a great many Christians are self-ish, self-centered, infantile, rude, abrupt, irritable, and many other things which demonstrate that they lack divine love for their brethren. Unfortunately, this is the condition of much of the church in the world today.

Although some would insist that these people cannot really be “saved,” an honest, thoughtful analysis of the situation leads us to believe that this is not really the root of the problem. Many have met Jesus. They have truly been born again. But sadly, they are not walking in intimacy with Him. They do not walk daily in the Spirit. They don’t understand how to commune with Him continually. They fail to enjoy the availability of His constant presence. Due to this failure, they do not often exhibit His supernatural love for one another.

These believers are simply babies. They have not grown up spiritually enough to have the continual supply of love which they need. Young children are often self-centered. They hardly ever think about others, but only about themselves. It is almost impossible for an infant to exhibit a caring love for others, since they have so many needs themselves. For the same reason, these do not express God’s love.

The evidence of true spiritual maturity – the proof that we know God intimately and are walking in communion with Him – is that we love. This exhibition of love is the one sure sign, the one observable evidence, that we have a personal relationship with Jesus.

This love is so powerful we can not only love believers who are friendly or likable, but also those who are difficult to like. Being full of God’s love, we can love those who are not kind to us, those who take advantage of us, those who abuse our efforts to help and to love them. We can love those who don’t agree with us, those who oppose

us and those who sin against us in various ways. We can love those who offend us, those who take from us and never give back, those who disappoint us, those who reject us and those who mistreat us. We can love the most unlovable people with the love of God. This love whose source is God is so powerful and superhuman that, being full of it, we can even love our enemies (Mt 5:44).

LOVE IN THE CHURCH

Here in this book we have been speaking about the experience of the one true church. The key to this experience is walking in intimacy with God and being led by our true Head, Jesus Christ. Since this communion with God is the source of the real church, it is only logical to assume that those who are succeeding in living in the true church experience will also be full of love.

Here we find an important fact. Those who are truly enjoying the reality of church will be men and woman who are full of divine love. What we can conclude then is that the manifestation of this love is the test of the genuineness of our church experience. If and when we are full of love for one another, then this demonstrates that we are succeeding in enjoying the one true church. The evident expression of the love of God is the testimony that what we are doing is the work of God.

Any believers who are succeeding in walking together in communion with God and one another will manifest this love. This is a sure sign that they are enjoying the one true church. This is a dependable indication that what they are living out is genuine. This love is not something that man can produce. Its origin is only divine. Therefore, when it is in evidence, you can be confident that God is doing His work among those who are manifesting this love.

NEW TESTAMENT VERSES

The New Testament is full of admonitions for us to walk in love. It may be the most common exhortation of

the New Covenant. We have already stated Jesus' command for us to love one another. As we read along we encounter many other such admonitions, exhortations and examples.

We read: "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another" (Rm 12:10). "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Rm 13:8). "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Rm 13:9). "Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law (Rm 13:10). "Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts..." (I Cor 14:1).

We also learn: "Let all that you do be done with love" (I Cor 16:14). "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13); "...with all lowliness and gentleness, with long-suffering, bearing with one another in love (Eph 4:2); "...causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love (Eph 4:16). "And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us... (Eph 5:2).

Also we are exhorted: "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more" (Ph 1:9). "Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (Ph 2:2). "That their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love" (Col 2:2). "But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection" (Col 3:14). "And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all..." (I Th 3:12).

Even more we are admonished: "But concerning brotherly love you have no need that I should write to you, for you yourselves are taught by God to love one another" (I Th 4:9). "Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart..." (I Tm 1:5). "And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works..." (Heb 10:24). "Let brotherly love continue" (Heb 13:1). "Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart..." (I Pet 1:22).

Summing things up we are taught: “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous...” (I Pet 3:8). “And above all things have fervent love for one another...” (I Pet 4:8). “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (I Jn 4:7).

The above paragraphs are by no means a complete list of all the verses in the New Testament which encourage us toward AGAPE love. Yet surely they are sufficient to show that the manifestation of divine love is at the very center of the gospel message. It is an expression of the very heart of God.

We have studied in earlier chapters many of the different ways and methods which men use to try to hold a “church” together. There are innumerable artifices which people employ in an attempt to get Christians to adhere to one another or to their group. When any work to form a group of believers is initiated by man, it is always necessary for human means to be used to hold that group together.

But, as we also have seen, the true glue which should hold the body of Christ together is this supernatural love. The true bond of Christianity is love (Col 3:14). It is the love of God which fills our hearts and causes us to serve, have fellowship with, and meet with other believers.

It is when we are walking “in the light” that we have genuine “fellowship with one another” (I Jn 1:7). This implies having a constant, transparent intimacy with God. This intimacy then produces the fruit of love in our lives. The result of this love is the expression of the living church, the habitation of the Most High God.

MANY CHALLENGES

When we decide to walk in love, we will encounter many challenges. Our commitment to love will be tested again and again, in many different ways over many years. As we walk with the Lord, we will experience a variety of

circumstances. We will encounter a great many Christians with all kinds of personalities, sins, weaknesses, failures, and problems. These dear brothers and sisters will impact our lives in ways of which we perhaps have never even dreamed.

Some Christians might take advantage of you financially. They might cheat you out of some money. Some might steal from you. They may borrow from you and never pay you back. They might even ask for some money "for the work of God" and then spend it on themselves.

Others might take advantage of you emotionally, perhaps romantically capturing your heart, dating you and then leaving you. Some may marry you and then cheat, breaking their marriage covenant. You might experience a divorce. You might be slandered, mistreated, and have false rumors spread about you.

While you are trying to serve God, you may have people misunderstand you and your motives. You might be criticized, ridiculed, and even hated. Brothers and sisters with whom you thought you had a good relationship may turn against you. Then they might work to turn others against you also. The very people whom you trusted and to whom you opened your heart might betray you.

Christian leaders whom you respect may bring you into bondage to their programs and works. They may even beguile you into an illicit sexual relationship or urge you to do something illegal to help them. The number of ways in which Christians can and do sin against each other is endless. These thoughts are only intended to give a small example of what can and does occur when we are in relationships with other people.

So how then can we continue to live in love? How can we overcome the emotional trauma and pain which is caused by these many believers with whom we interact in our lives? What is God's solution to the anguish, heartache, distress, and suffering which comes to us as we try to walk in communion with others? How can we continue to live in love? This is an essential question which every believer needs to know how to answer.

THE MOST POWERFUL CURATIVE

In our struggle to overcome the hurt and disappointment which we will inevitably encounter in our relationships with other Christians, God has made available to us a very powerful medicine. It is a kind of remedy which is powerful enough to treat the worst kind of emotional pain. It is a restorative that can heal our inner man in ways that we might think impossible. This spiritual medicine is called "forgiveness."

When we are wounded by others, through whatever ways or means, this frequently produces various emotional reactions. First we feel pain. Next, we tend to become angry. It is only natural to begin to want to strike back at that person, physically, verbally, or by trying to hurt them in a roundabout way. One common technique is to want to tell others about how that other person abused or hurt you, intending to turn the others against the offender and thereby gain some sense of retaliation or to extract some sympathy.

It is common for this hurt to continue working in our hearts for a long time, even many years. This gives rise to resentment, bitterness, and often a desire for revenge. How many times have Christians actually prayed to their heavenly Father to judge, smite, wound, or even kill another Christian because of what they have done to them? Obviously, this is not what is known as "walking in love."

The solution for all these very human reactions is forgiveness. That's right, we need to forgive the offender. Our forgiveness will heal our inner man. It will medicate our emotions. Forgiveness will take away bitterness, anger, and strife. Our liberating forgiveness for the other person who offended us will actually turn out to be the best help *we* could ever get. It will do much more for us than we could ever imagine. Forgiving someone else might seem like doing something for them, but in reality, it will do much more for us. It will bring us an emotional healing in a way which nothing else can do.

Genuine forgiveness will set us free from bondage to our self, our old nature, our precious feelings, our God-given “rights,” and our natural disposition. It will renew our love for God and that other person. It will bring a supernatural balm which will treat our wounds so that we do not notice them so much any more. It will liberate us from our “self” which is really part of the old creation and needs desperately to be denied – to die.

Forgiveness is one of the great secrets of successful Christianity. Without it, we will never succeed in walking in continual intimacy with Jesus. You see, God loves forgiveness. It is part of His nature. He sent His only Son to die in our place to forgive us and then to save us. Therefore, in order to remain in sweet communion with Him, we must become forgivers too.

Jesus teaches us: “And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses” (Mk 11:25). The expression “whenever you stand praying” indicates that we are attempting to enter into the presence of God.

At that moment, we must not be holding a grudge or unforgiveness against our brother. If we are, then this will impede our relationship with our forgiving Savior. We will find it difficult to enter into and stay in the presence of Jesus. Since He died to forgive this person, then we too must forgive them. Living in such forgiveness will help us in our search to live in the one true church which is in the presence of God.

We also learn that our forgiving others is a prerequisite to receiving our own forgiveness. Jesus says: “But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses” (Mk 11:26). If we continue to demand “justice” by refusing to forgive others, then we too will receive true justice. However, no one who has any understanding of their own sin would really want such justice for themselves. If we want others to get what they deserve, then we also will get what we truly deserve. For your own sake I urge you, don’t seek this.

Further, we are taught that if we do not forgive, this will result in personal torment and our being put in a kind of emotional or even physical prison. Perhaps it is worth the time here to review a parable Jesus taught in response to a question from Peter, which teaches us this truth.

“Then Peter came to Him and said, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, ‘Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’”

“Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’ So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’ And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt.”

“So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?’ And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him. So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses” (Mt 18:21-35).

You see, unforgiveness will get us into trouble with God. If we do not forgive, He promises to deliver us over

to the “torturers” who run the prison. This means that as time goes on, we will find ourselves in spiritual bondage and even intense emotional or bodily pain. Forgiving others will release us not only from our emotional suffering, but also from many other ailments, possibly even physical ones, which are binding us. It will bring emotional and physical healing. It will also save us from who we are and transform us into the image of Christ. It will restore our relationship with God.

It is interesting to note that it is not the offender who is disciplined by God. Instead, it is the victim who refused to forgive. Perhaps by our way of thinking the one who gives offense is the one more deserving of castigation, but in the heart of our Father, the refusal of forgiveness seems to be even more worthy of judgment.

When we fail to forgive our brothers and sisters when they sin against us, not only do we suffer individually, but we cause a breach in the unity of the body. It is a great stain on the garment of the bride of Christ. Our lack of forgiveness destroys the communion inherent in the true church experience. Such a failure can quickly spread to others if we “share” our problems with others and try to get them to take our side in any difficulty.

WHEN A BROTHER SINS AGAINST US

The biblical teaching is quite clear. When a brother or sister sins against us we are to go to them ourselves and confront them about their offense (Mt 18:15). This means that we do not go to everyone else. We are not to share our problems with all the others first. The offense must remain between us. If the person refuses to hear our complaint, then we are allowed to take along someone else to help us explain the problem to the offender.

If they still refuse to listen then, and only then, are we allowed to “tell it to the church” (Mt 18:17) so that the body as a whole can lend a hand to resolve any conflict. It is only if they reject the testimony of the entire church that we are allowed to limit our contact with that person.

However, this does not mean that we should not forgive them. Even if they are unwilling to acknowledge their sin, we should never be bound by unforgiveness. Such failure to forgive will poison our own souls and retard our spiritual progress. Although we may not enjoy the same spiritual communion with them which we had previously, we must never allow unforgiveness to impede our relationship with Jesus and our spiritual development.

You will know when you have genuinely forgiven someone when you can talk about them to others without expressing any anger or bitterness. You will know you are free when you can lovingly converse about someone or some past situation without a certain amount of bile creeping into your tone and attitude. You can be sure that you are free when you can love that other person with a pure heart.

Forgiveness may not be something which comes easily to you. You may not experience a huge wave of emotion impelling you to forgive. Yet forgiveness is just based upon a simple decision. We must decide to obey God and forgive. Once we turn our will in this direction, the supernatural supply of God will follow. His grace will assist us once we have chosen His way.

It may be that we need to forgive someone over and over again. It may be that it is only little by little that we release our hold on our hurt feelings. It may be very difficult for us to open our hearts and let go of our pain. But as we make this decision, perhaps deeper and deeper each time, the love of God will fill the void which was once only emotional "ground up meat."

So often people cling to their hurts, using them to try to strengthen a flimsy emotional barrier which they have erected to attempt to protect themselves from future harm. They hold onto their hurt feelings, hoping that the other person will feel bad, that they can somehow punish them this way, or that by staying shut up emotionally, they will be safer.

All of this is simple human foolishness. Such emotional gymnastics will in no way protect us or solve the prob-

lem. The only solution is in Jesus. We must forgive others as He has forgiven us. This is His unique and wonderful cure for all emotional pain, bitterness, and anger. You will be so happy when you obey Him.

One part of this picture which many seem to miss is that God uses the things which happen to us for our own good. He has allowed certain things to happen in our life. Perhaps to us they seem terrible. But from His vantage point, He sees areas of our soul which need transforming. Perhaps it is our temper. Maybe it is our selfishness and self-centeredness. Possibly we have areas of sin which we think we are hiding from Him or from ourselves.

I cannot imagine all the different possibilities here. But there is one thing which is abundantly true. God is using all our circumstances for our good (Rm 8:28). If and when we learn to obey Him in them, we will gain tremendously. We will no longer be the same natural person we were before.

When you learn to forgive everything and anything in the name of Jesus, someday you will worship Him for the work which He has done in your life through these events which at one time seemed like something from hell. You will thank Him for being merciful enough to allow you these experiences, seeing how much of His nature you gained through them.

THE OTHER SIDE

There is also another side to the question of forgiveness. What about those who have committed a sin or offense? If and when we are walking in the light of God, we should become ever more sensitive to when and how we have offended others. If and when a word or deed of ours is not done in love, we should have the conviction of sin in our conscience. Due to our intimacy with Jesus, His Spirit will trouble our conscience until we admit our guilt and repent before God and to those whom we have injured.

This willingness to respond to the sensation in our consciences of wrongdoing is an essential element to a

truly spiritual walk. When we refuse to acknowledge our error, when we resist the Holy Spirit speaking in our spirit, when we harden our hearts against the need for repentance, then we begin to damage our relationship with our Lord.

In order to admit sin, we must humble ourselves. To repent to our brothers or sisters whom we have offended requires revealing our weakness and errors. When we are too proud or stubborn to do this, when we instead insist upon our own rightness in any situation, then we begin to lose our intimacy with God. When we only justify ourselves and make excuses for our actions and words, this reveals our lack of humility and meekness. These attitudes of pride and self-justification work to exclude us from God's presence. He will withdraw Himself from people who cling to and express such dispositions.

God resists the proud (Js 4:6). This means that when we refuse to humble ourselves, He will resist our efforts to enter His presence. It will become difficult to find Him and His answers to our needs. His grace to endure many situations will become scarce and our lives will become more and more burdensome.

This loss of communion with Him means that we no longer find it easy to walk in the spirit. Without such an essential element, we then begin to lose the experience of genuine church which is only found in the Holy Spirit. The inevitable result of such hardening of our hearts is that we begin to walk more in the soul, being motivated by the natural man. Self-justification in any situation where another has been wounded by us will only cause us to lose our joy and communion.

In many situations both parties to any sin, quarrel, or misunderstanding may have erred. It may be that all involved did not act completely in love. Consequently, all need to repent and ask forgiveness from the others. The fact that someone else may have sinned against you does not relieve you from your guilt of having sinned against them too. Perhaps you also have something for which to ask forgiveness in any given situation. Far too many times,

people excuse themselves for their sins by pointing to the errors of the others. Such excuses may serve to justify ourselves in our own minds, but they do not work to justify us with God.

It may be that in some situation or other someone has sinned against you and you reacted by sinning against them. Possibly, they refuse to admit their error. This does not relieve you of your guilt. You are not allowed to wait until they see their faults first. In order to maintain your spiritual relationship with Christ, you must humble yourself and repent before God and the other person, even if they insist that they are right. Their sin against you will never excuse your error against them. In addition, it is just possible that your humbling of yourself will help them to do the same.

These two things: the failure to forgive and the failure to admit guilt and ask for forgiveness will impact your enjoyment of and participation in the one true church. If such sins go untreated they will disrupt your fellowship with God and other believers. With the passage of time, your failure to obey will relegate you to a position outside the intimacy of the true church and to a life which is largely governed by the soul instead of the Spirit.

SERVING OTHERS

When Jesus came to this earth He came for a specific purpose. He came to serve others. His goal was not to serve Himself or to be served, but to dedicate His life to minister to the needs of others. His great love for mankind impelled Him to this lifestyle. After Jesus began His ministry, all His waking hours were involved in this service. Where He went, to whom He spoke, the subject of His prayers, whether He ate or slept, His whole life was committed to meeting the needs of others.

Therefore, it is evident that if and when we are walking in His love our entire life will also be dedicated to serving others. This is a very important point. This is where "the rubber meets the road" in our Christian life. If we are

walking in love then there will be some evidence of this in our activities. It will be obvious to all those around us that we are committed to serving Jesus by serving His body.

The service to Christ's body may take very many forms. Usually, it is related to the exercise of our spiritual gifts. In fact, God has given all believers a gift or several gifts for this very purpose: to serve one another. We are to use the spiritual abilities which Jesus has given us to benefit other Christians and even people who do not yet know Him.

It may be that we spend much time in prayer for the needs of others. It is possible that God has called us to focus upon meeting physical necessities. Perhaps we are anointed to teach, to counsel, or to prophesy. Possibly we have a gift of healing or miracles. It is conceivable that giving financially is our primary focus. The variety of ways in which God might call each one of us to serve is endless. It is impossible to name them all.

But one thing is very clear. No one is called to do nothing. No one member of the body of Christ is free to simply serve themselves and their own family. Each and every one is required by God to use his time and talents to serve others. In the same way in which Jesus made the service of others His focus, His goal, and His life's ambition, so we too must dedicate ourselves to minister to others. This is the true expression of divine, AGAPE love.

LOVE AND THE CROSS

Such a devotion to others is not natural. It is not something in which the fallen soul delights. So when we begin to speak about love and service, the cross of Jesus comes into view. In order to live a life of service, we must deny ourselves. We will need to die to our own desires, pleasures, and needs. This will necessitate the death of our old life and nature so that Christ's life and nature can predominate.

When Jesus walked on this earth, He had one final destination – the cross. He came to serve us and His dedi-

cation to this service was so extreme that He was ready and willing to die for us. This willingness to die was the ultimate expression of His love. So, if and when we are disposed to live His life and serve His body, this will become our destination also.

In I John 3:16 we read: "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." You see, in order to love with Jesus' love, we must also lay down our own lives. We must die to ourselves. We must give up our rights to live for and to serve ourselves. Instead, we must use our time, energy, money, gifts and attention to minister Jesus Christ to others. This is true Christianity. In fact, it is the only true Christianity.

The denial of our self and abnegation of our "rights" to a self-serving lifestyle, is a result of divine love. God's love within us will impel us to put aside our own interests and pleasures and use our resources and energy for others instead. His love will cause us to use all that He has freely given us, not to please our carnal desires, but as tools to serve others.

Once again, we are not to use our liberty which He has given us to serve ourselves but instead "...through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13).

Those who are walking in love will be seeking every opportunity to serve others. They will be attentive to the Holy Spirit and to those around them, seeking how and when Jesus would want them to be useful to others. Since their life is dedicated to this, since it is their goal and focus, they will be ever more sensitive to the impulses of the Holy Spirit in being of service in His kingdom (I Jn 4:16).

We must be clear here that this service is something which is led by our spiritual Head. This is not simply a legal demand. As with all the other aspects of the body of Christ, this part too must be spiritual. This means that our service must be led by and accomplished through the Holy Spirit. Simply trying harder to be some kind of servant will not be enough. We must learn to live in and by the Spirit so that our lives and service will be of eternal value.

Of course, service is not something which is expected of babies. In fact, the lack of a dedication of service to others reveals that a person is still in spiritual infancy. When and if serving others is not our focus and delight, this shows that we have not made much progress spiritually. As we mature in Christ, our desires will increasingly reflect His. Our heart will more and more express His own. So, any lack of devotion to Christ's body simply exposes that there is also a great lack in our spiritual maturity.

Naturally, our "ministry" will grow along with our spiritual man. The more we grow, the more effective our service will be. When we mature, we sense more easily how and when Jesus would like us to serve. Further, our service becomes much more efficacious, since it is more and more in tune with the will of the Heavenly Father.

It is worth noting here that our spiritual gifts were not given to us so that we could impress others. They were not bestowed upon us so that we could be seen and heard. We did not receive gifts so that we could attract a following, appear to be more spiritual, or to rise up in the church in a manner that begins to require that others serve us. Our "ministries" were not given so we could use them as a means to exalt ourselves.

A servant or slave in any household occupies a humble position. His function is to make life easier and better for the others. Any time someone is using what God has given him to serve himself, this is a sure sign of spiritual immaturity. It is a sure indication that that person is not walking in intimacy with Jesus who came to be the servant of all.

LOVE IS...

Love is God's nature. Therefore, the genuine expression of this love has certain characteristics which reflect this divine nature. There is a certain "flavor" or "aroma" about someone who is walking in supernatural love which is perhaps hard to define yet very real. There is about them a certain something which is an exhibition of Christ's divinity.

Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians details many of these characteristics so that we can be able to identify them. Not only can we recognize them in others but we can use these details to weigh our own lives. From these verses, we can examine our lives to see how much or how little of the nature of God we are exhibiting. Each of these characteristics defines an aspect of Christ's nature which should be in evidence in every one of us.

To begin, we read that "Love suffers long, and is kind" (I Cor 13:4). In our walk with the Lord, we will encounter many situations which cause us to suffer and sometimes suffer severely. Many of these occasions are caused by other people. It is very easy, when someone else is causing us pain, to have an unkind reaction. This is especially true when this suffering goes on for an extended time. Perhaps this time is one year, or two years, or ten years, or even thirty years.

In such situations God's love suffers patiently and continues to be kind to the other person who is causing our pain. Human love can never do this. It runs out and usually runs out quickly. But the supernatural love of God continues to love and be kind, even when faced with long-standing suffering. His love is the only love which behaves in this way.

It might be that your suffering is not caused by anyone else. Perhaps you are sick or in pain. But the expression of kindness still must be yours. If we become crabby, impatient, and difficult because of our pain, then this is evidence that we need much more intimacy with the source of real love, which is Jesus.

We are told that "Love does not envy" (I Cor 13:4). Since Jesus is very humble, His nature in us is not to be jealous when others have more than we do. Those filled with His life don't mind if someone else has more money or worldly goods. They are not frustrated when others succeed and they don't. They are not striving to have as much as or more than someone else. They are not troubled when another person is more noticed, more used by God, more praised, and or more recognized. They do not become bit-

ter when others are benefitted and they are not. Their joy is to see that someone else is being blessed because their hearts are beating in harmony with their Creator.

We learn that “love does not parade itself” and that it is “not puffed up” (I Cor 13:4). This means that those who are walking in God’s love are not seeking recognition. They are not proud of what they have in terms of material things. They are not full of themselves because of their intelligence, personal beauty, or other human advantages. They are not arrogant due to their spiritual gifts or about the ways in which God is using them. These people are not seeking opportunities to be seen and heard. They are not looking to impress others in any way. Instead, the flavor of true humility permeates their life and their ministry.

Love “does not behave rudely,” it “does not seek its own” (I Cor 13:5). Godly love is not pushy. It is not demanding its “rights” in any given situation. Those filled with love are not offensive to others, insisting that their ways and desires are right and need to be fulfilled. They are not demanding that their ideas and opinions are the only correct ones. They are not using others for their own benefit. They are not seeking to satisfy themselves in any situation, but rather to make sure that others are being blessed.

Those who walk in love are “not [easily] provoked” (I Cor 13:5). They are not easily offended. When they are poorly treated, when they are ignored, when they are misunderstood, when someone sins against them, they do not instantly get irritated and angry. Since they are humble, their pride is not quickly hurt. These loving people do not react humanly to provocation. They do not try to retaliate when others misuse them or hurt them. They don’t fight back. Instead, with the eyes of the Spirit, these people see beyond their outward situation and sense the loving heart of God for these people who abuse them.

People filled with God’s love are very innocent and even somewhat naive. They are living out a love which “thinks no evil” (I Cor 13:5). They are not quick to impute wrong motives to others. They don’t spend time judging

the thoughts and intentions of other believers. They don't waste time imagining that others think badly of them or imputing various sins to everyone else. Truly there is a pure attitude, a kind of "holy innocence" toward evil which permeates the life of one who walks in love.

Obviously, love "does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth" (I Cor 13:6). Loving people are not happy when someone else falls and sins. When evil things happen to those who oppose them and have done things to hurt them, this does not make them glad. They are not pleased to see that that person is "finally getting what they deserve."

Instead, they pray for their enemies. Their love for them does not permit them to enjoy the pain, difficulty, and failure of others who have misused and abused them. They are glad when they see others growing spiritually. They rejoice when others are enlightened and blessed. They are joyful when the work of God goes forward and the darkness is beaten back. Their joy is not when evil happens to others, but when others are brought into more intimacy with God.

Love "bears all things" (I Cor 13:7). Believers who are full of God's love will have a supernatural endurance. They don't give up on other people easily. One thing has become quite clear to me over many years. That is that in God's sight people are not disposable. We are not free to simply get rid of people we don't like or who offend us.

It is inevitable that, in our walk with the Lord and our contact with others in His body, many problems will occur. People will sin. They will err. They might do and/or say things which hurt us, possibly in very profound ways. Yet, in spite of all this, we are not free to simply discard them. Love "bears all things."

It is very easy for us to lose faith concerning our own situation and the condition of others. Yet Paul teaches us that love "believes all things" (I Cor 13:7). We can be sure that when God begins a project, He has the intention of finishing it. When He enters a person's life, He already knows what He will do to complete His purposes. Therefore,

when we are walking in intimacy with God, we will sense His eternal persistence. We will receive faith from Him to continue to believe that His will shall be accomplished.

This faith which God gives generates within us a hope (I Cor 13:7). This hope is that God's glory will be reproduced in us through all the difficulty and tribulation through which we pass (Rm 5:2). Those walking in communion with God have the hope that they are being transformed into His glorious image.

We know that some day, this vessel of earth will break open and the glorious work which God has been doing within us will shine forth as the sun (Mt 13:43). Through our faith, we see into the future. We glimpse what true glory is and we have been captured by and are held by that vision. It is our intimacy with our Creator which gives us this hope.

In God there is an endless supply of His love. It is unlimited. It "never fails" (I Cor 13:8). There is actually no way any human being can live in the ways described above. Only the life and nature of God can fulfill this most lofty goal. So, in order to live in this way, we must be continually connected to the eternal Source. If we are to transmit His nature, if we are to exude the sweet aroma of His character, if we are to be an accurate demonstration of His feelings and thoughts, we must cultivate and maintain an intimate, loving, communion with Jesus Christ.

Those who are walking in love become living exhibitions of the divine nature of Christ. They are filled with kindness, gentleness, patience, and sweetness. Others will sense in them something very attractive which will cause them also to desire a greater intimacy with their Savior.

This display of Christ is something which the Holy Spirit of God does within us. It is not a result of human dedication or effort. Simply deciding to try harder will fall short. There is nothing in the natural man which can adequately imitate this. Therefore, to show forth this wonderful nature, we must walk in ever increasing intimacy with God. We must abide in Him, continually receiving the flow of Divine Life which will transform us into His image.

THE HOUSE OF GOD

If you were required to live in a house with a number of other people, where would you choose to live? Would you like to be with those who constantly argued and fought amongst themselves? Would you enjoy an environment where there was always an undercurrent of hatred, tension, animosity, or fear? Would an atmosphere of pride, envy, contention, and strife attract you? Of course not!

You, no doubt, would choose a place where people loved one another. You would look for a home where there was peace and harmony. You would seek a place where you would be accepted and warmly welcomed.

This same thing is also true of God. Where will He be pleased to dwell? Among whom will He be satisfied to live? With which group of people will He establish His eternal dwelling place? Without a doubt it will be among those who love one another.

This loving environment, which reflects His own nature, will no doubt draw Him. He will be attracted to people who live in love and unity. This certainly is where He will live. This is His true house. This is where He has planned to live forever. We will all do well to occupy our time constructing just such a house for Him. Anything less than this will not be accepted.

Once again we read: "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious oil upon the head, running down on the beard, the beard of Aaron, running down on the edge of his garments. It is like the dew of Hermon, descending upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing – life forevermore" (Ps 133). This atmosphere of loving unity is "good and pleasant" for us and for God Himself also.

We have tried to define here in this chapter, in some small way, just what divine love is. Perhaps to many readers this standard seems very high and unattainable. It may be that they realize that they frequently fall short of this

high calling. Yet we must not become discouraged and simply try to be content with what little we have.

So again, we must remember that God Himself is the source of this love. It is not something which we can produce ourselves. Our work is simply to abide in Him. We must establish and maintain an intimacy with Jesus. We must learn to enter into His rest. Then, we will find an unlimited supply of love for one another.

A SERIOUS CONSIDERATION

Finally, we come to a very serious consideration. If we do not walk in love, if the manifestation of the divine nature is not seen in us, if we do not love our brother, then this is an indication that our Christianity is bankrupt.

When we do not love, then this is proof that we have lost our contact with God. If we do not exhibit love, we are walking in darkness and have lost our spiritual way (1 Jn 2:9). If we do not love our brother whom we can plainly see, how can it be true that we love God who is invisible (1 Jn 4:20)?

Far too many believers today are not really walking in intimacy with God. Their spiritual progress is stalled or impeded by many factors. Perhaps they are not forgiving their brothers and sisters their offenses. Possibly, they have not repented for things they have done in the past. This would include not only repenting before God, but also repenting to anyone and everyone against whom they might have sinned. It would also include restoring anything stolen or wrongfully taken from anyone. A thorough repentance to everyone and a restoration of everything is an essential ingredient for spiritual progress.

It is possible that some are stuck spiritually because they still love this world. Their heart is divided, not being fully fixed upon Jesus. In this situation, they have difficulty receiving anything from the Lord (Jn 1:6,7). Their spiritual life is frustrated due to the division of their affections and attention.

The number of possible causes of a failed or stalled spiritual life are innumerable. But the evidence which

exposes this condition is the same. Anyone who does not love their brothers and sisters is in serious spiritual trouble. They are far from God. They are not walking in intimacy with Him. Their Christianity is really a farce. Any supposed “walk with the Lord,” which does not manifest His love, is only an empty show – a pretense. When we do not love, then we have strayed far from God’s path.

We must not look at others around us and measure ourselves by their standard. The fact that many others may not be loving, that they might not be expressing God’s nature, that they might be regular church attenders but still walking in the flesh, cannot be the model for our spiritual life. The one touchstone which will expose whether or not we are truly walking in God is whether or not we love our brothers. The expression of this supernatural love is the evidence of a right standing before God.

SPIRITUAL GIFTS ARE NOT ENOUGH

We must never judge our spiritual condition by the fact that we manifest spiritual gifts, have an anointing to preach or teach, or that we have a lot of revelation. All these things, although they are gifts from God, are not directly related to our spiritual growth or right standing before Him. Only the evidence of divine love is the true test of our spiritual condition.

Many mistake the fact that they experience an anointing, gift, or revelation to be an indication, or even *the* indication, that God is pleased with them. Instead of true, godly love being the standard, they rely upon the fact that they have and use spiritual gifts to prove that they are right with God. Yet this is not the true test. It cannot be thought of as evidence of God’s approval.

In I Corinthians 13 we are taught even if someone might have tremendous gifts (for example, healing the sick, raising the dead, and even moving mountains), without love this is empty. Further we read that some can understand glorious things from the Bible thus allowing them to preach in an extremely impressive manner.

Possibly many are awed by their ministry. But without God's love all our gifts and ministry is merely like the sound of a musical instrument which is heard for a moment, but then vanishes away like the wind.

There are many men and women of God today who have strayed from an intimacy with Jesus and have even fallen into sin. Some are even committing adultery. Yet, their gift or ministry still "works."

Thus, they delude themselves into thinking that God is still pleased with them. Since some "anointing" is still there, they cannot be too far wrong. They imagine that God is letting get by with sexual sin because of their "special need" or "position in the church."

Yet, the only true test of right standing before God is that we manifest His love to all, unselfishly. This virtue can only be obtained by a continual, intimate relationship with Jesus.

Therefore, we must seek this with all our heart. We must ask our Savior to expose anything within us which is hindering this flow of divine love. We should pray and fast if necessary so that God can cleanse our life of all impediments which are hindering the flow of His love. As we begin to walk in increased transparency and intimacy with Jesus, His love will express itself through us to the church and the world.

11.

THINGS THAT DESTROY

DESTROYER #1: THE TONGUE

*I*n this book we have been speaking about the glorious experience of the true church. We have been examining many of the aspects of the bride of Christ which are truly remarkable and enjoyable. This sublime intimacy with God and other believers is something which flows freely from the heart of the Father. It is something which should be a natural experience for all Christians.

Yet in practice, this is often not the case. While the true church experience should be easy, it is frequently not found at all, or quickly lost after it has once been known. Believers living in love and meeting in godly simplicity should be a normal and common experience. It seems as if this should be something which is natural and easy, since it requires nothing dramatic, spectacular, or expensive. Yet in practice it is one of the most difficult things on earth to find.

The problem here is that God has an enemy. The devil is constantly at work trying to destroy something which is so much on the heart of God. Since God loves His bride and since the experience of the true church is such a powerful vehicle to effect growth and perfection in His body, Satan always does his best to destroy any such expression.

Not only does the devil have many demons and fallen angels to aid him in his destructive work, but he also finds many Christians who are ready and willing to help him. I am not saying that these believers wittingly are cooperating with the devil, but nevertheless, they are people in whose lives he finds much which he can employ. Any untransformed, sinful part of our soul is something which the devil can and does use. When our natural, sinful nature is intact, when we have not thoroughly seen and repented for our sins, then we are easy prey for God's enemy.

Many believers can be and often are used by him to destroy the work of God. Perhaps your experience in the Christian church will verify this unfortunate fact. When believers are infantile, carnal, untransformed, and have very little intimate communion with God, they are easily used as tools of the devil. Since they are in the very core of the church and have access to many hearts and lives of other believers who make up the body of Christ, they are the perfect instruments for the works of Satan.

One of the best uses to which the devil puts carnal Christians is to slander others. In fact, the name "devil" in Greek can mean "slanderer." The devil loves an untransformed tongue. He likes nothing better than someone who likes to gossip, speak evil of others, recite others' faults, and tell everyone the bad things they have heard about someone else.

You see, natural soulish believers are still very much like worldly people. They like to imagine that they are better than everyone else. They think that by criticizing others, they are elevating themselves. By sharing their demeaning thoughts concerning others with you, they are trying to convince you that they are superior to those they are defaming. They imagine that by putting others down, they are lifting themselves up. However, what they are really doing is revealing their spiritual infancy and their distance from true intimacy with God.

Many Christians, when they hear something bad about another brother or sister, can't wait to tell someone. It is like something burning on their lips, just waiting to

spread to someone else. Proverbs 16:27 reads: "An ungodly man digs up evil, and it is on his lips like a burning fire." They find a certain glee in exposing the faults and failings of others. They take delight in trying to demonstrate how weak others are and how they have been caught in some sin or other.

The Bible teaches us that it is "...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt 12:34). No one but God can see into our hearts. Our interior life is invisible to other men. But when we speak, we reveal what is inside of us. Therefore, what we say is a clear demonstration of what we are. What comes out of our mouth is a transparent expression of what is in our heart. So, when we speak gossip, criticism, and defaming things about others, this shows that our souls are not yet transformed.

This is why James speaks so forcefully about our tongue. He explains that it is an unruly member. It is often "set on fire by hell" (Js 3:5,6), that is to say that it is a part of us which is frequently used by the devil. He further asserts that if we are able to control our tongue, this reveals that we are people in whom God has done a miraculous work. He has perfected us, transforming us into His image. You see, if we have been changed inside, then nothing evil can come out. But if we remain fleshly, then our speech will reveal this lack.

When we speak something evil about another brother or sister, we are talking about a member of Jesus' body. Therefore, we are also speaking about Him. We are using our words to hack and tear at the fabric of His church. We are being used by Satan as a weapon to wound and destroy others. Our words are his tools to separate and divide believers. They are instruments of the devil used to cause others to think worse of someone else. We "bite and devour" (Gal 5:15) one another, being stimulated by our fallen nature, for fleshly gratification, amusement, and a sense of being superior.

All this then serves to destroy love, break down unity, sow discord, and in general tear down the work of God. When we slander and gossip, instead of building up the

church, we tear it down and desecrate it. In place of edifying His body, we hurt and crush it. This is the work of the devil. He has come to steal, kill and destroy (Jn 10:10). When we allow our tongue to speak evilly or demeaning-ly of others, we are simply instruments of the king of darkness. We are being used as his pawns to tear down the work of God.

One common sin which often generates sinful speaking about other believers is a lack of forgiveness. When we refuse to forgive others for things which they have done against us, we become bitter. This bitterness gives rise to angry thoughts and feelings which eventually find their expression in our words. Springing from the fountain of our flesh, these words tear down and divide. When we do not obey our Lord in forgiving others, we easily become an instrument of the devil to destroy the work of God.

LOVE COVERS

As we have been seeing, God's way is the way of love. God is in love with His body, His church. When you love someone, you don't speak badly about them. Let us imagine that you have a son or daughter whom you love. Perhaps they have sinned in some way or another. They have slipped up in their spiritual walk and committed an error. Since you love them, you don't go around spreading this news. You don't tell everyone you know about their failure or moral lapse. Instead you cover their sin, keeping it between you, them, and God.

The Bible teaches us that "...love will cover a multitude of sins" (I Pet 4:8). When we are filled with God's love, we don't advertise and expose the sins of others. Instead, we cover them. Being motivated by divine love for them, we deal with the situation and with them, involving the minimum number of persons and with an attitude of lowliness and love.

This is not to say that we should tolerate sin. Certainly anyone who is sinning needs to be spoken to. They need to be admonished, rebuked, counseled, or dealt with in any

number of ways. Yet, because we ourselves are sinners in need of mercy, we must deal with them in the same way. Without an air of superiority, but with humility and love, we must go to anyone who is in sin and try to help them come to repentance.

In no way is our job to advertise and tell the world about this person's sin. Instead, because we love them, we do our utmost to rescue them out of the snare of the devil and restore them to an intimacy with God. This kind of loving care for them is an expression of Jesus' heart.

As we have been seeing, the true church is held together by love. Our loving communion with others is the substance which causes believers to adhere to one another. So the devil constantly tries to attack this bond. He will put into weak believers' minds various thoughts of criticism, judgment, and rumor. Then, since these believers are vulnerable to his thoughts, he stimulates them to verbalize these thoughts to others. Then they too function as an "accuser of our brethren" (Rev 12:10).

When we hear something bad about someone else, our immediate reaction is to pull back from our relationship with them. We begin to think that if they are so deficient, who wants to be close to them? If they have such serious weaknesses and problems, we might get hurt or abused by remaining in relationship with them. So our reaction is to close our hearts to that person and tend to spend less time with them.

In this way, Satan uses believers to attack others verbally and tear down the fabric of the church. When many Christians are weak and fleshly, then the body of Christ will be full of such talk. This is one of the most powerful tools which the devil has. It is one thing which is extremely destructive to a genuine church experience.

Therefore, those who wish to experience the reality of church must come to an important and firm decision. They must choose never to speak evil of another brother or sister. We read: "...speak evil of no one" (Tit 3:2). Also that we should "...not speak evil of one another" (Js 4:11). This decision is absolutely essential. We must constantly watch

our tongue. We must be vigilant that we do not let our mouth express words of reproach against another, even if our mind is full of them and our tongue is itching to say them.

When and if we gossip, judge, or defame another, we sin against them and against God. If we do let these words slip out, we must immediately repent to the person who heard us and to the Lord. Only in this way, can we maintain the loving unity which God has for us. Only in this way can we build up the body of Christ instead of being used to tear it down.

SOWING DISCORD

There are some things which God hates. One of them is "...one who sows discord among brethren" (Pr 6:19). When we allow ourselves to become an instrument of the devil, we put ourselves in opposition to God and all of His purposes. Whether we realize it or not, we are cooperating with the kingdom of darkness. When we have a habit of speaking evil of others and gossiping about their failures, then we are a regular member of the devil's staff.

Sadly, there are many believers who do much more to promote the devil's kingdom than the kingdom of God. Since they have not been convicted of their sins, including their sinful speech habits, they are not repentant before God. Their lack of repentance inhibits their transformation.

The direct result of this is that they are not very effective in any work they do for the Lord. But even worse, they are frequently and powerfully used by Satan to tear down what God is trying to build up.

Let us be very clear that just because what we are saying might be true, this does not justify our saying it. Many suppose that if the gossip or judgment they are sharing with someone else is true, then it is O.K. with God. Those who imagine this are sadly deceived. Any words of ours which denigrate someone whom God loves and tear down loving relationships between brothers is a work of darkness.

Many of the faults and failures of others about which we become aware are true. Much of the rumor and evil speaking about brothers and sisters is based upon some fact. But love does not speak these words. Again, love covers sins (I Pet 4:8). Love always hopes the best for and speaks well of others.

God our father loves each of His children enough to die for them. Unless we too arrive at this position, we will never succeed in living in the reality of the one true church. Instead, we will remain someone who is susceptible to the influence of Satan.

JUDGE NOT

No one of us is in a position to pass judgment upon another brother or sister. We are not able to see into their hearts. We don't know their inward desires, problems, fears, or experiences. Therefore, we can't really know their motives for what they did or said. Only God is in a position to rightly judge. Let us leave this judgment with Him.

Jesus teaches us to: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Mt 7:1,2). This means that, unless we repent, God will use the same standards to judge us which we used on others. The exact measurement in terms of judging others' motives and actions will be used to expose us before the universe.

We are all sinners. All of us have faults and weaknesses. Therefore, we are in no position to sit in judgment of others who also are weak. We read: "Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of [or according to] the law and judges [using] the law. But if you judge [using] the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge" (Js 4:11).

We are not allowed to judge others using the standards of the Old Testament law or even what we might believe to be "New Testament principles." Our standard must be the love of God. It is only by seeing through His

eyes and sensing the love of His heart that we can act and speak in a way which pleases Him.

No doubt there are times when the words and actions of others displease Him. There are occasions when we must rebuke, exhort, or correct someone else. Yet this does not allow us the liberty to share with others the sins of the offending person. Our words must be given to the person who is offending and not to the rest of the body.

So we see that one of the principle ways in which the loving unity of the body of Christ is destroyed is by our uncontrolled tongue. Our words are powerful instruments which Satan can use to further His purposes. Therefore, we must seek God to do a transforming work within us. We must pray that it would be His Spirit which would be expressed through our mouth. We must be vigilant so that we do not let our tongue express many thoughts which might come into our mind. It is only by submitting our thoughts and our words to the control of the Lord Jesus that we can build up His house instead of tearing it down.

DESTROYER #2: AMBITION

Another thing which works powerfully to destroy the house of God is human ambition. Natural human beings often have within them certain desires. They desire to be admired. They like to be seen and heard. They love it when others think and speak well of them. They enjoy accolades, praise, and even worship which comes from other mere human beings. Some love to rise up above the others to control and dominate them. They are proud when others look upon them with envy due to their position and fame. Not a few strive with all their might to achieve just such a status in this present world.

These desires are works of the fallen flesh. They are ugly, putrid, stinking expressions of the sinful nature which lives in unholy, untransformed men and women. It is the manifestation of such ambition in the church which frequently serves to tear apart and destroy the work of God. The impulse that many have to rise up and dominate

others is the cause of much division, confusion, and lack of spiritual life in the church today.

When we become born again, we receive gifts and spiritual abilities from God. These things are given for us to use in serving one another so that all can grow up into the fullness of Christ. However, when some believers have within their hearts a desire and ambition to rise up, be noticed, and even adored, then they can begin to use these gifts to try to impress others and so obtain the results which they are seeking. They want to do a mighty work "for God."

For example, let us suppose that someone has been given a powerful gift of preaching or teaching. When this person opens their mouth in the exercise of this ministry, there is a supernatural anointing which accompanies their gift. Naturally, others are impressed. So when this child of God is not humble, when there is in his or her heart an ambition to rise up, then they begin to use their gift to achieve their goals.

These men and women are constantly seeking an ever larger audience. They are eager to accept any and all invitations to show off their spiritual prowess. They are always anxious to be able to make their impression on the maximum number of people possible, thereby increasing their fame and their sphere of influence. This tendency is not limited to preachers and teachers but also to those with gifts of healing, prophecy, miracles, singing, etc.

The heart attitude which Christians need to have is entirely different. We read: "Let nothing [this really does mean nothing] be done through selfish ambition or conceit [vain glory], but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself" (Ph 2:3). You see, pride and the ambition to rise up, be seen and heard, and to dominate others have no place in the life of a true follower of Jesus.

Let us think about this together. Who was the first person to use the talents and gifts which God had given him to secure a group of followers? Who was the one who had the intelligence, good looks, and spiritual abilities to attract and hold a large number of adherents and devotees? This

gifted person was Satan himself. He was the first one to take the things God had freely given him and use them to carve out a personal following. Therefore, it is logical to conclude that those who follow this path are not following in the footsteps of Jesus, but someone much more sinister.

When ambition is the motive behind someone's works, many problems occur. One is that they begin to divide the body of Christ. Obviously, every single Christian is not going to be impressed with them, so they must naturally try to carve out of the church a special group for themselves. They work to separate to themselves a part of Christ's body which is enamored with their person and their works. This then becomes their "church" or group, resulting in a division within the body.

Those who are so divided become limited in their contact with others. The ministry which they receive is also limited, coming from only one or a few approved sources. Thus their spiritual growth is restricted since they do not have free access to the many facets of the entire body of Christ. The division of the church into factions which embrace and follow certain gifted leaders is a very common ailment today.

Still another, much more serious problem is that these leaders who rise up to attract a following begin to substitute for the leadership of Christ in the lives of their adherents. It is very easy for many believers, especially those who are not spiritually mature, to begin to look to and trust in human leadership for their direction. When these leaders rise up, exhibiting spiritual gifts and supernatural powers, this only serves to stimulate this misplaced confidence.

INVISIBLE AND OMNIPRESENT

Today Jesus is invisible. We do not know Him physically, but we know Him through the Holy Spirit. This invisibility is necessary for Him to be omnipresent. If He were visible as He was almost 2,000 years ago, He could only be in one place at one time. But since He now is "the

Spirit" (II Cor 3:17), He can be present with all of His people all the time. It is through His spiritual presence that Jesus leads and guides each one of His children. It is this invisible leadership which produces the reality of the one true church.

Any time any other person begins to substitute for the headship of Jesus in His body, serious problems arise. The ability of the Head to guide each one is proportionally restricted. Furthermore, the focus of each member of the body is shifted from seeking God alone to looking to human sources. This then serves to paralyze, confuse and hinder the full functioning of the church. It keeps them from following every direction and nuance of the Head.

Human beings are made with a certain physical restriction. They can look in only one direction at a time. There are other creatures, such as lizards and fish which can look in two directions at once, but people cannot. Although this is a physical limitation, it has spiritual applications.

It is not possible for Christians to have two "heads," or sources of direction and ministry. They simply cannot focus constantly on them both. It is not possible to have two masters (Mt 6:24). These will continually compete within us for supremacy until one wins. Usually, the one with a more tangible presence dominates, since human beings are much more attuned to the physical world than to the invisible world of the Spirit.

We have already studied in chapter five about the meaning of the Greek word "antichrist." This would be someone who is taking the rightful place of Christ in the assembly. Such a substitution is extremely prejudicial in the lives of those who are then governed by mere human beings. But it is also extremely dangerous for the spiritual life of the person who is rising up to take the place of Jesus Christ in any assembly. Although in today's "age of grace" we do not see the judgment of God falling on us for our errors and sins, when He returns to judge His people, these failures to obey His clear instructions will have serious and eternal consequences.

The carnal desire of Christians to rise up and dominate the others was present even in the early church. We have already studied about the works and words of Diotrephes who took control of and began to dominate the church as described in III John. But there were many others who, lacking spiritual understanding and humility, also had natural ambitions.

PAUL'S EXAMPLE

Paul was a man who ministered to the churches as a servant. He never exalted himself. He often appeared "weak" and was sometimes reviled and despised for his lack of a commanding human appearance which awed others (II Cor 10:10). His service to the body was one of helping them to become attached to Christ as a bride is to her husband (II Cor 11:2). He did not seek to become some great, famous leader. Yet God had revealed to him that others, who came later, would seek exactly this position.

When Paul visited the leaders in Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem, he explained this future peril to them. They were all together on the beach weeping and expressing their love for one another (Acts 20:37). In this situation he said: "I know that after I leave ...even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them[selves]. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you [about this future problem] night and day with tears" (Acts 20:29-31 NIV).

These coming individuals were people who would twist the scriptures and the truth of God. They would use these slightly altered truths to justify and fortify their position of rising up and attracting followers. These were Christians who would have ambitions to be "leaders" and so use their gifts and the things which God had given them to satisfy their fleshly desire for position and fame.

Paul constantly warned about this danger. He knew that others would come later who did not have the same heart attitude as he did. They would not have the same

understanding of the importance of maintaining the headship of Christ.

And he was right. Later on we read of Paul telling Timothy: "This you know, that all those in Asia have turned away from me..." (II Tm 1:15). (Remember that Ephesus was in what was called "Asia" in that day). Just as he had prophesied, some had risen up in these churches to attract followers for themselves and so turned them away from Paul and a total dependence on the Lord.

You see, as in any such situation, these kind of leaders have to establish their territory. They have to "protect" their flock from others who might compete with them for leadership. So they begin to undermine the influence of anyone else. Using words, innuendoes, subtle inferences, or outright lies, they attack anyone who might be seen as a competitor. In this case, because Paul was influential due to his relationship with Jesus and his anointed ministry, these leaders in Ephesus and Asia had to turn people away from him.

BEING DEFRAUDED OF YOUR REWARD

In Colossians 2:18,19 we read: "Let no one defraud you of your reward, taking delight in false humility and worship of angels, intruding into those things which he has not seen, vainly puffed up by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the Head..." Upon first reading, these verses seem to describe an animal which I have never seen in over 30 years of ministry. It seems to speak about someone who is falsely humble, yet puffed up, worships angels, and claims to have visions. Although there may be a few who could fit into this category, it seems strange for Paul to use a part of his short letter to warn about such a rare bird.

But perhaps with a little help, we can see something much, much more common here. First, we can understand that these people were not holding onto the Head. They were not submitted to Jesus. Further, they were disrupting the relationship of others with this true authority, thus depriving ("defrauding") them of spiritual rewards which

come from such a submission. This is exactly what we have been discussing.

They were teaching a “false humility” which could easily be understood as encouraging others to submit to them. Further, they taught them to worship “angels.” The word “angels” here is literally “messengers” which many Bible scholars see as referring to “pastors” or church leaders.

So here we very probably have a description of exactly what we have been studying. Men and women who rise up, encourage others to humble themselves (submit to them) and even “worship” or exalt them, substituting themselves in the lives of the believers in the place of the true Head. Unfortunately, this animal is not rare at all.

The interruption of the flow of authority from the Head is something which paralyzes and destroys the true functioning of the body of Christ. It is an extremely common but dangerous practice which causes confusion, limits spiritual growth, and retards His full expression here on earth. It is a custom which generates strife and contention, generated by those who are promoting their own leadership and seeking personal followers.

When men take the place of Jesus in the church, many evil results are seen. This gives rise to competition for more members and bigger ministries, envy, jealousy, contention, and strife.

We read: “But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth.” “For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there.” “This wisdom does not descend from above but is earthly, sensual [soulish], demonic” (Js 3:14,16,15).

It is very sad but I have heard horrible stories about some meetings of Christian leaders who held positions of authority over congregations. In these “conventions” there were leaders who shouted and argued, fought with fists, swore at each other, and even pulled out knives and guns striving to get or maintain positions of power. Others bought, sold, and traded congregations for money to try

and achieve more influence and income. This kind of “wisdom” is certainly earthly, soulish, and demonic.

Christians need to be alert and aware of this serious problem of ambitious men seeking to dominate and run the church. It is such a common practice in today’s world that many do not notice it or see anything wrong with it. Yet it is one of the things which most destroys the house of God and ruins His work among us.

So, believers need to be taught this truth. They urgently need to understand this message. Every Christian should be diligent to avoid this error and stay away from all who insist upon it. Such enlightenment will greatly improve our experience of the true church.

The biblical understanding that men do not and should not have their own authority will serve as a kind of divine quarantine. It will work to isolate those who have ambition and drive to dominate others. When believers correctly understand spiritual authority, it will be hard for someone to exalt himself and lead the rest astray. In this way, the errors which arise should be limited in their scope.

THE IDEA OF COVERING

In the church today there is a popular teaching. This teaching is that everyone should be under some kind of “covering.” The thought behind this is that every man should be in submission to another leader or group of leaders who supervise their lives. They believe that through this supervision, many errors, excesses, and sins will be avoided. They imagine that by submission to other men, they will be protected and properly guided. Since this teaching is so prevalent today, it is necessary to spend some time examining it.

So what does the New Testament teach us about covering? There is, in fact, one very important passage which specifically addresses this subject yet it is not often well understood. In I Corinthians 11:3-7 we read about the importance of women using some kind of head covering

when praying or prophesying to demonstrate their submission to a man, be it their husband, father, etc. This covering then is a symbol of their submission to a man.

The reason I use the word “symbol” here is that it is possible for a woman to physically cover her head, but not be in the least submissive. A woman could be extremely rebellious, yet wear some kind of veil or hat. So it is only logical to conclude that any covering she might use is only symbolic of her heart attitude. The true covering means that she has humbled her heart before her husband or father and is willing to let him be her head in all the senses of this word we have been studying.

In the first part of this same passage men are strictly forbidden to use any sort of covering. When men are exercising their spiritual gifts in the church – praying or prophesying for example – they are not permitted to have their head covered (vs 4). Why is this? It is because their true head is Christ (vs 3). If and when they use a covering, they dishonor Him.

Let me repeat here that any physical “covering” is simply a symbol of the position of their hearts. Following our previous logic, this must mean that if and when they put themselves under the covering of, or in submission to, another man they shame their true Head. They “dishonor” Christ who is their Head (vs 4).

When a man places himself “under,” or in submission to another man, he declares that his true Head is not sufficient. He is placing his confidence in someone else. If a woman who has a husband places herself in a position of submission to another man (which occurs in the case of adultery for example) she shames her husband. In essence she declares that her husband is not manly enough to lead and satisfy her.

In the same way, any man who substitutes Christ’s headship by taking another man as his covering is doing the greatest dishonor to Him. It is a disgrace. It is declaration that they prefer and have confidence in the leadership of a human being instead of their true Head. They are testifying by their actions that Jesus is not sufficient for them.

However, our Lord Jesus is totally capable of being the head and leader of every man (vs 3).

While many believers over the years have used this passage to argue about and divide from each other over the subject of women using or not using hats or veils, it seems that very few have really understood the main point of this teaching. Paul begins this discourse with the issue of men, not women. His first instruction is about the possibility of a man dishonoring his true Head by accepting another covering.

It is only further on that he brings in the issue of women, using them as examples to more exactly explain his meaning. If we miss the warning here about men submitting to an authority figure other than Christ, we have missed the message completely. Certainly Paul's main concern was not about men wearing hats in meetings but about them accepting a head other than Christ.

DISPUTES AND CONTENTIONS

One thing which does severe damage to the true church is when brothers dispute and contend with each other about ideas and Bible doctrines. Many imagine that when they strive with others about what they believe to be the truth that they are doing the work of God. Yet this is not the case.

We are taught by Paul that: "...a servant of the Lord must not quarrel {strive, argue, contend} but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient..." (II Tim 2:24). Further, "contentions" and "strife" are clearly labeled as works of the flesh (Tit 3:9; I Cor 3:3; Gal 5:20; II Cor 12:20; I Tim 6:4; II Tim 2:23). Jesus, as our example, never wasted His time arguing or contending with others about His teaching.

You see, we are not required to try to convince anyone of what we think we understand. The work of God is not a mental thing. It is based upon revelation. Someone else will only be able to receive a revelation given to us or through us when they are open, ready, and willing to receive it.

When others are not open to something which seems important and even precious to us then there is a temptation to try to appeal to their mind. Perhaps we think that we can convince them. We might begin trying to explain what we mean or even argue with them when they do not understand or agree. But when we do so we move from the spiritual realm to the carnal, from the spirit to the mind. Such discussions can do nothing to edify anyone.

An even worse situation occurs when brothers argue in front of other believers. Sometimes these others are young or new converts. When they see brothers contending and disputing, this can harm their faith. They see an unholy activity which leaves an unpleasant impression in their minds. This can undermine their respect for those who are striving. Such activity is very harmful and is forbidden by God's word. We read: "Remind them of these things, charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit, to the ruin {destruction, damage} of the hearers" (II Tim 2:14).

Very often, such arguments are a result of someone wanting to appear more spiritual or advanced than others. Sometimes this willingness to dispute reveals a hidden desire for recognition and influence among the other believers. When brothers strive and contend it is often because one or both of them are wanting to be seen as leaders, showing how the others are wrong and they are right. Such activity only reveals a lack of maturity and a natural desire for power and influence. This is the work of the flesh and it damages rather than edifies the one true church

DESTROYER #3: DISOBEDIENCE

We have been discussing the glorious possibility of experiencing Jesus as the head of all things to His body. We have been seeing how it is possible and desirable for Him to lead everything and everyone. He will lead us individually and He will lead the church as a whole. However, when we opt for divine leadership, we begin to tread on holy ground. When we leave the worldly idea of following

man and decide to follow the King, then we enter into a very serious relationship with Him. When we declare that He is our leader, then we must obey His instructions to us. He must actually *be* our leader.

The necessity to hear and obey Jesus is not only true for each individual, but for the congregation as a whole. Any time Jesus' authority is rejected, He simply moves on. He moves on to others who are ready and willing to hear and obey. As we have stated previously, He is not bound to our ways of practicing the church or even our revelation concerning this theme. Simply understanding His will is not enough. We must also do His will by following His leading every day.

Through the years I have seen several groups of believers, who were meeting more or less informally, simply disappear. Some of them had been meeting together for quite a few years and then suddenly were gone. Often this dismantling of the meetings and relationships was something which occurred quite unexpectedly.

Why did this happen? It was because Jesus had spoken to them, clearly and over a period of time, concerning a direction which He wished them to take. Yet they did not hear. They did not obey. So He moved on and their group fell apart. Since these meetings did not have any human structure to hold them up, when Jesus moved on, they collapsed.

The reason for this disobedience varied. Perhaps they were so pleased with the way things were that they did not want to change. Possibly, they had a personal resistance to what Jesus was saying. But for whatever reason, they stubbornly refused to move in God's direction and so He simply withdrew from them. Lacking the presence and guidance of the Lord, these groups fell apart. Some of these members are still, to this day, wondering what happened.

Jesus spoke to the church in Ephesus: "...repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place" (Rev 2:5). This meant that this church would simply disappear. And to the church in Laodicea He says: "I will spew you out of My

mouth" (Rev 3:16) thus indicating a rejection of them. The Lord was issuing some instructions to these believers. If they did not hear them, then they would suffer the consequences which He promised.

Dear brothers and sisters, these things are very serious. We cannot play around with God. Perhaps while we are participating in human constructions "for" God, we can get away with acting and doing as we please. Possibly we can play around with our Christianity. But when we enter into a covenant relationship with Him, then we are obligated to hear Him and do His will.

DIVINE JUDGMENT

In the early church, sometimes sudden, divine judgments occurred. The story of Ananias and Sapphira lying concerning what they did with some money is an extreme example of this. Further, in I Corinthians 11:29, 30 we read that God judged believers who did not rightly discern His body. They did not treat other believers as if they were members of Christ but simply as other human beings.

Due to this failure, they ate and drank "judgment" to themselves. Many became weak and sick. Some had even died due to their sins of mistreating others. Although these judgments of weakness, sickness, and death could, and probably do typify spiritual problems which some might suffer, there is no doubt that Paul was also referring to actual, physical illness and death. These judgments were a result of believers' disobedience to Jesus.

Many are curious as to why we do not see such severe judgments happening today. Why is it that so many believers are so far from obedience – sinning so much against each other and against God in so many different ways – but yet we don't see this divine judgment falling on them? What is different about our situation today?

The answer to this could be that many of the "churches" which we see today are not really the work of the Lord. They are perhaps works which some man or group of men is doing for God, but they are not the work of God. They

are not something which God Himself is doing. Therefore, since it is not His work, God feels no need to defend it. He senses no impulse to severely judge errors. Since it is not really His in many senses of the word, then He feels no necessity to protect His testimony. He has no need to defend His Name from being degraded since the work is not truly His.

THE FEAR OF THE LORD

This means that if and when we decide to let God be our commander in chief, we must walk in the fear of the Lord. When we set out upon the course of truly enthroning Him among us, then we must act with the consciousness that He really IS among us. Consequently, His presence, His leadership, and direction must be respected. We must esteem very highly His position and His will.

To live in the presence of God and under His authority is a very sober, solemn proposition. This is not a game. His church is precious to Him. It is not something which we can treat lightly. Although He is very loving, He is also the Judge. We must therefore only enter into a covenant relationship with Him with a sincere heart and a readiness to follow Him wherever He goes.

No doubt, Jesus is full of mercy. He is patient, kind, and good. He is certainly not going to turn His back on us just because He sees that we are a little stubborn, short sighted, fearful, or some other such thing. As long as He sees some small possibility of our going His way, He will continue to work with us.

But if and when our resistance to His will is strong and prolonged, then we can expect to experience some consequences. If and when we begin to resist Him and even destroy His work with our words, attitudes, and actions His judgment cannot be far behind.

When we seriously enthrone Jesus as our Head, we may see Him begin to judge some situations in ways which we have not seen before. One of the saddest of these results is that Jesus simply moves on to work with others who have an opening to what He wishes to do.

Again I would like to stress that Jesus is not committed to our doctrine. He is not bound by the fact that we have the “right” vision or practice. He is only attracted to those whose hearts are humble and broken before Him. He will work with any who are pliable and willing to move and work along with Him in His way.

HOW GOD SPEAKS

Jesus, our Head, communicates with us personally in many different ways. But when He speaks to the assembly, He almost always speaks through another person. For example, He almost never speaks audibly to the group as a whole. Instead He uses men and women, the members of His body, to direct His body. As we have seen, He most frequently speaks through members who have the greatest intimacy with Him. He uses the vessels who are most open and available to Him to express His authority.

All of us need to hear and respond to God’s direction being given through such members. When the church fails to heed the Lord’s direction, His expression is limited. When the participants in any communion of believers will not obey the voice of God flowing through a brother, then the collective experience of His presence is diminished. Being tuned in to the voice of the Lord, we all must be able to receive His instructions through others and obey (Ecc 5:1).

It is not uncommon for Christians to have a very difficult time recognizing and submitting to genuine spiritual authority. This is because those through whom it is flowing are humble people. They are not exalting themselves. They don’t put on a special attitude of superiority or greatness. They don’t have distinctive uniforms, or titles. They don’t exude self-importance or have that almost imperceptible swagger of those who are rich, famous, or have positions of power.

Natural people easily respond to these outward expressions of importance or authority. But since those who are simply transmitting the authority of Jesus do not

exhibit these characteristics, it is very easy for immature, unspiritual believers not to recognize or to ignore their words. It is extremely easy to miss the voice of the Lord speaking through someone who appears unspectacular.

This then becomes a real challenge for the church. We must not look simply at the appearance of our brothers. When we fail to hear God speaking through humble men and women, we lose our direction and blessing. If we are not finely tuned to His Spirit, it is easy to miss His voice and consequently not enjoy His leadership. It is essential that we escape from our worldly concepts of how and through whom God speaks and remain open for His word to flow through the brethren. If we don't, then our church experience will be greatly limited.

There are also times, perhaps more often than we would think, that God speaks through other members who are not perceived as "leaders." Perhaps the usual vessels are not open to the particular revelation or direction which He desires to give. Possibly, He wishes to test us to see if we can hear Him speaking and not just rely upon the more mature to lead us. But for whatever reason, God can and does sometimes speak to the group through a member who may not stand out to us as special. This might be a person whom we don't expect the Lord to use.

Perhaps this one through whom God speaks is young in the faith. Possibly he or she is not thought of as being really "spiritual." Maybe they have some sort of physical deficiency or are not especially beautiful or well thought of.

The result of this is that we must continually be sensitive to His Spirit. We must be attuned to hear His voice. We must be ready and willing to hear and obey Him, no matter how He chooses to speak to us. We must be "...submitting to one another in the fear of God" (Eph 5:21). Our need is to have humility, the genuine fear of the Lord, and a readiness to receive His word and follow Him.

Disobedience destroys the work of God. It cuts off the flow of divine life which is the source of the church and all that is genuine in our Christian experience. When we, indi-

vidually, become resistant to His leading then our spiritual life will suffer the consequences. We will lose our sweet fellowship with Him and end up only walking in the soul.

Furthermore, when any group of believers begins refusing the direction of the Holy Spirit, they are in great danger. They run the risk that Jesus will simply move on and leave them without His tangible presence and leadership. This removal of the divine presence from any group is disastrous. Without it the group will simply fall apart or begin to rely upon human methods and means such as natural leadership and authority to hold itself together.

IN THE MEETINGS

We have spoken in earlier chapters about how we must follow the leading of the Holy Spirit in our meetings. Such gatherings, conducted by the Lord Himself, are full of His presence and beneficial to all. This is a wonderful experience and a divine privilege. In such meetings, all have the opportunity to share and minister.

Yet there is something which we must be sure to do. The authority of Jesus must be maintained. We must preserve His rulership over these gatherings. If not, this sublime experience will be destroyed. Those who are more sensitive to Him must have the boldness and faithfulness not to let someone take control of the meeting and deviate it from the Holy Spirit's track.

We have covered this ground in an earlier chapter, yet it bears repeating. There is a danger here which I have encountered many times over the years. This is that some men and women, coming into a situation in which there is no apparent leader, see this as an opportunity to express themselves. Perhaps they imagine that they can become the leader which this group seems to be lacking. Possibly they love to talk and to be seen and heard. Conceivably they are young in the faith and do not know how to follow the Holy Spirit. Maybe they begin speaking or praying in the Spirit, but continue on too long, following some emotional stimulation and get into the flesh.

For whatever reason, there will be times when someone is talking, singing and/or praying on and on and on in a way which is not led by the Lord. If this situation is allowed to continue on too long, it will quench the Holy Spirit. It will destroy the work of God. It will drag everyone down to a natural, human level and the presence of the Lord will be lost.

If we are to meet in God's presence we must maintain His authority. Therefore, when such a situation occurs, those with discernment and maturity must act. In gentleness, kindness and with all consideration not to hurt the other person, they must bring the meeting back under the direction of the Lord. This might be done with a simple prayer or word. It might involve speaking directly to the offender. Whatever is done must serve to stop the action which is taking the group out from under Jesus' dominion and bring it back on His course.

As mentioned earlier, there is some room for error. We don't need to jump on anyone immediately when they stray. But if fleshly, human participation is allowed to continue too long, the whole meeting will suffer. When this happens frequently, people will lose their enthusiasm to meet together since their spirits will be unsatisfied. Soon the work of God will be destroyed by the lack of action on the part of more discerning believers to preserve the authority of the Holy Spirit.

There are also many other things which serve to destroy God's work. These include allowing a "root of bitterness" (Heb 12:15) to grow in our hearts; the failure to forgive others; allowing sin to continue without confronting the offenders; and many other such things.

It is impossible to detail and deal with all the possibilities in this writing. However, Jesus is capable of leading His people. As we walk in intimacy with Him, He will lead us in dealing with every situation and need. May we entrust our lives and hearts ever more to His leadership and care.

12.

**BUILDING ON
THE FOUNDATION**

When addressing the problem of divisions and teaching the new believers in Corinth about how to build the church, Paul says: “For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (I Cor 3:11). In any kind of construction, the foundation is perhaps the most important part. It is the essential point of beginning for everything which will be done later.

It is at precisely this point that so many of today’s denominations, groups, and “churches” have, perhaps inadvertently, strayed from God’s plan. A great majority of today’s Christian groups are based upon a set of doctrines, practices, revelations, a system of human leadership, or some other such thing. Their basis – the fundamental thought which holds them together – is not simply and purely a person, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Clearly, all Christian groups have some foundation in Christ or they could not be considered Christian. Yet many have mistakenly laid other foundations alongside of, or together with the person of Jesus as their basis for fellowship. They have established other criteria as the basis of their meetings and relationships with one another. Then they have built up their particular organization on this defective foundation.

Without a proper foundation, anything which is built on top of it is put at risk. If the foundation is not correctly

laid, the whole structure is going to be faulty. Whatever is constructed on top of it can never be done properly unless everything is first torn down and the foundation remade in the proper way.

The person of (not the doctrine about) Jesus Christ is our one and only foundation. The message of this book can be encapsulated in this one thought: we must come back to Jesus Christ in all our building work. He is the foundation. He is the substance. He is the source. He is the form. He is the Head. He is all in all. To me this is one of the most important features of this understanding of the church which we have been discussing: it is Christ centered. In everything He is to have the preeminence (Col 1:18).

SO HOW DO WE BUILD?

So how do we build? First we introduce men and women to the person of Jesus Christ. We explain to them how they need to thoroughly repent of their sins so that they can be forgiven and receive His own uncreated, eternal life inside of them. Next, we lead them to give themselves completely to Him, yielding their lives in total submission to His will. This will open the way for Him to do His transforming work within them without hindrance.

This step of total consecration to God is indispensable. Unless and until believers are ready and willing to submit themselves completely to the government of Christ, they cannot enter very fully into the true church experience. Since Jesus' body is totally dependent upon Him for its daily direction and even its very life, when Christians have a partial or incomplete submission to Him, their enjoyment of His body will be very partial also.

After the step of complete consecration, new believers must be shown how to live in a love relationship with God and with one another. A life of loving service to one another and even to unbelievers is the only genuine life goal any Christian can pursue. This is the focus and direction of any true Christianity. As we allow Christ to live this kind of focused life through us, others will be able to see an exam-

ple to imitate and follow. Our best teaching is the example of how we allow Christ to live in us and through us.

All this is really very simple. It would be much more simple if so many other methods of building were not so common, thus obscuring people's vision. One of the biggest obstacles which we face today is that there are so many faulty structures which have confused and blinded God's people.

Consequently, a large part of our work seems to be undoing much of what has been built up. We must tear down everything earthly and human and get back to Jesus. Before we can build the new, we have to remove the rubble of the past. We must strive to bring everyone back to "...the simplicity that is in Christ" (II Cor 11:3). As we simply live Christ's life in submission to Him and in unity with one another, the one true church will begin to be seen.

WE MUST HAVE THE SAME PLAN

After we have laid the wonderful foundation of Jesus Christ, then we can begin to build. But with whom can we labor? Who will join together with us in constructing the eternal habitation of God? Here we find another important ingredient. As mentioned earlier in this book, we can love all, serve all, receive all, and even meet with all because they are loved by God. But when it comes to building, there is another requirement.

In order to build together with someone else, we must have the same plan. We must be building according to the same pattern. If not, then much effort and time will be wasted. We will end up disillusioned and frustrated.

Let us imagine that you want to build a boat. So you get a plan and begin to build. Soon your neighbor wants to help. Naturally, you welcome his assistance. But perhaps so much of what your neighbor does is wasted. He cuts boards in different shapes and lengths than your plan specifies. He joins parts together in ways that you have to dismantle later and redo. Not only that but he takes apart things which you have done and does them wrongly.

So you scratch your head and wonder why. Why is so much of what this helpful neighbor does wrong? Why is it that instead of helping, he seems to be hindering? Then one day you discover the reason. He has another set of plans. He thinks that you are building an airplane rather than a boat. Instead of working together, you are working at cross purposes. Much time, effort, and materials have been wasted.

From this illustration we can see that in order to work together with other brothers to build up God's house, we must have the same vision. We must have seen and be working from the same plan. If not, we will experience a lot of frustration and very little progress. There are countless men and women of God who have become discouraged in their work for the Lord because they encountered much frustration trying to work with others.

When others have a "denominational" pattern, when they are building up something with earthly materials and human leadership, then you will have a very difficult time working in this environment. While some have tried to "work within the system" or even tried to change it, it is very rare for anyone to have much success building in this way. There certainly is, in almost any place, the opportunity to pray. It is usually possible to edify some in their individual lives and help them along their way in any situation. Yet any artificial, human structures will limit and inhibit much progress toward the goal of God.

So the best thing to do is to find some others who have the same vision. Things will go much more smoothly if we can locate and work together with others who have the same plan. Concerning those who have a different vision, you can bless them, pray for them, and trust that their Lord will take care of them and their work for Him. Your part is to simply obey God in what He has shown you to do.

If you do not know anyone who has received the same understanding, then you must begin to pray. Pray that God will bring you into contact with some other believers who are pursuing Jesus in the way we have been discussing. You might be surprised to find that there are

many more believers just like you whose hearts are yearning to see God's living house built up and completed.

If there is no larger group available, then you need to pray for another brother who can work with you. One is enough, but two or three are better. You can then walk in God's presence together and allow Him to build you together on His foundation. This will take time, possibly even years of living and interacting together.

This living together will not be easy. But there are no shortcuts. You must allow Christ to establish you together in Him in a solid, real way which only He can do. Therefore, we should prepare ourselves mentally for this. We must be willing to pay the emotional and spiritual cost which this will involve. We also must be willing to invest much time, possibly many years and even our life serving others while God does His work in them and in ourselves also.

WHERE DO WE FIND THESE OTHERS?

Some questions which come to many people's minds when thinking about a church experience without human leadership are: "With whom shall we meet?" "With whom will we have daily fellowship and relationships?" "Who is it that we are supposed to serve in love?" The answer is quite simple. God Himself will bring these people into our lives.

When we follow Christ, we will encounter others in the normal course of our living. Certain of them will stand out as someone whom God has brought to us. They might have some needs which we can meet. They might have a hunger for what God is showing to us. They might already have a similar vision and be seeking others with whom they can put it into practice. The possibilities here are endless, but the result is the same.

As we walk in the spirit, we will have a spiritual "knowing" that certain people are being placed by God alongside of us for some reason known to Him alone. We do not have the right to pick and choose people who

appeal to us. We are not free to reject those who have serious problems or might be difficult. When we, walking in intimacy with God, know that He has placed someone in our lives, then we must love and serve them in His name.

It is clear that as human beings we can have only a limited number of truly close relationships with others. Our capacities are finite. If we have a handful of really intimate brothers and sisters, this is quite a lot. So, we can concentrate our ministry and love on those who are closest to us, building and edifying each other under the government of God.

Naturally, we will also have some relationships with others who are more “distant” spiritually. It is not being implied here that we should arrange a small circle of intimate friends who agree with us and shut out the rest. The thought is simply that we will always have some brothers and sisters who are more intimately related with us and others who have a somewhat less intimate connection.

Those we know and with whom we have a greater intimacy will likewise have relationships with others who are more distant from us. Those in turn will have others with which they have communion and so on. Soon, there will be a whole network of interrelated believers loving and serving one another.

Perhaps a good analogy of this could be a brick wall. Each brick has another brick on each side and a couple more on the top and the bottom. These others bricks also have bricks touching them, which have other bricks in contact with them. The whole then makes a wall. As believers live in loving communion with those who are close to them, the whole then makes the church.

No one (besides Jesus) needs to try to create or control these relationships. There is no need for someone to try to organize or plan such a thing. It is God Himself who places the members in the body as it pleases Him (I Cor 12:18). He is the One who should be in control of these relationships. As He brings others into each of our lives and we allow Him to build up an intimate communion between us, His eternal house is being constructed.

The house of God is something living, something “organic” so to speak. There is no “how to” manual. There are no specific, step by step, plans which we can implement to make sure things are done correctly. The relationships and fellowship about which we are speaking are something which the Holy Spirit can and will produce as we give Him our hearts and minds. We must have faith that as we follow Him day by day, He will build His church as He has promised.

Although many humans long for something defined, orderly, and programmed, the house of God can never be built in this way. There is no systematic method we can use to produce what He desires. It is only by maintaining a daily faith relationship with our Head that we can realize this glorious experience. Human intelligence and organizational ability must be discarded. All the wonderful attributes of the bride of Christ can only be known by those walking in intimate communion with Jesus.

MORE GIFTED MEMBERS

It is clear that there will be members of the body who have gifts and ministries which will reach beyond the “few” with whom they have a spiritual intimacy. Naturally, God will lead them in using these gifts to serve His body in a wider way. Preaching and teaching, healing, etc. are ministries for the entire church to enjoy. By no means is anyone suggesting that such ministries of larger scope are unnecessary or are to be rejected.

However, this does not negate the need of those with such ministries to be connected in spiritual intimacy with a few others. The fact that they have a ministry to many does not signify that they have no necessity for close communion with a few especially intimate brothers also. No one should neglect such spiritual fellowship with others and concentrate only on “their ministry.” Believers who do so run a very high risk of becoming isolated, like a lamb far from the flock, and therefore become easy prey for the enemy. Our communion with other believers who are

close to us will provide a living way for God to bring edification, inspiration and even correction into our lives.

NEW TRANSPARENCY

When we are walking together with some others, what we generally expect is that we will find a great blessing. Hopefully there will be a generous amount of grace and satisfaction in our communion. But something else will also occur. We will begin to see the other's sin. We will realize the weakness and failures of the others. Their life will become more and more transparent to us.

This will occur for two reasons. First, we will find that God draws us closer to these others. We will have a frequent, if not daily, communion. So the fact of this intimacy will result in our knowing our brothers and sisters in a deeper way. It is possible for people to know each other for many years, perhaps while being members of some kind of religious structure for example, without knowing the sins and faults of the others. But when we enter into the spiritual communion of the body of Christ, it is inevitable that we will begin to know much more about each other – both the good and the bad.

The second reason is that this is the work of the Holy Spirit. He came to “convict the world of sin” (Jn 16:8). So when we begin to open up to Him and His building work, sin begins to be exposed. As we “walk in the light” (1 Jn 1:7) with others, this light reveals many things. It “makes manifest” (Eph 5:13) what has previously been hidden.

When we begin to discover that our brothers and sisters are not perfect, when we see that they are sinners like ourselves, when their fallen, not yet transformed nature begins to be expressed, what is our reaction? The natural man tends to pull back. Our human nature would like to stay far away from such people with these ugly, difficult problems. But this is not God's response. This is not His solution.

It is here that we find a real test of our love for God and our commitment to our brothers. It is here that we see

if we are ready and willing to live in and build up the house of God.

Here we have the wonderful opportunity to overcome our natural reactions. We can, through the grace of God, forgive others. We can look upon them through the eyes of God. We can deny ourselves our human responses and seek God's grace to treat them as He would. Another way of thinking about this is that we can love them as we love ourselves (Mt 22:39).

This is a real challenge. Here is the true proof of our Christianity. If we cannot love our brother, then we will never experience the fullness of the one true church. If we fail here, then we will never be built together upon God's foundation. When we simply run away from those who are difficult or sinful, we will never succeed in seeing the house of God built up. Lacking artificial structures to keep people together, we only have God's love on which to depend. The genuine body of Christ is "...edifying {building up} ...itself in love" (Eph 4:16).

Once again we see that it is here that the cross of Jesus comes into view. It is when we live with others in God's love that our own "self" must be crucified. In order to succeed in living in love, we must die. Our natural reactions, opinions and desires must be laid in the grave. The fallen soul can never stand up to such a test. Only the Life of God within us is capable of living in love and harmony with all those whom He has chosen.

BEING BUILT TOGETHER

Following this path of love and self-denial, after some time we will discover our union and communion with these other like-minded brothers and sisters growing. We will realize that the love of God is giving us a victory over our human reactions to their failures and weaknesses. We will have heard all the accusations of the devil which he raises against them. We will have observed all their obvious sins and weaknesses. We will have been made aware of their human failings. Yet we will still love them.

This then is the beginning of the building of God. This is our being built upon His foundation, Jesus Christ. This is an eternal union of ourselves with God and with one another. This is something which has passed the tests of this world and has become eternal.

When we have seen the truth about others and still love them, when the devil has shared with us all his insights about their sins and failures, when we have overcome our own reactions and feelings, then what remains is something which will endure forever.

When we cooperate with Jesus and allow Him to build us together in this way, then the church becomes much less vulnerable and eventually, invincible to the attacks of the enemy. In the Old Testament, the stones for the temple were carefully crafted. They were cut, sawn, and possibly even sanded until they fit perfectly together. When they were put into place in the temple, it has been said that they fit so well that not even the blade of a knife could be inserted between them.

You see, the devil's attacks are like the blade of a knife. He loves to insert his accusations about another brother in the middle of our relationship. When his words find a little space in our hearts and minds, then he begins to twist this knife to pry us further apart. This is his main technique to destroy the work of God. It is to "reveal" to us the faults and sins of others. Then he uses this information to destroy the love which should hold us together.

But when we succeed in living in love, when the devil's accusations no longer find a place in our hearts, when he has expended all his efforts but has failed to separate us, then the gates of hell begin to tremble. When we overcome his words which he uses to accuse others, then he has very little power left. It is then that he has exhausted all his ammunition and failed.

When we no longer agree with the thoughts which he puts in our minds, when we stop reacting in natural, human ways to his assaults, when we continue to love our brothers and sisters in the middle of his attacks on their character, then the devil's kingdom is in trouble. It is then

that Christian men and women are winning the victory. They are overcoming God's enemy. God's house is being built up.

As we have seen, love is the only glue that holds the true body of Christ together. Without some artificial doctrine, leader, practice, method, etc. to keep believers together, only God's love will work. So the devil does his best to attack this unique, precious connection.

When we, acting in our flesh, cooperate with him and criticize, defame, gossip, and speak ill of our brothers and sisters, we tear apart the only thing which joins us together. This kind of speaking is sin and must be avoided at all costs. If and when we find ourselves involved in it, a deep and thorough repentance is the only solution. It is only when we overcome in this sphere that we will see the house of God being built up in love.

ADDING MORE STONES

When two or three brothers begin to experience victory in the area of loving one another then this is the beginning of something very precious and real. When five or six, or even twelve begin to enjoy a relationship of godly love, then the foundation of God has been well established. This then becomes something very solid to which the Lord can add a lot of weight.

For example, let us suppose that a few brothers are in communion with each other and with Jesus. Suddenly, perhaps being enthused with a revelation of what God is desiring, a whole group of other believers decides to join them. Let us put this number of new ones at about 100. But if these few original brothers are not well built together, if the enemy still has some ammunition left which they have not overcome, then this group will not stand the test.

Sooner or later, the devil will manage to drive a wedge in between these first few brothers. They will disagree about some doctrine, direction, leadership, or situation. Soon a rupture of fellowship will take place. As for the 100 more who came recently, they too will be confused and

divided. They might have thought that they were coming to a place of love and unity, but instead they see fighting and contention. Some will take one side and others another. This will result in a division of the body and the destruction of the work of God.

Before the Lord can add more weight, the first few blocks (brothers) must be well established on the foundation. They must be solidly joined together in God's love. They need to be patient and allow Jesus to do a complete work in their individual lives and among them. Then, and only then will they be able to support more weight.

This is an essential first step in the building of God. Don't think you can skip it. You cannot rush or bypass this process. Unless and until several brothers are thoroughly built together in God's love, anything which is built on top of it will not stand for any extended time. This is precisely one of the main reasons why many groups flare up for a short while, seeming to have a good revelation and flowing of the Holy Spirit, and then disappear. The first few "foundational" brothers were not well knit together in God's love.

Jesus spent about three and one half years with His disciples. During that time, they no doubt had struggles in their relationships with one another. So Jesus taught them. He taught them to love, to forgive, to turn the other cheek, to be meek, and to be humble. He instructed them concerning how they should live together in spiritual communion. He used every situation as an opportunity to teach them to live in harmony.

For example, there were frequent contentions among the disciples about power, greatness, and authority. Some of them seemed to desire a position of preeminence over the others. As we have seen, this is also a frequent reason why many groups fail today. When certain brothers begin contending and disputing among themselves about who will have the most influence, or someone rises up to take control of the group, the true church experience is doomed.

Dealing with these situations, Jesus soundly rebuked them. He stated repeatedly and clearly that in His king-

dom, the greatest must become the least. He also demonstrated for them powerful examples of service and humility (Jn 13:3-17). So, after His death and resurrection, these brothers had some supernatural building. They had some history of living together in the presence of the Lord.

On the day of Pentecost, there were 120 of these disciples in the "upper room." Most, if not all, of these brothers and sisters had spent much time with each other and with the Lord. They must have had a certain amount of supernatural relationship or "building." It is evident that they did because on that very day the Lord chose to add "about three thousand" new believers to their number (Acts 2:41).

Amazingly, these 120 withstood this weight. The apostles did not begin to compete with each other about who would have the most influence or be the greatest. Some petty doctrine or other did not divide them. The problems which arose did not cause them to disagree and split into two or three different churches. The challenges they faced did not induce them to begin to distrust each other, contend with each other, or cast each other out of the church. This is because they loved one another. They had spent time together in the presence of Jesus and He had done an eternal work in their hearts.

This is what all of us need today. It is essential that we take advantage of the few other brothers and sisters with whom we have communion. Here is the proving ground. It is here that the rubber meets the road. They are the ones with whom God has put us. It is with these few that we need to learn to live in harmony and love. When this small part of God's building is well established, then it may be that the Lord can trust that this part of His house has a foundation strong enough to support more weight.

Perhaps we think that all this might be easier if we could only find some Christians who were more agreeable. If we could locate some that were less problematic, less sinful, less stubborn, and more sensitive to us. But "God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased" (I Cor 12:18). Those whom He has brought into our lives are those with whom we must have communion.

It is with them that we must overcome. It is with these few that we allow God to work in our hearts until we love them as He does.

Jesus knows what needs to be done in our hearts. He knows the needs of others too. So when He puts us together, He sees how He will use our gifts and anointing to minister to the rest. He also foresees how the problems and sins of each individual will help the others grow. He sees how we can bless one another. He is likewise aware of how their weaknesses and problems will impact our lives, causing us to die to ourselves in order to keep on loving them. He has designed these relationships to be the most effective in dealing with our problems and promoting our real spiritual growth.

So we see that where we are is exactly where God wants us to be. Unless He has given us clear guidance to move somewhere else, our situation is perfect for us. If we have found some others with the same plan and vision of God's house, it is here we must stay and allow God to do His work in us and through us. When He is ready, when we are transformed into His glorious image, when we are no longer susceptible to the work of the enemy, then He may use us to be effective in the lives of a larger number of people.

CUTTING OFF FELLOWSHIP

So when are we allowed to cut off fellowship with someone else? When is the point when another person's sins are so great that we are not supposed to take any more? When do we give up on someone else? The answer seems to be almost never. We can only give up our love for another brother or sister when God Himself gives up on them. God does not give up easily.

However, Jesus does give us some guidelines for our continuation of fellowship with someone who offends us. We read: "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not

hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector" (Mt 18:15-17).

Here we have a formula for dealing with a brother who sins against us. First we go to him, not to everyone else. If he repents, then we are to forgive him (Lk 17:3); not only once but "seventy times seven" (Mt 18:22). However, if he won't listen, we are to take two or three with us. If the brother or sister still won't receive our complaint, we are allowed to take the matter before the larger group. Finally, and only after taking the first three steps, we are allowed to cease reaching out to him or her in love.

It is my understanding that the final "you" in verse 17 of Matthew chapter 18 is singular. That means that you, personally, may withdraw from fellowship with that person if you have followed the procedure above. This does not seem to be a method for excluding someone from the church as a whole. This is not a formula for "church discipline." Although it has often been applied in this way, it seems that in this case, only you (singular) are no longer required to maintain communion with the other person.

A "DISORDERLY" BROTHER

There also seem to be a few other situations where our communion with others is not demanded. There is a passage where Paul teaches us to "withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us" (II Thess 3:6). When someone is not walking in communion with Jesus and therefore not "walking in the light" (I Jn 1:7), it becomes very difficult to have fellowship with them.

The word "disorderly" above must mean walking in consistent, unrepentant sin. Since their heart is not seeking the things of God, there is really no benefit in trying to build together with them.

Although we might be used by God to rescue them from their behavior (Js 5:19,20), without their repentance,

any long-term association will not be constructive in any eternal way.

This principle applies in many situations. When it becomes obvious that a brother or sister is not truly seeking the kingdom of God, we do not need spend our time and energy trying to maintain communion with them. When they resist the authority of Jesus and are manifestly being led by the flesh, then we cannot build together with them either.

Paul also teaches, referring to those who were opposing his teaching: "If anyone teaches otherwise and does not consent to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness, he is proud, knowing nothing, but is obsessed with disputes and arguments over words, from which come envy, strife, reviling, evil suspicions, useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself" (I Tim 6:3-5).

Any Christian walking in the flesh cannot co-labor with you in building God's house. It is better not to spend your time with such people. This does not mean that you don't continue to love them and to pray for them. It simply means that we must invest our time and energy serving those whose hearts are open to Jesus and His kingdom.

The scriptures are not advocating here some kind of harsh, hateful attitude of rejection which is common in many Christian groups today toward someone who has stopped agreeing with them. There is no thought of cutting off any and all communication, treating them roughly or unlovingly, breaking familial ties, and shunning them as if they had the plague. Such attitudes do not reflect the heart of God. Instead, it seems that this must be a natural reaction toward those whose hearts are not seeking the government of Christ.

When other believers are not in submission to and in communion with the Head of the body, spiritual relationships become almost impossible. We therefore are urged, instead of trying to maintain some kind of fleshly friend-

ships, to simply concentrate our time and efforts on those who are seeking Jesus. The automatic, spiritual response is to work together with those who are “walking in the light.”

SELF-PRUNING

In many ways, the one true church is self-pruning. We won't usually need to spend time worrying about excluding someone. They will normally just exclude themselves. If we and those with whom we have intimate communion are living in genuine submission to Jesus, then this leaves no room for the flesh. There will be around us an atmosphere of holiness and commitment.

Anyone coming into contact with us should sense this. If they do and are attracted, this is good. But in my experience, many do not have this heart attitude. They are not ready and willing to surrender completely to Jesus. This is not what they are seeking or something for which they are longing. Although they may feel attracted by the loving relationships which they see, they often don't feel comfortable with the total commitment to the Lord which they sense around them.

So these folks don't stick around. Although we may see them from time to time, they seem to exclude themselves from fellowship by their lack of desire for Jesus and Him only. True communion can only be known among those who have a reciprocity of total commitment to Jesus and to one another.

It is a mistake to feel that we must keep reaching out to people who aren't really seeking God. Our goal is not to recruit “members.” There are some believers who are constantly collecting difficult people, thinking that they are ministering to them. But often these folks are just hanging around because they crave attention, not because they are seeking the Lord. We should allow Jesus to govern our relationships, instead of our own soulish heart. We should not invest too much of our time and energy reaching out to those whose hearts are closed.

In the early church perhaps this situation was a little different. There was only one group of people called “the church.” But today, believers have many options. If they are not attracted to what we are doing, there are thousands of other groups where they can seek whatever it is that they want. They can find a group which seems to satisfy their need.

An example of this could be someone who is seeking a place of authority and recognition. At first, he or she might imagine that your sphere of fellowship would be a perfect platform from which to launch their “ministry.” Perhaps, mistaking the leadership of the invisible God for no leadership at all, this person might imagine that they can assume this position for themselves.

After discovering that this will not work, they will probably leave and look for a more suitable place. I John 2:18,19 reads: “...even now many antichrists [those taking the place of Christ] have come...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 that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us.”

TURNING OVER TO SATAN

It seems that on one occasion, Paul recommended that the believers take a radical step. In this case, when someone was sinning blatantly and unrepentantly, he instructed them to: “...deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (I Cor 5:5).

In another situation, two men, Hymenaeus and Alexander had evidently fallen into obvious sin. They refused to listen to the voice of their conscience and repent. Their sin and their justification of it had gone so far that their lives amounted to blasphemy of Jesus’ person and work.

No doubt Paul and/or others tried to warn them and rescue them but to no avail. So eventually Paul was driven to the point of desperation where he, probably in prayer,

delivered them "...to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme" (I Tim 1:20).

The thought behind this extreme step seems to be that God would remove His physical protection from these individuals. Then Satan could attack them in various ways, possibly including sickness, injury, or death. From the suffering which this punishment would produce, it was hoped that these people would turn from their sin and repent.

However, we can "deliver to Satan" all we want. But it is only when God, who knows and judges our hearts and motives, decides that such a thing is good for the one being so punished that He will let it happen. It is God who is protecting all His children. Just because a few decide that one of their number needs punishment, this may not reflect His heart's attitude. The positive thing is that this kind of prayer leaves all discipline in the hands of God. It does not indicate some overt action which the group does to punish someone themselves.

I don't believe any of us should quickly arrive at such a prayer. Even if we do come to this point, it should never be with an attitude of hatred, anger, or strife, but with the hope that this medicine would cure and save the one who is being so judged.

Please notice Paul's loving attitude in II Corinthians towards the believer whom he had previously turned over to Satan. It seems that this man who was sleeping with his father's wife had repented. So, immediately Paul was willing to forgive him and receive him back into fellowship. He says: "...you ought rather to forgive and comfort him lest perhaps such a one be swallowed up with too much sorrow. Therefore I urge you to reaffirm your love to him" (II Cor 2:7,8).

CHURCH DISCIPLINE

Over the years in which I have been walking with the Lord, I have heard a lot about "church discipline." Many different groups of Christians have seen fit to throw a brother or sister out of their meetings. The justifications for

this are varied, but the practice is always pretty similar. Some brother or sister is ejected from the group and then the rest have nothing more to do with them. The intent here seems to have been to subject the offender to as much emotional pain as possible.

Frequently, such expulsions are done to protect the established leadership. Instead of reflecting the heart of God, they are merely a way to get rid of someone who is not going along with the program. Often it is simply a convenient way for someone to maintain their own authority.

Although there is the one instance already mentioned where Paul seems to indicate a corporate action be taken with respect to a sinning believer, it is certain that this was not to be done in a malicious, hateful, cruel manner. Judging from the other writings of Paul, specifically chapter 13 of I Corinthians, it is the love of God which should dominate all our words and actions. Any and all such steps must be taken with the hope of restoring and rescuing the offender. Any such activity must reflect the heart of God.

Certainly there are occasions when the sin of an unrepentant brother or sister requires that the believers cease to have communion with them. There is no spiritual benefit to be obtained by continuing on in fellowship with someone who is denying the authority of Christ over their lives. Continued relationships will not only *not* help the sinner, but will, over a period of time, contaminate the rest.

However, such a decision on the part of the whole must also be led by the Head. We should never be quick to exclude anyone whom Jesus loves. Such action should not be the result of a power dispute, envy, unforgiveness, or other such fleshly motivation. We are only free to discontinue fellowship when Jesus Himself has shown us that the heart of an individual is perverted, i.e. that they are not genuinely seeking Him or His kingdom and only using fellowship with the believers for selfish motives.

CHURCH DISCIPLINE BY THE HEAD

We have already spoken in the previous chapter about the fact that Jesus did send judgment upon some believers.

This was upon those who were eating and drinking their corporate meal in an unworthy manner (I Cor 11:29-30). These men and women were failing to respect and treat others as members of Christ's body. They did not act towards others as they would act towards Jesus Himself. They failed to "discern" the Lord's body. Therefore, they became weak, sickly, or even died.

In the book of Revelation we have another instance of divine judgment. Jesus warns "Jezebel" and those who are committing sexual sin with her that if they do not repent, He will "cast her into a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her into great tribulation" (Rev 2:22).

No doubt these Revelation verses have deeper spiritual applications beyond a simple instance of adultery, but the message is clear that it is Jesus Himself who will exercise this judgment. He is the one who searches the "minds and the hearts" (Rev 2:23). He is able to discern each one's motives. Therefore, He and He alone is worthy and capable of executing the judgment that is appropriate when it is needed. Such judgments are much more likely to occur when the work which is going on is His work.

There are a few stories which I have heard which seem to confirm this thought. One of them I will try to recount here. A friend of mine here in Brazil, Geraldo, went to visit South Africa several years ago. He went with a large group of believers to witness a revival which had been taking place among the Zulu tribe. In his perception, this was a genuine work of God. They had no official leadership. It was God Himself who directed their lives and their meetings. Their Christ-centered lives and communion really impressed him. While he was there they told him a story.

About a week before his arrival, a pastor from another church had come to one of their meetings. Since these meetings were open for anyone to give a message or exhortation, this pastor eventually got up to preach. Not long after beginning his message, he fell dead, right in front of everyone. Later, it was learned that he was living in an adulterous situation. It seemed as if God had judged this situation without anyone having to do His work for Him.

I strongly believe that we need to keep our hands off of God's work. Jesus is the one building His church. He is the One who is anointed to do this task. Let us then follow Him in simple obedience. He will do the rest.

There is no need for us to try to discipline each other. The idea that for any reason we should treat others badly, subjecting them to ridicule, shunning them and convincing others to do the same is really infantile and ridiculous. This will not minister spiritual life to anyone.

If someone sins, we should confront and rebuke them. If they have repented, then we must immediately forgive them. If they are continuing on in sin, then we must pray that God Himself will deal with them in His way. As we lift up these situations to Him, He knows how to, and has the power to, justly deal with them.

Although we do have our part to play, building up the church is really the work of God. It is not something which we do for Him, but something which He does through us. Let us again remember that Jesus said: "I will build My church" (Mt 16:18). As we have seen in the first chapters, He is the source, He is the center, He is the substance, He is the focus, He is the life, and He is the Head of everything.

OUR WORKS WILL BE JUDGED

Jesus is the foundation which has been laid. We then are exhorted to be very careful how we build upon this foundation. It is only by building with the substance of Jesus Himself that we can erect anything which will stand the test of eternity.

This is an extremely important admonition. Although many may have not given much thought to what this means or to the results of disobedience in this area, it is an essential factor in our work for God. Each and every believer must have this truth firmly implanted in their minds in such a way that it guides their words, works and behavior.

When Jesus returns He will judge all our works by the burning intensity of His presence. Anything which was not "done in God" (Jn 3:21) will certainly go up in flames. At

that time, it will be an extreme embarrassment, a moment of great agony, if we find that many of our efforts were simply expressions of our flesh.

If our works for God have been merely a result of our own intelligence, education, or abilities, if they were just accomplished by what our natural man could do, if they were just the fruit of human wisdom and effort, at that time the ugliness and ineffectiveness of our rebellious works will be evident before all.

It is therefore incumbent upon each one of us to humble ourselves before Him. We must thoroughly repent of anything and everything which we have been doing which does not have its source in Him. We desperately need to stop any and all work which is merely wood, hay, and stubble. Any effort which is merely human endeavor must be abandoned.

Next we must cultivate an intimacy with Jesus Himself which will become the source of and the inspiration for all our work in His house. We must learn to abide in the vine in such a way that the flowing of His life within us will produce supernatural fruit (Jn 15:5). We need to develop a spiritual communion with our Lord and King which will guide our words, works, and steps.

In this way, and only in this way, when we stand before Him on that Day, we will receive an eternal reward. We will not be ashamed, having our works burned up by His presence. We will hear Him say in the presence of the whole watching and waiting universe "Well done, good and faithful servant... Enter into the joy of your Lord" (Mt 25:23).

AFTERWORD

*A*s different brothers and sisters in various parts of the world have read the first drafts of this book I have been privileged to receive some feedback. Perhaps surprisingly, most of the responses have been very positive. It seems that men and women all over the globe are hungering for just this kind of church experience. Countless numbers are unsatisfied with the current condition of Jesus' church and are searching for something much more eternal and spiritually edifying.

However, there seem to be a few who still have trouble with the idea of a complete liberty from human, institutional leadership. They seem to feel that there must be at least a little bit of positional authority in the body of Christ just in case things get out of control or to deal with a few special situations. The idea of a complete absence of any human authority figure seems to them to be unthinkable.

These assertions are usually supported by some of the Bible verses which we have already examined earlier in this writing. It was my hope that the explanations offered and the better translations of these verses already presented would have been adequate to assuage the hearts and minds of everyone who is genuinely interested in obeying the Lord in this question. However, since this is such an important issue, it seems good to touch again briefly on this subject here at the end of this book.

The practice of human, positional authority cannot be biblical for several essential reasons perhaps not yet fully clarified. Firstly, it violates the principle of Jesus being the unique life source of His body. Anything which might originate from another source, i.e. a human authority fig-

ure, cannot produce anything of spiritual value. Instead, it is a serious mistake. It is an act which, although it might seem good, produces only wood, hay, and stubble.

This fact is very important. This is an essential, unalterable principle. Only the "fountain of life" gives rise to the new creation. All other sources, no matter how good or right or "qualified" they may seem, are utterly rejected. They are impotent, being unable to generate anything truly spiritual or eternal.

Secondly, any exercise of mere positional authority violates the free will of the believers. Such authority works in a way which God never, ever works.

Let us think about this together. Human or positional authority would only be necessary when someone is unwilling to obey the spiritual authority of Jesus flowing through His body. If someone will not obey God speaking to them through His word, His Spirit, other believers etc. then we might imagine that someone more tangible could give this person a little "push" in the right direction. They could apply some small earthly force to help this person do the right thing.

Yet this is something which God never does. If and when anyone is unwilling to obey, He never forces them. Jesus never, ever, pushes anyone go one centimeter beyond where he or she is willing to go, even if it is for their own good. Even if someone is about to commit a serious sin, God does not rush down from heaven to make them stop. Think about this a moment. If God will not do something, should we be trying to do it in His place?

No amount of earthly pressure to try to make someone do anything, even if it is the will of God, will be of any eternal value. Even if we can persuade someone to obey, and to do something which is obviously right, if there is any resistance within them to this path, then they will gain no spiritual benefit.

Any "obedience to God" which is not from the heart is useless. It will do nothing to transform them. Conversely, when the heart is open and ready to obey, positional authority is completely unnecessary.

Since the exercise of positional authority violates these two clear, essential, inviolable principles it cannot be thought of as being from God. Therefore, we must readjust our thinking to conform to God's revealed will. We must not be held prisoners to common practice and teaching. Instead, we must understand any and all Bible verses only in ways which conform to absolute spiritual principles and also to the plain teachings of Jesus which we have examined in earlier chapters.

Jesus said that ALL authority in heaven and earth had been given to Him (Mt 28:18). What then was left over? Nothing. Nowhere do we find Him parcelling out a little of this authority to others, except to exercise over demons. This situation is still in force. He has retained *all* authority.

GIVING

Another question which has arisen regarding the subject of living in the body of Christ together without human leadership is about giving. Many have been trained that they should give to an institution. They have been taught that they should give their "tithe" to the church where they attend. If now they have no "church" to which to give, what should they do?

Our response in this writing is not intended to be a complete essay on the subject of giving. It is not our purpose here to analyze the question of different kinds of offerings or how much we should tithe, etc.

The main thrust of this response is that we must learn how to follow the Holy Spirit in our giving. Just as He is to be the Lord of every other part of our lives, so too our giving of money, etc. should be led by Him. God will show us where and how to give. It might be to the poor. It might be to meet the needs of brethren around us. It might be to support someone who has given themselves to the work of the Lord. For example, someone might be in need of financial help who is working as a missionary or dedicating themselves to some spiritual work or other.

The tithe belongs to the house of God. But the house of God is people, not some kind of organization. It is the

men and women who belong to Him who are His house. Therefore, giving to them *is* giving to God's house.

If we are part of some religious organization which has expenses such as building maintenance, electric bills, salaries for the workers, etc. then we have a responsibility to pay our part of those expenses. Just as the members of a club have their dues to pay since they benefit from the structure and functions of that club, so too anyone who is benefitting from their participation in an organized group should be responsible for their part of the expenses.

However, perhaps we should be careful about calling this giving "to God." If we are merely paying our part, if it is ourselves who are benefitted, then we are simply giving to ourselves. Giving to God is a kind of giving from which we derive no benefit.

LARGER MINISTRIES

As mentioned in an earlier chapter, it may be that some brothers or sisters have a very powerful gift for anointed ministry. Certainly these gifts are important and necessary for the whole body of Christ and even unbelievers.

However, one fact seems to stand out when speaking about such ministries. In the New Testament, both in the ministry of Jesus and of the apostles, no ministry was ever done as a show or spectacle. The use of powerful or more obvious spiritual gifts was never done with the thought of impressing others, drawing attention, or gaining fame or fortune.

When Jesus healed some folks, He specifically told them to be quiet about it (Mt 8:4, Lk 8:56). He did many of His miracles in secret. He even insisted that they tell no one that He was the Christ (Mt 16:20). Even when He healed publicly, He did not do so as a kind of spectacle or to draw attention to Himself. He made no effort to gain fame or followers by the use of His gifts. The apostles in the early church did not make a circus or show out of the ministries which God had given them. As God used them

in the normal course of life, they used their gifts for HIS glory, not their own.

So this leads to the obvious conclusion that we too should *never* use our gifts in any way which glorifies ourselves. Perhaps we can sing well or preach. Possibly we have gifts of healings or miracles. If so, we must constantly be vigilant to use these gifts only in ways which glorify Jesus and not ourselves.

If and when we realize that we are becoming the center of attention or taking glory away from God, where it belongs, then we must repent before Him and look for ways to use our gifts which do not produce this ugly, natural result. Certainly the Lord has given His people gifts to use in ways which will further His wonderful and glorious purposes and His kingdom.

REAL CHURCH MAY NOT LOOK IMPRESSIVE

As we learn to live in love with all our brothers and sisters, we may be excited by this new experience and the revelation which we are receiving. It may be because we are enthusiastic about a new experience of the body of Christ that we expect most other Christians will want to live this way also. We even might think that our small beginning would turn into something really impressive which will shake the world. Just like the early disciples, we might imagine that now is the time for Jesus to come and take command of His church and really make things happen. However, this may not be what really occurs.

Assuredly, as we obey our Lord, learning to meet around Him and in submission to Him, we will see His hand moving in power and many lives being transformed. However, this may never become something impressive in the eyes of the world or even other believers. Our experience may never reach such a zenith of popularity that the church in the whole world is instantly changed. Our way of serving the Lord and one another will probably never become universally popular. We should prepare our hearts for this.

There are several reasons for this. Firstly, God's ways are not usually showy. He Himself is humble and seeks to have communion with others who are humble also. God is not desiring to make some kind of big, impressive splash or show off His power and glory. His goal is to change men and women into His image. So, it is probable that when He is in control of His church, the results are not going to be impressive in terms of world recognition, popularity, etc.

This may be perhaps compared to the first passover meal which God instituted. This was a holy, awesome repast. However, there was very little about it which might attract the natural man. Yes, there was roasted meat but it was probably without any seasoning, perhaps not even salt. Next there were herbs, but they were bitter and unattractive. To top it off there was a hard sort of bread without any yeast to make it more palatable. Yet, this was God's way.

Secondly, very many of God's children are not truly seeking to be pleasing to Him or to walk in intimacy with Him. It is sad but true that many people, who at one time or another actually received Christ, are not following Him with their whole heart today. While they may maintain some appearance of Christianity, i.e. going to church meetings once in a while or abstaining from a few grosser sins, their hearts are not captured by a daily intimacy with Jesus. Consequently, they will not be excited about the kind of church experience which we are recommending.

You see, God's ways have no appeal to the carnal man. He offers little to attract our flesh. The same is also true of the church experience which is led by and filled with Him. There will be very little which will draw carnal or infantile believers. There will not be a plethora of social events, entertainments and/or "support groups" to hold their attention. Only those who are serious about pleasing Jesus will be attracted. Therefore, this way of living out the life of Jesus with others will never be universally popular.

TIME TOGETHER

One of the few things which we have to offer to God is our time. He doesn't need our human energy or efforts.

But time is an essential element in the true church experience. In order to serve one another, love one another, build each other up in life, use our gifts and ministries, get to know others in the Spirit, etc. we must spend time with each other. There is simply no substitute in our search for more reality in our church experience than spending time together with other believers. There is no other way in which the relationships needed to sustain the living church can be maintained or built up.

Here we find one of the most important keys to experiencing the real church. We must have time to spend together! Therefore, the availability of our time for God to use in these aforementioned pursuits is critical. This means that we must rearrange our priorities. We must not let other demands and pressures dominate us.

There is a lot of truth to the saying: "People make time for what is important to them." For example, if someone loves fishing, he will get up before dawn, stay up late at night, and make many other sacrifices to be able to do what he loves. Where we invest our time reveals what is most important in our lives.

Many brothers and sisters are held prisoner by their businesses. They devote all their time and attention to them. Others are distracted from the work of the Lord by entertainments. Still others simply spend their time on the various necessities and demands of this life. However, each and every believer who desires to live in and experience a more living church experience must make spending time with other believers a priority. If they don't, very little of any eternal value will occur. If we do not devote time to being with each other, the real church will not be seen.

This time together might be simple fellowship. It might be praying together. It might be meetings, counselling or the use of various gifts and ministries. Exactly what we do together is not as important as the fact that we have our time available to be with one another.

Of course the other essential ingredient is that it must be Jesus who must be directing these occasions. Any time two or more believers succeed in entering into His pres-

ence together He will minister Himself to and through them, thereby edifying His own body. When we enter into Him together, we all will profit immensely.

Therefore, those who are serious about living Christ together will be people who seek to devote their time to knowing Jesus intimately and serving His body daily. Without such a commitment of our time to the Lord, nothing of much eternal value will happen. The work of the Spirit among us will be severely retarded.

If and when our time is occupied with other pursuits, no matter how logical or justifiable they may seem from a human point of view, the true functioning of the church will be very limited. Believers who are seeking a more living expression of the body of Christ must rearrange their priorities so that their time is available for their Lord to use.

In the true expression of Jesus' body, there are no clergymen or women who will do all or most of the work. Here, everyone has a responsibility before God to love and serve. Consequently, the time we have available for God to use becomes critical. If we are a slave to something over which we have no control (many hours of employment for example) then during that time we are free in regards to the Lord's work. But during the times in which we are free from such demands then we must regard ourselves as the Lord's slave (see I Cor 7:22).

Other books by this same author:

FROM GLORY TO GLORY
THY KINGDOM COME
GENUINE SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY
BABYLON
ANTICHRIST
SIGNS OF THE END
REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE
SEEDS
THE NEW TESTAMENT
THE FATHER'S LIFE TRANSLATION

*To read online or order books without cost
visit our website:*

www:agrainofwheat.com

*"A Grain of Wheat" Ministries is looking for book
distributors in all parts of the world. If you are interest-
ed, please contact us for more information.*