

Enclosed is the first nine in a series of articles entitled "From the Back Row, Commentary on the Church of God." The author of this series is a member of the spiritual organism known as the Church of God. He has done extensive research into the Churches of God, especially those group that trace their history back to the Worldwide Church of God. This series is a Biblically based commentary on various subjects and doctrines affecting the church. Any of these articles may be freely distributed in their entirety or reprinted in publications with credit given to the author. Thank you and God Bless.

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From the Back Row  
Commentary on the Church of God  
Aligning ourselves with God

Which "work" do you support? Which headquarters do you choose to follow for direction? Which council of elders or ministerial council do you look to spiritual guidance and for defining the objectives toward which you are to move? Whom do you counsel with in order to find out who and how you are to serve? What is your "alignment"?

Dependence on men has been taught to us in the church. We rely on the worldly corporate philosophy and structure brought into our fellowships as our guide. Many of us receive our "marching orders" as Christians from those who believe such concepts. We align ourselves with a particular organization and their leaders and look to a church headquarters for guidance. The desire in humans to be a part of a group and to rally around a cause or effort is strong. It is not wrong to support and affiliate with a church group. We need, however, to refocus our attention on our PRIMARY loyalties and on where we are to ultimately seek spiritual direction.

The book of Revelation tells us where our true alignment as Christians ought to be. "And He [God] who sat there [a throne set in heaven] was like jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like a emerald...And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings and voices. An there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. Before the throne there was a sea of glass like crystal."(Rev. 4: 3, 5-6). This awesome picture draws our attention to where a Christian's headquarters is.

"Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads." (Rev. 4:4). These elders, chosen by God, are His constant counsel in regard to His plans and His work.

"And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the book of life...And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire." (Rev. 20:12, 15). This book of salvation shows who we are to serve as Christians. We are to love and serve not only those currently in the book (God's elect), but also humans who potentially could be in this book of eternal life (all mankind).

It is God's TRUE headquarters where God receives input from the TRUE council of elders that we can take advantage of wherever we are on the earth. These elders impartially draw from the foundation of wisdom of God's word and ALWAYS follow God's lead. Additionally, our desire must be to serve ALL humanity and not only a man-made mailing or tithe list.

Fellow Christians, we are NOT sheep without a shepherd or children without a Father to lead us. God has not left us alone. Our first and foremost connection is to God and His BIG work from heaven and NOT to a particular church organization! We have ALWAYS had direct, instantaneous and personal contact with our true leader and with headquarters. It is by God's

Spirit that we receive our objectives and what we are to accomplish. Contact, counsel and leadership from HQ is only a prayer away.

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"Now when the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (Acts 2:1-4, KJV throughout). The New Testament church of God began with the twelve apostles and a gathering of disciples whose names are lost in history. Were these forgotten laborers important to God's work? What happened to them after Pentecost?

Many Christians focus their attention on the lives and works of the twelve apostles. Some may feel that the apostles, representing only 10% of the original 120 disciples, were the primary or only tool of evangelism God used powerfully. In the shadow of our attention given to these men that seem larger than life is a significant group of unknown workers for God. This forgotten majority, the 90% of the brethren at Pentecost, were to play a major role in God's plan of salvation to the world.

Some in the church have falsely assumed that the forefront of the dispersion of the gospel is a small, elite cadre of full-time supported church employees known as the "ordained." We have focused on highly visible "leaders" due to our desire to seek a champion for all facets of promoting the cause of the gospel. We seek someone to represent the truths we believe and to love others instead of doing so ourselves. We may also think that unless we perform a service or gospel outreach on a grand scale or with a dynamic, charismatic personality then it should not be done at all. If we are honest, many of us center our attention on larger than life leaders or unrealistic expectations to justify our inactivity. We desire someone to stand for us, when God commands that we individually stand for what He has taught us.

The unknown soldiers of the gospel that were at the Pentecost birth of the church stayed in Jerusalem for two years and apprenticed in the truth and service of Jesus. God allowed persecution of His church to remind the disciples of their responsibility in God's plan of salvation. It was these forgotten 108, along with many others, that left everywhere to spread the good news of the kingdom. It was this silent majority that spearheaded the dispersion of the gospel to the earth, while the apostles stayed behind in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1-4). These disciples carried with them the truth and the witness of God's working in their lives. They served, loved and taught their way around the Roman empire. They helped build the church by using the foundational teachings of the apostles and receiving inspiration and direction from their leader Jesus Christ. God trusted these disciples and blessed their labors by using them to convert others, apart from the 12 apostles or Paul and Barnabas (Acts 11:19-26).

To believe our efforts will not matter is short-sighted. We do not have to sit in the back row of church and see ourselves as unworthy to participate in God's work. God recruits ALL His children to labor in the harvest and concerns Himself with the smallest service. Jesus does not forget even a cold cup of water given to those in need (Matt. 10:40-42). Spiritually, as ambassadors of Christ, we can refresh others by what we do and say. As active bearers of His word, God assures us of His work in and through us. God's word accomplishes ALL that He sets it to do (Is. 55:10-11).

We are in partnership with God to bring people into the Kingdom. It is to our glory to be part of the active majority, whose accolades come not from men but God. Let us remember that the forgotten of men are the remembered and blessed of God.

#### Attitude of a True Servant

One of the hallmark traits of a true Christian is an attitude of service and love toward God and fellow human beings. Jesus took the time in the last few hours of His life to stress

serving others (John 13:12-17, KJV throughout). The Bible discusses two kinds of service we can offer. It is imperative we understand this difference in our Christian lives.

At His last Passover Jesus contrasted two types of service His disciples could perform and pointed them to the pinnacle attitude they were to achieve. With the suffering of the crucifixion before Him, Jesus emphatically declared to His students "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves." (Luke 22:25-27). Jesus first draws our attention to the Gentile-like attitude of service. Those that acquire this attitude "serve" and are benefactors ("do-gooders" in the Greek), but they do it to exalt themselves and RULE those they "serve." The relationship is one from the top-down, of a person dictating how they will serve those considered "under" them. Jesus tells us NOT to do this! He commands us to view ourselves as equal to those we serve (v. 26). Our Savior then declares that being served is not God's idea of greatness. Jesus came to show us that true greatness is serving and loving humbly as He did.

We can either rule through serving or serve through serving. We run the risk of ruling through service whenever we selfishly dictate to others how we are going to serve them instead of asking them. Many leaders and ministers in the church have unfortunately succumbed to this tendency of human nature. They have acquired a view of service not unlike the "king to his subjects" Gentile-like attitude Jesus did not endorse. Those of us who behave in this fashion can use our "service" as a cloak to influence others to do our will and to justify exalting ourselves above those we serve. If a person does not appreciate receiving this type of "service" we may deem them unthankful, ungrateful, or unconverted. Their response to our dysfunctional view of serving can become justification for negative actions we may take against them!

The following example illustrates this difference in service attitudes. One way we could serve a dinner is to ask the person we want to serve what they would like to eat. We ask them what kind of main dish they would like, inquire about the vegetables they find delicious and find out what they would like to drink. We would also discover what their favorite dessert is and prepare it for them. Serving of the meal is at a time convenient for the person served.

In the second type of service however, we decide what to fix for dinner. We determine what main dish, drink, vegetables and dessert to serve. The time of the meal is convenient for us based on our schedule.

Which of the two ways of preparing dinner, both requiring the same preparation and effort, is the TRUE spirit of Godly service? The first kind of service seeks to discover the wishes of a person and strives to fulfill them (within the context of God's word). The wants of the served, not the one serving, is characteristic of the first example. The second example shows service from a self-determined point of view. It does not matter that the person served would not like the main dish prepared, would not like the drink we offered or could not eat the dessert we made. We may even make ourselves angry if the person served gives constructive feedback on our "service"! If those we serve from this self-dictated view do not like what we do, we think it's THEIR problem, not ours!

God is the greatest servant and knows what we need before we ask Him (Matt 6:25-34). Our service as true Christians must seek to learn how best we can utilize our skills and God given talents to strengthen each other and those not yet converted. God challenges us to search and fulfill the necessities of those we desire to help. We are not to please or exalt ourselves through misguided service that seeks to influence obedience to our will. The spirit of God beckons us to take hold of the opportunities of love before us and make a CHRISTIAN difference in the lives of others. In the light of God's great grace, mercy and love toward us our sacrifice of humble service is a reasonable response to our Savior. If we are willing, we can achieve the attitude of a true servant.

### God's Government: A Synopsis

The church of God has had considerable discussion and debate on what we refer to as church or God's government. Analysis of Biblical texts, research papers, our church tradition, personal experiences, and a host of other factors has entered into our study. The following is a synopsis on this pivotal subject.

We need to first understand how God's government applies to God. How does God "rule" Himself? God governs Himself with His laws and always chooses to do right. His objective is to train us to do the same. He desires beings like Himself, which is why we have been created in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). We become His spiritual children by virtue of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:14-16) and will look like Him in the resurrection (Phil. 3:21).

God from the beginning wanted us to be individually responsible and accountable for our choices. He held Adam and Eve personally accountable for what they chose in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3). After Israel came out of Egypt, God presented to His people a choice. They had to choose between obedience to God's way of life with blessings or disobedience resulting in cursings. God did not force them into righteousness, but commanded them to choose (Deut. 30:11-20). In the New Testament our Savior emphatically stated to the disciples that the WAY the Gentiles rule is NOT the way he wished them to act. He did not want the disciples utilizing the structures and philosophies of the world (Luke 22:24-27) which do not encourage self-government with God as King. In the end-time God will destroy the governments of mankind that proceeded out of the Babylonian foundation of governance. Jesus will obliterate the Satan inspired system of human beings ruling human beings, which is hierarchy or top-down government (Dan. 2).

Our Father yearns for us to acquire the character to always choose His way of life and to rule ourselves using His words inscribed in our hearts (Heb. 8:10-11). God wants a "hierarchy of one," whereby through His Spirit, His word and our relationship with Him we build character and learn to rule over our choices. God ultimately governs His creation from the inside-out, not from the outside-in as humans and Satan try to do.

God does not use the dysfunctional, abusive family concepts from the world which some have brought into our fellowships under the misnomer "God's government." God desires EACH of his children to achieve their full potential of service and love, NOW dynamically, individually active in His work. TODAY we can build through His word and life's experience the character we will use for all eternity. Our Father wants to apprentice us for independence, not spiritual dependency on man. His work desires to utilize ALL His children, not just a humanly devised subset known as the "ordained" or "leaders."

Our Father leads in His government by inspiration, not intimidation. Choice, not coercion establishes God's governance. He operates with compassion, not constraint. He encourages cooperation, not competition amongst His children. His government builds on TRUST and on relationships, not on suspicion and corporate titles and church offices of "authority." Our creator believes in the primacy of the individual, not in discarding a person because he or she does not fit a worldly corporate image of success. His way teaches us to use our expressions of creativity so that they do not conflict or compete with the creativity of others in His family. God encourages unity of the spirit, an outgoing love and a humble, obedient heart to Him and not uniformity or contrived unity founded on obeisance to a "leader."

God's government comes to EACH OF US not by an earthly headquarters or a minister, but by baptism and His Holy Spirit. God's emanates His will and government directly from His throne, the TRUE headquarters (Rev. 4). His BIG work utilizes the TRUE elders around that throne (Rev. 4:4). Those of different talents and gifts fill His true government, along with a variety of services working together through the unifying spirit of love. Our God's governance is the culmination of cooperation and love between independent free moral agents who chose to rule their lives under God's principles of existence.

In contrast the Devil's philosophy uses force, pain, coercion and punishment to influence people to choose his ways. If humans do not do Satan's will, he or his demons may possess them. We in the church sometimes use similar tactics such as coercion, penalties, and disfellowshipment to influence others to choose our will. Through ungodly hierarchical concepts we promote the belief that it is a more fearful thing to fall into the hands of a "leader," minister or headquarters than the hands of the living God.

God's way, however, guides and rewards people into choosing rightly and through His goodness leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Love, mercy and reward are the basis of our creator's government. Fear, penalty and punishment are the basis of top-down governance concepts. The difference in governance is that God guides, but Satan punishes and possesses and human hierarchies wish to do the same. God's method of governance is the only one that works and produces the character He seeks!

Jesus, talking to His disciples on the Mount of Olives said "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." (Matt. 5:17-18). Jesus came to reveal the intent behind God's laws and was the embodiment of his Father's words. This scripture delineates God's ultimate statement on government. At the completion of His plan God's written words will disappear. Remaining at the climax of the plan of salvation will be beings who are character imprints of God the Father, even as Jesus was. We will rule ourselves as God and Jesus rule themselves and choose as they choose. We will be more than beings IN the kingdom of God, we will BECOME the kingdom and government of God. This is our destiny in the inspiring and awesome plan of God.

#### Anchors of peace in the sea of life

In the last few hours of his life, Jesus made a promise to his disciples of the peace of mind they would receive from the Holy Spirit in their lives. Our savior said "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27, KJV throughout). We Christians yearn for more of the peace of God. We desire peace in our lives in the midst of change and trials both in the world and the church. How can we accentuate the peace promised by God? Understanding a few simple principles and insights can gain us spiritual anchors for our soul in the midst of the sometimes tumultuous sea of life.

One anchor we can have is to understand that our true headquarters is in heaven and God's true elders are around His throne constantly (Rev. 4:3-6). By anchoring ourselves with God's heavenly home office we will not soon abandon our relationship with our Father. We will not quickly overturn ourselves by the fallibilities of those who create earthly headquarters for His work or claim to solely represent God and what He believes.

Another anchor comes from understanding that as humans and Christians we are fallible creatures who are attending the ongoing classroom of character known as life. God made us fallible and peace comes when we accept this condition of creation with the hope of learning the lessons and gaining the character God desires. Though we struggle with the pulls of human nature we need not fear any condemnation from God if we seek after Jesus our savior (Rom. 8:1).

We do not have to be tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine. Debates on doctrine are as constant as the rising sun and will continue to Christ's return. Many of us wish that God would pour knowledge into us as He did with King Solomon. Wouldn't you like Jesus to show up at the end of your bed every month for one hour and straight-forwardly answer your doctrinal questions and personal problems face to face? How we wish! Seldom if ever can we defend ALL objections against a doctrine. If someone presents us with a new doctrine or a change of

understanding of a doctrine, we should study the Bible and pray about it. We may have twenty Biblical reasons for believing a doctrine is true. If someone presents us with a fact or insight we cannot immediately answer, let's not toss away our belief based on one or two questions! There are times when we cannot answer all the objections brought against our beliefs. It is entirely all right to admit our human fallibility and not change beliefs overnight. Any change should only come after examination of the evidence and determination that what was formerly believed was not true. Our attitude and willingness to change when corrected is what God looks for in us.

When the storms of life assail us, we can gain perspective on our problems and climb out of our boat of despair by reaching out to bless the life of our fellow man. By serving others, particularly in THEIR time of need, we gain insight which will help us further weather the storm in our own life. Love is the gift we give to others that, like a seed planted, returns to us more than what is sown. Our faith and works will give us boldness when we meet God (1John 3:17).

A healthy sense of humor makes life more enjoyable. Humor helps us "lighten up." It pulls us back from obsessing and awfulizing about a situation and puts in perspective our difficulty. Humor aids and unburdens our mind to better work on the problem at hand. This is not to say that we should reduce every situation to frivolity. Humor however is God's gift to us to remind us not to take life as grimly serious as we tend to do. It helps us bail out our boat of woe when we are in the midst of a trial.

We can place our hopes, dreams, trials and troubles on the broad shoulders of our God and Savior. Periodically there are events in our lives and in those we love that remind us of our limitations as humans. God is available to take our cares (1Peter 5:7) and to help us gain depth of character from it. The sweet smelling incense of our prayers rises up before God (Rev. 8:3-4) and he takes notice of them. Petitioning prayer to God through Jesus and based on our relationship with Him avails much.

The most important anchor we can possess is to rest in the words and love of God. It is in His word that we find solace and strength. God made the entire universe for us. Jesus risked His existence and gave His life to forgive and heal us, and to show us how much He loves what He created. God did not spend all His creative powers on making us and in offering Jesus as a sacrifice for sin only to see us ultimately fail and not overcome sin. The purpose of our creation is to overcome and share eternity with our creator. God has a vested interest in us. He will do all He can to help us and guide us. God will not fail in His effort to bring His sons and daughters into the kingdom of God and have an eternal relationship with them. God has much to lose if we were to fail. We can have peace knowing that our God loves us and that He takes the greatest interest in the pinnacle of His creative power, mankind. With the love of God in us by the spirit and a willingly heart the peace of God can grow and reign in our lives. We can rest in God's words, promises and love. Even as Jesus stilled the storm on the sea of Galilee (Mark 4:35-41), He is helping us quell in our lives our storms and learn to live in peace. These anchors, dropped in the sea of our lives, will help keep us stable and not capsize.

### The Apprenticeship of God

Jesus had just completed training those that would later help spread the gospel to the world. Near the end of His earthly life He said to His students "You are my friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things I heard from My Father I have made known to you." (John 15:14-15). Jesus declared that the disciples primary training period had finished. They were beginning to receive their "graduation" from the apprenticeship of truth and love they had learned. The fullness of their graduation ceremony would come at Pentecost when they would receive the power needed to finally go forth and serve.

In our church history we have not done a good job motivating the brethren to take up their full responsibility as Christians and utilize the gifts of God's Spirit to serve and spread the

gospel. We are extremely hesitant and reluctant to change due to a lack of trust in God's Holy Spirit in His people. We have a strong desire to build organizations, not character.

Instead of apprenticeshiping members for service then graduating them, many are content to create members who maintain a spiritual dependency on a church organization or leader. It is unfortunate that while Jesus treats all of us as friends, brethren who graduate to further growth as Christians find leaders and churches who still wish to treat them as servants, not friends. The practical application of apprenticeship is greatly lacking in our fellowships.

What can we do to apprentice and help the process of graduating the church for service? First we must realize that EACH Christian is to be a one-person advertisement for the kingdom of God. Second, making mistakes and taking risks are a part of the learning and growth process in becoming more proficient servants. The church of God need not fear this and ought to encourage brethren to extend themselves in this area. When brethren do make mistakes, we should not use it to justify failure and abandonment of our goals but rather as another lesson that improves our character of love on God's road to eternal life.

Third, instead of trusting in human direction of God's people we ought to ask God to help us trust Him to guide His people. Fourth, those that consider themselves "leaders" in the church need to acquire an attitude of someone who apprentices, not rules or baby-sits, God's people. Leaders would benefit by "putting on the clothes" of the lowliest member of their congregation and sitting in the back row of church to learn the foundational attitudes needed to implement an apprenticeship program.

The Pentecost of Acts 2 was God's graduation of His first 120 teachers. They in turn apprenticed other disciples. Unfortunately, they failed to heed God's admonition to go into all the world and bear witness of God's message and His work in their lives. God allowed persecution and scattering (Acts 8), His graduation and "wake up" call to His children, to motivate them to fulfill their calling as Christians. We in the spiritual organism known as the church of God are already scattered, but we can do much to enhance our spiritual strength by apprenticeshiping. It is time for us to expand and fulfill our destiny as God's elect.

### The Neglected Gift: Being Single

The church has written and spoken much about the various gifts of the Spirit such as wisdom, faith, healing, tongues and so on (1 Cor. 12:4-11). We have discussed at great length the gifts of responsibility of apostles, evangelists and teachers (Eph. 4). The gift of being single and serving God, however, is a gift that has virtually been absent in our sermons and discussions in the church.

What is your perception of single people in the church? Is singleness like some "disease" that only marriage can cure? Are single people merely half-complete jigsaw puzzles, desperately searching for their "other half" to "complete" them? Can singles be a powerful force in the church for service and love?

Recently I thumbed through a reference publication called the "family album" from a once large Sabbatarian church from the 1980's. It contained pictures of those in the "ordained" ministry and leaders of the church. Browsing through the book, I noticed that single people were almost ABSENT from the pictures. I found one or two single people serving the church whose mate had died. Unfortunately, only one or two additional photos of either a male or female who were single their entire life were in this book. How sad!

The apostle Paul called being single a gift of God (1Cor. 7: 7-9). He later states "But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord-how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world-how he may please his wife. There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world-how she may please her husband." (v. 32-34).

Single people, whether at one time married or not, offer to their fellowships the undistracted devotion of mind and strength for service that comes from concentrating their lives on pleasing God. Singles, because they do not spend their energies on the maintenance of a relationship with their mate and family, can devote themselves entirely to living holy lives and to caring relationships with others.

It would be wise to include singles more in our activities in the church. Our fellowships should teach single people to be content in the state they are in and serve God's church instead of trying to get them married. If we do this then if someone decides to marry it is out of outgoing love and strength of character rather than selfishness, a desire for acceptance or the belief that marriage will "make" you happy. Unmarried people need encouragement and confirmation that they are a vital part of the congregation and not "loose ends" in the church. Lastly, let us point unmarried people to the two greatest servants in the New Testament, Jesus and Paul, who were both single (Paul, who may have been married at one time, was single during his entire ministry). These are role model singles can look to for inspiration.

Being single, Christian and "married" to God is one of the highest callings God can give. Singles are one of the untapped resources, a hidden treasure in our fellowships that we are to unearth and encourage to reach out and give of themselves to the glory of God. Being single can be a dynamic and joyful experience, a life of opportunities and expanding vistas of giving oneself in outgoing concern to others. Dedicated singles are one of God's gifts to His church. It is now up to us to accept this gift.

#### What is the secret to unity?

Do you wish there would be more unity between brethren in the church? Do you yearn for an atmosphere of mutual respect, love and cooperation? Do you desire to draw from the strength, gifts and character of your brothers and sisters in the faith?

We earnestly seek togetherness but seem unwilling to pay the price to achieve it. We yearn to have the barriers breached yet refuse to open our arms. We look across to our brethren not in our fellowship through the fences we build in our organizations and wonder why they are distant from us. We cry out to God and fast for a bond of fellowship while mixing the mortar of the bricks to erect our own "middle wall of partition" (Eph. 2:14) between "us" and "them." We sigh and cry for something to be done by someone, somewhere, somehow, yet fail to see where the true responsibility for unity lies. We curse the darkness of separation, but will not ourselves strike a match to light a candle.

We need to ask ourselves a tough question. Do we love the church of God, that spiritual organism that transcends the artificial, man-made boundaries of human organizations and human nature? Or is our love filtered through the organizational-colored glasses we put on ourselves?

Our Savior's last prayer with His disciples stressed true unity. Jesus prayed "Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are" (John 17:11, KJV). Jesus went on to say "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one" (v. 22). Our formula for oneness of mind cannot be found in the philosophies and structures of the world for we are to be not OF the world even as Jesus was not (v. 15-16). Jesus did not pray that the Father aid us in constructing a working relationship between leaders in various church headquarters to achieve togetherness. The only unity that matters is based on our individual connection to God through the Holy Spirit and the glory of love and truth Jesus gave to His church.

When was the last time you visited a church of God fellowship group outside the church organization you regularly attend? You may know the doctrinal stands of people in another church, but have you taken them out to dinner lately? Remember the last time you phoned, sent a card or letter, or visited the sick of someone you do not see every Sabbath? Do you receive the newsletter or tapes of fellow Christians in the church of God striving, like yourself, to

understand the perfect will of God? It is through these seemingly small acts of kindness, caring and love that we tear down walls of separation and build bridges of understanding and relationships.

What about differences in comprehending what is the truth of God? Doctrinal disagreements have and will exist to the time of Christ's return. Many doctrines DO matter. No one should recant their convictions based on the Bible for the sake of some common denominator of belief. Our passions however must not blur the vision of being friendly toward those in the household of faith. If we are strong in what we believe we need not worry of being "tainted" by a view different from ours. We can maintain our integrity of belief and STILL be kind to others. Of course, there may be something we can learn from those we visit! Differences in understanding exist and it is our challenge to create and maintain friendships in this background. It is therefore imperative that we see the big picture and love not only our fellowship subset of the body of Christ, but the whole church of almighty God written in the book of Life (Rev. 3:5, 20:12).

In the resurrection there will be no church corporate banner to fly, no human headquarters to rally to, no multiplicity of groups in existence. There will be only you, me and the rest of God's elect He has collected over the millennia.

What is the secret to unity? We know that a measure of unity, love and brotherhood exists in the church of God when WE sow the seeds of service and cooperation. We must submit ourselves to God's Holy Spirit and be tenderhearted toward each other. The church is as unified as your actions dictate. Oneness with our brethren in the faith, in whatever fellowship or organization they attend in, begins with ONE. Unity begins with YOU.

#### The seed, the sower, the gospel and home fellowships

The church of God is experiencing an explosive growth in home fellowship groups. This trend will no doubt continue and enlarge over the next several years. Members of these new house churches, many of which came from larger church organizations, wonder what their roles and responsibilities are in spreading the gospel. Brethren grapple with this question against a backdrop of leaders in larger churches deriding this new movement of God's people. Their chief criticism lies in the belief that small fellowships do not do "the work." Some ministers feel that a home fellowship's role is at best irrelevant and at worst a hindrance to those "truly" active in God's great commission delivered to His people (Matt. 28:16-20).

In an overlooked statement by Jesus and the words of the apostle Paul we discover the responsibilities local fellowships bear. Jesus, talking to His disciples after a discussion with the women at the well in Samaria said "Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" (John 4:35, NKJV). Jesus goes on to declare "And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this the saying is true 'One sows and another reaps'. I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors" (v. 36-38).

Notice that the disciples were sent to harvest that which they did not sow or plant! It was the righteous men and women that toiled before them, and the words and deeds inspired by God and written in the Old Testament that sowed the seed of truth (1Peter 1:10-12, Acts 15:21). The disciples were not the first to enter into the harvest field of the world. They did not personally know the workers that came before them. God's work is one where laborers expend their efforts at various times in the field.

The apostle Paul offers us insight into how God distributes jobs in His work. Paul, in correcting the Corinthian church not to have contentions, said "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." (1Cor. 3:5-6). He goes on to state "So then

neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor." (v. 7-8).

Paul was stressing that all workers in God's work are critical to the successful implementation of God's plan of salvation. ALL are to cooperate to reach a common goal whether they plant seeds of truth or later water by encouraging spiritual growth in others. Each person who puts his hand to the plow in God's work is rewarded according to the effort they exert.

A significant contributing factor to the confusion and criticism about responsibilities in the gospel derives from an obsession with numbers. The number of members or ministers we have, the moneys we collect and the volume of requests we receive through media outreach are some of the figures used to verify who "really" is active and producing in God's work. We must be cautious however not to put greater faith in numbers than in God's plan. Noah, a preacher of righteousness, taught God's way for 120 years and gained not one convert. Many of the righteous prophets of old did not live to fully see the fruit of their labors (1Peter 1:10-12). Regardless of numbers we must never overlook our Christian calling and commission. The manifestation of the ultimate fruit of our efforts may not come until the future.

Home fellowships can play a dynamic, rewarding role in the commission to spread the gospel Jesus gave His church. It may be our skills and talents lead us to be sowers of God's truth in the soil of the mind of another whom He has prepared to accept His word. We may be waterers, encouraging others on their road to accepting Jesus as their Savior before their baptism or giving spiritual nourishment to those already converted. We may also labor as harvesters who gather the fruit of the sower and waterer into God's church. God however reserves for Himself the ultimate gathering of the harvest of souls at His resurrections (Matt. 13:24-30, 37-43; Rev. 20).

Whether sowers, waterers or harvesters, all Christians are fellow laborers and contributors to God's great work. Our Father has promised us a reward for using our talents in whatever job He has given us. Since we are in the "last days" before Christ's return, it may be that the sowing and watering of some home fellowships do not bear fruit until the Great Tribulation. At that time, an innumerable multitude will accept Jesus as their Savior, repent and turn to God (Rev. 7:9-17). May God help us awaken to our high calling in Jesus, to take our royal priesthood seriously (1Peter 2:9-10) and boldly enter into the fields of the lives of His greatest creation, mankind.

THE END OF THIS ARTICLE

Enclosed is the first nine in a series of articles entitled "From the Back Row, Commentary on the Church of God." The author of this series is a member of the spiritual organism known as the Church of God. He has done extensive research into the Churches of God, especially those group that trace their history back to the Worldwide Church of God. This series is a Biblically based commentary on various subjects and doctrines affecting the church. Any of these articles may be freely distributed in their entirety or reprinted in publications with credit given to the author. Thank you and God Bless.

\*\* Visit the Church of God Bible Study Web site at: <http://www.biblestudy.org> !!!

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From the Back Row  
Commentary on the Church of God  
Aligning ourselves with God

Which "work" do you support? Which headquarters do you choose to follow for direction? Which council of elders or ministerial council do you look to spiritual guidance and for defining the objectives toward which you are to move? Whom do you counsel with in order to find out who and how you are to serve? What is your "alignment"?

Dependence on men has been taught to us in the church. We rely on the worldly corporate philosophy and structure brought into our fellowships as our guide. Many of us receive our "marching orders" as Christians from those who believe such concepts. We align ourselves with a particular organization and their leaders and look to a church headquarters for guidance. The desire in humans to be a part of a group and to rally around a cause or effort is strong. It is not wrong to support and affiliate with a church group. We need, however, to refocus our attention on our PRIMARY loyalties and on where we are to ultimately seek spiritual direction.

The book of Revelation tells us where our true alignment as Christians ought to be. "And He [God] who sat there [a throne set in heaven] was like jasper and a sardius stone in appearance; and there was a rainbow around the throne, in appearance like a emerald...And from the throne proceeded lightnings, thunderings and voices. An there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. Before the throne there was a sea of glass like crystal."(Rev. 4: 3, 5-6). This awesome picture draws our attention to where a Christian's headquarters is.

"Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads." (Rev. 4:4). These elders, chosen by God, are His constant counsel in regard to His plans and His work.

"And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the book of life...And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire." (Rev. 20:12, 15). This book of salvation shows who we are to serve as Christians. We are to love and serve not only those currently in the book (God's elect), but also humans who potentially could be in this book of eternal life (all mankind).

It is God's TRUE headquarters where God receives input from the TRUE council of elders that we can take advantage of wherever we are on the earth. These elders impartially draw from the foundation of wisdom of God's word and ALWAYS follow God's lead. Additionally, our desire must be to serve ALL humanity and not only a man-made mailing or tithe list.

Fellow Christians, we are NOT sheep without a shepherd or children without a Father to lead us. God has not left us alone. Our first and foremost connection is to God and His BIG work from heaven and NOT to a particular church organization! We have ALWAYS had direct, instantaneous and personal contact with our true leader and with headquarters. It is by God's Spirit that we receive our objectives and what we are to accomplish. Contact, counsel and leadership from HQ is only a prayer away.

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"Now when the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." (Acts 2:1-4, KJV throughout). The New Testament church of God began with the twelve apostles and a gathering of disciples whose names are lost in history. Were these forgotten laborers important to God's work? What happened to them after Pentecost?

Many Christians focus their attention on the lives and works of the twelve apostles. Some may feel that the apostles, representing only 10% of the original 120 disciples, were the primary or only tool of evangelism God used powerfully. In the shadow of our attention given to these men that seem larger than life is a significant group of unknown workers for God. This forgotten majority, the 90% of the brethren at Pentecost, were to play a major role in God's plan of salvation to the world.

Some in the church have falsely assumed that the forefront of the dispersion of the gospel is a small, elite cadre of full-time supported church employees known as the "ordained." We have focused on highly visible "leaders" due to our desire to seek a champion for all facets of promoting the cause of the gospel. We seek someone to represent the truths we believe and to love others instead of doing so ourselves. We may also think that unless we perform a service or gospel outreach on a grand scale or with a dynamic, charismatic personality then it should not be done at all. If we are honest, many of us center our attention on larger than life leaders or unrealistic expectations to justify our inactivity. We desire someone to stand for us, when God commands that we individually stand for what He has taught us.

The unknown soldiers of the gospel that were at the Pentecost birth of the church stayed in Jerusalem for two years and apprenticed in the truth and service of Jesus. God allowed persecution of His church to remind the disciples of their responsibility in God's plan of salvation. It was these forgotten 108, along with many others, that left everywhere to spread the good news of the kingdom. It was this silent majority that spearheaded the dispersion of the gospel to the earth, while the apostles stayed behind in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1-4). These disciples carried with them the truth and the witness of God's working in their lives. They served, loved

and taught their way around the Roman empire. They helped build the church by using the foundational teachings of the apostles and receiving inspiration and direction from their leader Jesus Christ. God trusted these disciples and blessed their labors by using them to convert others, apart from the 12 apostles or Paul and Barnabas (Acts 11:19-26).

To believe our efforts will not matter is short-sighted. We do not have to sit in the back row of church and see ourselves as unworthy to participate in God's work. God recruits ALL His children to labor in the harvest and concerns Himself with the smallest service. Jesus does not forget even a cold cup of water given to those in need (Matt. 10:40-42). Spiritually, as ambassadors of Christ, we can refresh others by what we do and say. As active bearers of His word, God assures us of His work in and through us. God's word accomplishes ALL that He sets it to do (Is. 55:10-11).

We are in partnership with God to bring people into the Kingdom. It is to our glory to be part of the active majority, whose accolades come not from men but God. Let us remember that the forgotten of men are the remembered and blessed of God.

#### Attitude of a True Servant

One of the hallmark traits of a true Christian is an attitude of service and love toward God and fellow human beings. Jesus took the time in the last few hours of His life to stress serving others (John 13:12-17, KJV throughout). The Bible discusses two kinds of service we can offer. It is imperative we understand this difference in our Christian lives.

At His last Passover Jesus contrasted two types of service His disciples could perform and pointed them to the pinnacle attitude they were to achieve. With the suffering of the crucifixion before Him, Jesus emphatically declared to His students "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called 'benefactors.' But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves." (Luke 22:25-27). Jesus first draws our attention to the Gentile-like attitude of service. Those that acquire this attitude "serve" and are benefactors ("do-gooders" in the Greek), but they do it to exalt themselves and RULE those they "serve." The relationship is one from the top-down, of a person dictating how they will serve those considered "under" them. Jesus tells us NOT to do this! He commands us to view ourselves as equal to those we serve (v. 26). Our Savior then declares that being served is not God's idea of greatness. Jesus came to show us that true greatness is serving and loving humbly as He did.

We can either rule through serving or serve through serving. We run the risk of ruling through service whenever we selfishly dictate to others how we are going to serve them instead of asking them. Many leaders and ministers in the church have unfortunately succumbed to this tendency of human nature. They have acquired a view of service not unlike the "king to his subjects" Gentile-like attitude Jesus did not endorse. Those of us who behave in this fashion can use our "service" as a cloak to influence others to do our will and to justify exalting ourselves above those we serve. If a person does not appreciate receiving this type of "service" we may deem them unthankful, ungrateful, or unconverted. Their response to our dysfunctional view of serving can become justification for negative actions we may take against them!

The following example illustrates this difference in service attitudes. One way we could serve a dinner is to ask the person we want to serve what they would like to eat. We ask them what kind of main dish they would like, inquire about the vegetables they find delicious and find out what they would like to drink. We would also discover what their favorite dessert is and prepare it for them. Serving of the meal is at a time convenient for the person served.

In the second type of service however, we decide what to fix for dinner. We determine what main dish, drink, vegetables and dessert to serve. The time of the meal is convenient for us based on our schedule.

Which of the two ways of preparing dinner, both requiring the same preparation and effort, is the TRUE spirit of Godly service? The first kind of service seeks to discover the wishes of a person and strives to fulfill them (within the context of God's word). The wants of the served, not the one serving, is characteristic of the first example. The second example shows service from a self-determined point of view. It does not matter that the person served would not like the main dish prepared, would not like the drink we offered or could not eat the dessert we made. We may even make ourselves angry if the person served gives constructive feedback on our "service"! If those we serve from this self-dictated view do not like what we do, we think it's THEIR problem, not ours!

God is the greatest servant and knows what we need before we ask Him (Matt 6:25-34). Our service as true Christians must seek to learn how best we can utilize our skills and God given talents to strengthen each other and those not yet converted. God challenges us to search and fulfill the necessities of those we desire to help. We are not to please or exalt ourselves through misguided service that seeks to influence obedience to our will. The spirit of God beckons us to take hold of the opportunities of love before us and make a CHRISTIAN difference in the lives of others. In the light of God's great grace, mercy and love toward us our sacrifice of humble service is a reasonable response to our Savior. If we are willing, we can achieve the attitude of a true servant.

#### God's Government: A Synopsis

The church of God has had considerable discussion and debate on what we refer to as church or God's government. Analysis of Biblical texts, research papers, our church tradition, personal experiences, and a host of other factors has entered into our study. The following is a synopsis on this pivotal subject.

We need to first understand how God's government applies to God. How does God "rule" Himself? God governs Himself with His laws and always chooses to do right. His objective is to train us to do the same. He desires beings like Himself, which is why we have been created in His image (Gen. 1:26-27). We become His spiritual children by virtue of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:14-16) and will look like Him in the resurrection (Phil. 3:21).

God from the beginning wanted us to be individually responsible and accountable for our choices. He held Adam and Eve personally accountable for what they chose in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3). After Israel came out of Egypt, God presented to His people a choice. They had to choose between obedience to God's way of life with blessings or disobedience resulting in cursings. God did not force them into righteousness, but commanded them to choose (Deut. 30:11-20). In the New Testament our Savior emphatically stated to the disciples that the WAY the Gentiles rule is NOT the way he wished them to act. He did not want the disciples utilizing the structures and philosophies of the world (Luke 22:24-27) which do not encourage self-government with God as King. In the end-time God will destroy the governments of mankind that proceeded out of the Babylonian foundation of governance. Jesus will obliterate the Satan inspired system of human beings ruling human beings, which is hierarchy or top-down government (Dan. 2).

Our Father yearns for us to acquire the character to always choose His way of life and to rule ourselves using His words inscribed in our hearts (Heb. 8:10-11). God wants a "hierarchy of one," whereby through His Spirit, His word and our relationship with Him we build character and learn to rule over our choices. God ultimately governs His creation from the inside-out, not from the outside-in as humans and Satan try to do.

God does not use the dysfunctional, abusive family concepts from the world which some have brought into our fellowships under the misnomer "God's government." God desires EACH of his children to achieve their full potential of service and love, NOW dynamically, individually active in His work. TODAY we can build through His word and life's experience the character we will use for all eternity. Our Father wants to apprentice us for independence, not spiritual

dependency on man. His work desires to utilize ALL His children, not just a humanly devised subset known as the "ordained" or "leaders."

Our Father leads in His government by inspiration, not intimidation. Choice, not coercion establishes God's governance. He operates with compassion, not constraint. He encourages cooperation, not competition amongst His children. His government builds on TRUST and on relationships, not on suspicion and corporate titles and church offices of "authority." Our creator believes in the primacy of the individual, not in discarding a person because he or she does not fit a worldly corporate image of success. His way teaches us to use our expressions of creativity so that they do not conflict or compete with the creativity of others in His family. God encourages unity of the spirit, an outgoing love and a humble, obedient heart to Him and not uniformity or contrived unity founded on obeisance to a "leader."

God's government comes to EACH OF US not by an earthly headquarters or a minister, but by baptism and His Holy Spirit. God's emanates His will and government directly from His throne, the TRUE headquarters (Rev. 4). His BIG work utilizes the TRUE elders around that throne (Rev. 4:4). Those of different talents and gifts fill His true government, along with a variety of services working together through the unifying spirit of love. Our God's governance is the culmination of cooperation and love between independent free moral agents who chose to rule their lives under God's principles of existence.

In contrast the Devil's philosophy uses force, pain, coercion and punishment to influence people to choose his ways. If humans do not do Satan's will, he or his demons may possess them. We in the church sometimes use similar tactics such as coercion, penalties, and disfellowship to influence others to choose our will. Through ungodly hierarchical concepts we promote the belief that it is a more fearful thing to fall into the hands of a "leader," minister or headquarters than the hands of the living God.

God's way, however, guides and rewards people into choosing rightly and through His goodness leads us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). Love, mercy and reward are the basis of our creator's government. Fear, penalty and punishment are the basis of top-down governance concepts. The difference in governance is that God guides, but Satan punishes and possesses and human hierarchies wish to do the same. God's method of governance is the only one that works and produces the character He seeks!

Jesus, talking to His disciples on the Mount of Olives said "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled." (Matt. 5:17-18). Jesus came to reveal the intent behind God's laws and was the embodiment of his Father's words. This scripture delineates God's ultimate statement on government. At the completion of His plan God's written words will disappear. Remaining at the climax of the plan of salvation will be beings who are character imprints of God the Father, even as Jesus was. We will rule ourselves as God and Jesus rule themselves and choose as they choose. We will be more than beings IN the kingdom of God, we will BECOME the kingdom and government of God. This is our destiny in the inspiring and awesome plan of God.

#### Anchors of peace in the sea of life

In the last few hours of his life, Jesus made a promise to his disciples of the peace of mind they would receive from the Holy Spirit in their lives. Our savior said "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27, KJV throughout). We Christians yearn for more of the peace of God. We desire peace in our lives in the midst of change and trials both in the world and the church. How can we accentuate the peace promised by God? Understanding a

few simple principles and insights can gain us spiritual anchors for our soul in the midst of the sometimes tumultuous sea of life.

One anchor we can have is to understand that our true headquarters is in heaven and God's true elders are around His throne constantly (Rev. 4:3-6). By anchoring ourselves with God's heavenly home office we will not soon abandon our relationship with our Father. We will not quickly overturn ourselves by the fallibilities of those who create earthly headquarters for His work or claim to solely represent God and what He believes.

Another anchor comes from understanding that as humans and Christians we are fallible creatures who are attending the ongoing classroom of character known as life. God made us fallible and peace comes when we accept this condition of creation with the hope of learning the lessons and gaining the character God desires. Though we struggle with the pulls of human nature we need not fear any condemnation from God if we seek after Jesus our savior (Rom. 8:1).

We do not have to be tossed to and fro with every wind of doctrine. Debates on doctrine are as constant as the rising sun and will continue to Christ's return. Many of us wish that God would pour knowledge into us as He did with King Solomon. Wouldn't you like Jesus to show up at the end of your bed every month for one hour and straight-forwardly answer your doctrinal questions and personal problems face to face? How we wish! Seldom if ever can we defend ALL objections against a doctrine. If someone presents us with a new doctrine or a change of understanding of a doctrine, we should study the Bible and pray about it. We may have twenty Biblical reasons for believing a doctrine is true. If someone presents us with a fact or insight we cannot immediately answer, let's not toss away our belief based on one or two questions! There are times when we cannot answer all the objections brought against our beliefs. It is entirely all right to admit our human fallibility and not change beliefs overnight. Any change should only come after examination of the evidence and determination that what was formerly believed was not true. Our attitude and willingness to change when corrected is what God looks for in us.

When the storms of life assail us, we can gain perspective on our problems and climb out of our boat of despair by reaching out to bless the life of our fellow man. By serving others, particularly in THEIR time of need, we gain insight which will help us further weather the storm in our own life. Love is the gift we give to others that, like a seed planted, returns to us more than what is sown. Our faith and works will give us boldness when we meet God (1John 3:17).

A healthy sense of humor makes life more enjoyable. Humor helps us "lighten up." It pulls us back from obsessing and awfulizing about a situation and puts in perspective our difficulty. Humor aids and unburdens our mind to better work on the problem at hand. This is not to say that we should reduce every situation to frivolity. Humor however is God's gift to us to remind us not to take life as grimly serious as we tend to do. It helps us bail out our boat of woe when we are in the midst of a trial.

We can place our hopes, dreams, trials and troubles on the broad shoulders of our God and Savior. Periodically there are events in our lives and in those we love that remind us of our limitations as humans. God is available to take our cares (1Peter 5:7) and to help us gain depth of character from it. The sweet smelling incense of our prayers rises up before God (Rev. 8:3-4) and he takes notice of them. Petitioning prayer to God through Jesus and based on our relationship with Him avails much.

The most important anchor we can possess is to rest in the words and love of God. It is in His word that we find solace and strength. God made the entire universe for us. Jesus risked His existence and gave His life to forgive and heal us, and to show us how much He loves what He created. God did not spend all His creative powers on making us and in offering Jesus as a sacrifice for sin only to see us ultimately fail and not overcome sin. The purpose of our creation is to overcome and share eternity with our creator. God has a vested interest in us. He will do all He can to help us and guide us. God will not fail in His effort to bring His sons and daughters

into the kingdom of God and have an eternal relationship with them. God has much to lose if we were to fail. We can have peace knowing that our God loves us and that He takes the greatest interest in the pinnacle of His creative power, mankind. With the love of God in us by the spirit and a willingly heart the peace of God can grow and reign in our lives. We can rest in God's words, promises and love. Even as Jesus stilled the storm on the sea of Galilee (Mark 4:35-41), He is helping us quell in our lives our storms and learn to live in peace. These anchors, dropped in the sea of our lives, will help keep us stable and not capsize.

### The Apprenticeship of God

Jesus had just completed training those that would later help spread the gospel to the world. Near the end of His earthly life He said to His students "You are my friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things I heard from My Father I have made known to you." (John 15:14-15). Jesus declared that the disciples primary training period had finished. They were beginning to receive their "graduation" from the apprenticeship of truth and love they had learned. The fullness of their graduation ceremony would come at Pentecost when they would receive the power needed to finally go forth and serve.

In our church history we have not done a good job motivating the brethren to take up their full responsibility as Christians and utilize the gifts of God's Spirit to serve and spread the gospel. We are extremely hesitant and reluctant to change due to a lack of trust in God's Holy Spirit in His people. We have a strong desire to build organizations, not character.

Instead of apprenticeshipping members for service then graduating them, many are content to create members who maintain a spiritual dependency on a church organization or leader. It is unfortunate that while Jesus treats all of us as friends, brethren who graduate to further growth as Christians find leaders and churches who still wish to treat them as servants, not friends. The practical application of apprenticeship is greatly lacking in our fellowships.

What can we do to apprentice and help the process of graduating the church for service? First we must realize that EACH Christian is to be a one-person advertisement for the kingdom of God. Second, making mistakes and taking risks are a part of the learning and growth process in becoming more proficient servants. The church of God need not fear this and ought to encourage brethren to extend themselves in this area. When brethren do make mistakes, we should not use it to justify failure and abandonment of our goals but rather as another lesson that improves our character of love on God's road to eternal life.

Third, instead of trusting in human direction of God's people we ought to ask God to help us trust Him to guide His people. Fourth, those that consider themselves "leaders" in the church need to acquire an attitude of someone who apprentices, not rules or baby-sits, God's people. Leaders would benefit by "putting on the clothes" of the lowliest member of their congregation and sitting in the back row of church to learn the foundational attitudes needed to implement an apprenticeship program.

The Pentecost of Acts 2 was God's graduation of His first 120 teachers. They in turn apprenticed other disciples. Unfortunately, they failed to heed God's admonition to go into all the world and bear witness of God's message and His work in their lives. God allowed persecution and scattering (Acts 8), His graduation and "wake up" call to His children, to motivate them to fulfill their calling as Christians. We in the spiritual organism known as the church of God are already scattered, but we can do much to enhance our spiritual strength by apprenticeshipping. It is time for us to expand and fulfill our destiny as God's elect.

### The Neglected Gift: Being Single

The church has written and spoken much about the various gifts of the Spirit such as wisdom, faith, healing, tongues and so on (1 Cor. 12:4-11). We have discussed at great length the gifts of responsibility of apostles, evangelists and teachers (Eph. 4). The gift of being single

and serving God, however, is a gift that has virtually been absent in our sermons and discussions in the church.

What is your perception of single people in the church? Is singleness like some "disease" that only marriage can cure? Are single people merely half-complete jigsaw puzzles, desperately searching for their "other half" to "complete" them? Can singles be a powerful force in the church for service and love?

Recently I thumbed through a reference publication called the "family album" from a once large Sabbatarian church from the 1980's. It contained pictures of those in the "ordained" ministry and leaders of the church. Browsing through the book, I noticed that single people were almost ABSENT from the pictures. I found one or two single people serving the church whose mate had died. Unfortunately, only one or two additional photos of either a male or female who were single their entire life were in this book. How sad!

The apostle Paul called being single a gift of God (1Cor. 7: 7-9). He later states "But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things that belong to the Lord-how he may please the Lord. But he who is married cares about the things of the world-how he may please his wife. There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world-how she may please her husband." (v. 32-34).

Single people, whether at one time married or not, offer to their fellowships the undistracted devotion of mind and strength for service that comes from concentrating their lives on pleasing God. Singles, because they do not spend their energies on the maintenance of a relationship with their mate and family, can devote themselves entirely to living holy lives and to caring relationships with others.

It would be wise to include singles more in our activities in the church. Our fellowships should teach single people to be content in the state they are in and serve God's church instead of tying to get them married. If we do this then if someone decides to marry it is out of outgoing love and strength of character rather than selfishness, a desire for acceptance or the belief that marriage will "make" you happy. Unmarried people need encouragement and confirmation that they are a vital part of the congregation and not "loose ends" in the church. Lastly, let us point unmarried people to the two greatest servants in the New Testament, Jesus and Paul, who were both single (Paul, who may have been married at one time, was single during his entire ministry). These are role model singles can look to for inspiration.

Being single, Christian and "married" to God is one of the highest callings God can give. Singles are one of the untapped resources, a hidden treasure in our fellowships that we are to unearth and encourage to reach out and give of themselves to the glory of God. Being single can be a dynamic and joyful experience, a life of opportunities and expanding vistas of giving oneself in outgoing concern to others. Dedicated singles are one of God's gifts to His church. It is now up to us to accept this gift.

#### What is the secret to unity?

Do you wish there would be more unity between brethren in the church? Do you yearn for an atmosphere of mutual respect, love and cooperation? Do you desire to draw from the strength, gifts and character of your brothers and sisters in the faith?

We earnestly seek togetherness but seem unwilling to pay the price to achieve it. We yearn to have the barriers breached yet refuse to open our arms. We look across to our brethren not in our fellowship through the fences we build in our organizations and wonder why they are distant from us. We cry out to God and fast for a bond of fellowship while mixing the mortar of the bricks to erect our own "middle wall of partition" (Eph. 2:14) between "us" and "them." We sigh and cry for something to be done by someone, somewhere, somehow, yet fail to see where the true responsibility for unity lies. We curse the darkness of separation, but will not ourselves strike a match to light a candle.

We need to ask ourselves a tough question. Do we love the church of God, that spiritual organism that transcends the artificial, man-made boundaries of human organizations and human nature? Or is our love filtered through the organizational-colored glasses we put on ourselves?

Our Savior's last prayer with His disciples stressed true unity. Jesus prayed "Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are" (John 17:11, KJV). Jesus went on to say "And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one" (v. 22). Our formula for oneness of mind cannot be found in the philosophies and structures of the world for we are to be not OF the world even as Jesus was not (v. 15-16). Jesus did not pray that the Father aid us in constructing a working relationship between leaders in various church headquarters to achieve togetherness. The only unity that matters is based on our individual connection to God through the Holy Spirit and the glory of love and truth Jesus gave to His church.

When was the last time you visited a church of God fellowship group outside the church organization you regularly attend? You may know the doctrinal stands of people in another church, but have you taken them out to dinner lately? Remember the last time you phoned, sent a card or letter, or visited the sick of someone you do not see every Sabbath? Do you receive the newsletter or tapes of fellow Christians in the church of God striving, like yourself, to understand the perfect will of God? It is through these seemingly small acts of kindness, caring and love that we tear down walls of separation and build bridges of understanding and relationships.

What about differences in comprehending what is the truth of God? Doctrinal disagreements have and will exist to the time of Christ's return. Many doctrines DO matter. No one should recant their convictions based on the Bible for the sake of some common denominator of belief. Our passions however must not blur the vision of being friendly toward those in the household of faith. If we are strong in what we believe we need not worry of being "tainted" by a view different from ours. We can maintain our integrity of belief and STILL be kind to others. Of course, there may be something we can learn from those we visit! Differences in understanding exist and it is our challenge to create and maintain friendships in this background. It is therefore imperative that we see the big picture and love not only our fellowship subset of the body of Christ, but the whole church of almighty God written in the book of Life (Rev. 3:5, 20:12).

In the resurrection there will be no church corporate banner to fly, no human headquarters to rally to, no multiplicity of groups in existence. There will be only you, me and the rest of God's elect He has collected over the millennia.

What is the secret to unity? We know that a measure of unity, love and brotherhood exists in the church of God when WE sow the seeds of service and cooperation. We must submit ourselves to God's Holy Spirit and be tenderhearted toward each other. The church is as unified as your actions dictate. Oneness with our brethren in the faith, in whatever fellowship or organization they attend in, begins with ONE. Unity begins with YOU.

#### The seed, the sower, the gospel and home fellowships

The church of God is experiencing an explosive growth in home fellowship groups. This trend will no doubt continue and enlarge over the next several years. Members of these new house churches, many of which came from larger church organizations, wonder what their roles and responsibilities are in spreading the gospel. Brethren grapple with this question against a backdrop of leaders in larger churches deriding this new movement of God's people. Their chief criticism lies in the belief that small fellowships do not do "the work." Some ministers feel that a home fellowship's role is at best irrelevant and at worst a hindrance to those "truly" active in God's great commission delivered to His people (Matt. 28:16-20).

In an overlooked statement by Jesus and the words of the apostle Paul we discover the responsibilities local fellowships bear. Jesus, talking to His disciples after a discussion with the women at the well in Samaria said "Do you not say, 'There are still four months and then comes the harvest'? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" (John 4:35, NKJV). Jesus goes on to declare "And he who reaps receives wages, and gathers fruit for eternal life, that both he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together. For in this the saying is true 'One sows and another reaps'. I sent you to reap that for which you have not labored; others have labored, and you have entered into their labors" (v. 36-38).

Notice that the disciples were sent to harvest that which they did not sow or plant! It was the righteous men and women that toiled before them, and the words and deeds inspired by God and written in the Old Testament that sowed the seed of truth (1Peter 1:10-12, Acts 15:21). The disciples were not the first to enter into the harvest field of the world. They did not personally know the workers that came before them. God's work is one where laborers expend their efforts at various times in the field.

The apostle Paul offers us insight into how God distributes jobs in His work. Paul, in correcting the Corinthian church not to have contentions, said "Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." (1Cor. 3:5-6). He goes on to state "So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor." (v. 7-8).

Paul was stressing that all workers in God's work are critical to the successful implementation of God's plan of salvation. ALL are to cooperate to reach a common goal whether they plant seeds of truth or later water by encouraging spiritual growth in others. Each person who puts his hand to the plow in God's work is rewarded according to the effort they exert.

A significant contributing factor to the confusion and criticism about responsibilities in the gospel derives from an obsession with numbers. The number of members or ministers we have, the moneys we collect and the volume of requests we receive through media outreach are some of the figures used to verify who "really" is active and producing in God's work. We must be cautious however not to put greater faith in numbers than in God's plan. Noah, a preacher of righteousness, taught God's way for 120 years and gained not one convert. Many of the righteous prophets of old did not live to fully see the fruit of their labors (1Peter 1:10-12). Regardless of numbers we must never overlook our Christian calling and commission. The manifestation of the ultimate fruit of our efforts may not come until the future.

Home fellowships can play a dynamic, rewarding role in the commission to spread the gospel Jesus gave His church. It may be our skills and talents lead us to be sowers of God's truth in the soil of the mind of another whom He has prepared to accept His word. We may be waterers, encouraging others on their road to accepting Jesus as their Savior before their baptism or giving spiritual nourishment to those already converted. We may also labor as harvesters who gather the fruit of the sower and waterer into God's church. God however reserves for Himself the ultimate gathering of the harvest of souls at His resurrections (Matt. 13:24-30, 37-43; Rev. 20).

Whether sowers, waterers or harvesters, all Christians are fellow laborers and contributors to God's great work. Our Father has promised us a reward for using our talents in whatever job He has given us. Since we are in the "last days" before Christ's return, it may be that the sowing and watering of some home fellowships do not bear fruit until the Great Tribulation. At that time, an innumerable multitude will accept Jesus as their Savior, repent and turn to God (Rev. 7:9-17). May God help us awaken to our high calling in Jesus, to take our

royal priesthood seriously (1Peter 2:9-10) and boldly enter into the fields of the lives of His greatest creation, mankind.

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