

Do we adhere to the 'unity of the spirit'?

By Craig M White

V 1.2

"... with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, **eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit** in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call ..." (Eph 4:2-4 - ESV)

Introductory Remarks

How can Church of God members live in harmony with different opinions without having to compromise their beliefs and doctrines?

Are the differences in opinions serious or small? Are they really major or in effect minor? Are they fundamental to Christianity; major doctrines; points of doctrine; or policies and guidelines that some propel and teach as doctrine?

In Ephesians 4:2-4 quoted above, the Greek word for *unity* is *henotēs* which possesses a connotation of oneness or harmony – something which Christians can practice and experience. The sense is that this sort of unity is provided by God's holy spirit working with, in and through us – in the service of others. This unity can be undermined by Christians if not carefully crafted and utilised. The spirit does not automatically inspire one or control the situation. It comes from mature practice and decision-making – in other words by one building character.

Paul stresses the oneness among Christians in chapter 2 regardless of our ethnicity. Whether we be Israelite or gentile; male or female; free or slave; rich or poor, we are all one in Christ yet continuing to possess our racial, sexual and economic/class differences. We don't lose any of those. What we do lose is carnality and snobbery.

So, this Scripture is not referring only to the above, but also to behaviours and minor opinions that can be exaggerated out of all proportion.

What Commentaries Say

One of the problems that we encounter is that some people have "itching ears" (II Tim 4:3-5) which seems to indicate that they find silly novelties and weird ideas so interesting that they get emotional about them. For example extreme conspiracy theories; Nephilim; book of Enoch; bizarre theories; and non-scientific ideas on the 'lost' tribes of Israel.

Perhaps these ideas fill their needs or they are 'sucked into' something that is strange and titillating. In any case, they do not properly investigate or research these false doctrines found in newsletters and obscure websites.

Sometimes they use Sabbath meetings as the time to push their views, getting on the nerves of members, rather than discussing at some other time, in a placid manner. Church services is not meant to be a debating chamber.

They seem almost compelled to believe a lie rather than the great truths of Scripture including God's Plan for mankind. The truth itself can become secondary to them or polluted with rubbish. It then becomes poisonous and infectious, affecting the congregation and it often spreads and spreads.

Eventually it undermines the precious doctrines of the Bible that we hold dear.

However, the above category of weird nonsense is not what I am addressing – why would one want to tolerate such stuff? But someone who misunderstands matters and needs help should be provided with the support to do so.

For those with minor differences, quotes from the following commentaries assist in understanding what Paul is explaining:

"The unity of the Spirit - A united spirit, or oneness of spirit. This does not refer to the fact that there is one Holy Spirit; but it refers to unity of affection, of confidence, of love. It means that Christians should be united in temper and affection, and not be split up into factions and parties. It may be implied here, as is undoubtedly true, that such a unity would be produced only by the Holy Spirit; and that, as there was but one Spirit which had acted on their hearts to renew them, they ought to evince the same feelings and views. There was occasion among the Ephesians for this exhortation; for they were composed of Jews and Gentiles, and there might be danger of divisions and strifes, as there had been in other churches. There is "always" occasion for such an exhortation; for:

(1) "unity" of feeling is eminently desirable to honor the gospel (see the notes on [John 17:21](#)); and,

(2) there is always danger of discord where people are brought together in one society. There are so many different tastes and habits; there is such a variety of intellect and feeling; the modes of education have been so various, and the temperament may be so different, that there is constant danger of division. Hence, the subject is so often dwelt on in the Scriptures (see the notes on [1 Corinthians 2ff](#)), and hence, there is so much need of caution and of care in the churches.

In the bond of peace - This was to be by the cultivation of that peaceful temper which binds all together. The American Indians usually spoke of peace as a "chain of friendship" which was to be kept bright, The meaning here is, that they should be bound or united together in the sentiments and affections

of peace. It is not mere "external" unity; it is not a mere unity of creed; it is not a mere unity in the forms of public worship; it is such as the Holy Spirit produces in the hearts of Christians, when it fills them all with the same love, and joy, and peace in believing. The following verses contain the reasons for this." (*Barnes Notes on the Bible*)

"Ephesians 4:3. **σπουδάζοντες τηρεῖν τὴν ἐνότητα τοῦ πνεύματος**: *giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit*. Further description of the mutual forbearance in respect of the *inward effort* required, but introducing also the larger, fundamental idea of *unity*. **σπουδάξω**, which conveys the idea of *exertion*, is better rendered "giving diligence" (RV) or "earnestly striving" (Alf.), than "endeavouring" (AV). **τηρεῖν** = *keep*, in the sense of maintaining with watchful care; suggesting also that what is to be *kept* is something already in our possession. **τοῦ Πνεύματος** is the gen. of *originating cause*, = the unity which the Spirit produces or works, and here the oneness in feeling, interest and purpose which is appropriate to the oneness in doctrine and privilege whereof the readers are immediately reminded." (*Expositor's Greek Testament*)

Perhaps, in some cases, those with an alternative view may be correct. But can they not be patient and see if investigations and research verifies their positions?

They can discuss the matter and have others look into it without being divisive and leading members away from the body, thus contributing to the scattering of the flock.

However, some just argue over points of doctrine raising them to major doctrinal level or as if they were a fundamental belief, thereby fomenting division. Sometimes they just bang on and on and on over the point of doctrine, becoming bitter and attacking the church and leaders (some deceased) in a disrespectful manner and tone. Often exaggerating this or that, making false claims about it.

It is also not just what they say; or even their constant harping on about it non-stop; it is the way they talk about it – they are attacking, accusative, abrasive and off-putting.

Their approach is divisive and is not one of peace but fruits of the flesh (strife, dissension and party spirit – see Galatians 5:16-24).

So, I iterate, some doctrines are downright weird or heretical, for example that the *Book of Enoch* is inspired or spiritual in some way. They have "itching ears" (II Tim 4:3) for all sorts of nonsense and weird ideas. Even crackpot ideas that they somehow take seriously.

But what I chiefly address herein is how to handle minor matters and differences.

Points of Points of Points of Doctrine

When we look down the centuries of what history we have concerning sabbatarians, it is clear that they didn't have our knowledge today on a wide range of technical areas that helps to

inform us of various aspects of the Bible. Knowledge has increased in linguistics, history, archaeology, figures of speech, chiasms etc with vast resources at our finger-tips which have assisted us to grow in doctrinal understanding (see Daniel 12:4). Such as Bible dictionaries, commentaries, lexicons, maps etc etc.

There was an enormous increase in knowledge within the sabbatarian and Church of God communities the past century or so as a result of these resources. Are we grateful for that or squabble over points of points of points of doctrine? Or if not squabble, give enormous weight to points that can become abrasive and divisive if we do not handle it properly in the 'unity of the spirit.'

This is how I personally see it – let us use Pentecost as an example in a hierarchy of understanding. It appears that if we were to assemble a hierarchy of behaviours and beliefs, we would probably result in coming to something like the scale or rankings below, or similar:

1. Love of God
2. Commandments (which are one aspect of His love)
3. Sabbath and Holy Days
4. Pentecost
5. How to observe it
6. When to observe it
7. Typologies associated with the day
8. The history behind it
9. Etc

The typologies (possibly 7th in this scale) are important of course, but no where as near as important as keeping it in love and unity. Putting too much stress on a point can become abrasive - or can be useful and uplifting. It depends on the spirit/attitude behind it and how it is managed. So, the person postulating their view has to do it in the right way.

For instance, we are blessed to have been revealed the holy days via the Church of God – constantly having swipes at it (and I don't mean at abusive ministers) does not help the cause.

If one had the time and inclination, one can look at the other view to understand where the person believing in the other view 'is coming from.'

For example, where I can, I read the other viewpoints such as those who are opposed to the modern identity of the British-Israel doctrine. By doing this I:

1. Am less emotional in my interactions with others
2. Patient and listen to what the other person is saying without jumping in and being abrasive and rude, causing tensions
3. Able to perceive why they believe what they do
4. Endeavour to find any errors, gaps or short-comings in my beliefs and fill them in
5. Am able to fine-tune and calibrate the doctrine as a result
6. Able to follow up the references in the works involved which can and do lead to further discoveries assisting with the doctrine.

People need to be mature and learn to discuss matters without having to be divisive or to renounce one's own beliefs.

Of course we are all different and one size, so to speak, does not fit all.

Rather, I refer to difference in opinion within the Church's understanding. Note also that some make too much of **points** of a doctrine so that it becomes abrasive about the issue that it can be irritating and even divisive.

Doctrines, policies, guidelines and statements

It should be pointed out that sometimes members and ministers have mixed up doctrines with policies, guidelines. This has led to different interpretations, policies, implementation methods, views and so on in different congregations or regional areas. Even counselling for marriage differed from minister to minister.

This confusing of doctrines with guidelines etc needs to be unravelled so that we understand the differences and how they should be handled:

- **Fundamentals** – these are the most critical and important truths that are important for salvation and Biblical understanding. They are regarded as eternal truths upon which all other doctrines and policies hinge;
- **A doctrine** – a basic or major belief or teaching that is proclaimed or taught by a group. It can be enforced by policy or taught as something one should strive to believe and practice.
- **Sub-doctrine** – a component of a doctrine. For example, a doctrine may be that there are Church eras. A sub-doctrine would attempt to identify groups that make up each era. From that there can be smaller components and even sub-components making up the sub-doctrine. In turn a series of sub-doctrines compose a doctrine.
- **Policy** – an overall approach, action or means to achieve an outcome. A policy is not a doctrine nor is it an eternal truth. They can change with time and society. They should be published for all to see and know, otherwise some individual ministers implement whatever they want and back each other up regardless of what head office or leadership teaches.
- **Guideline** – these are general rules or advice or thoughts on how to do something. They are not enforceable.

Turning policies and guidelines into doctrines or even fundamentals and enforcing them was not something Herbert Armstrong taught or wanted and there is no proof whatsoever that is what he intended. Sometimes he would make a passing comment on music, dress or other personal preferences – at no stage did he ever suggest or want these to be enforceable doctrines or “thus sayeth the Lord” – but certain ministers did, and they had no right to do so. If a member

attempted to back up the official Church's position against opponents of the position, they would be accused of something or have something pinned on them; and a negative report sent into the regional director or equivalent on you and report whatever they wanted behind your back. You would never see the report and have a chance to stand up for the truth. If you survived your name was mud. If you were pushed out, it was extremely difficult to get back in. But it meant one less person resisting the oppressors and who could report to headquarters.

The fruits in some congregations were a cold, cliquey, stifling environment built on fear and intimidation – where is the love in that?

Concluding Remarks – Doctrine does matter

Of course, we must hold on to the Truth and not compromise with it. But can we not be kind, patient and be able to prove and articulate our views? We may not always be successful, but it behoves us to try.

For rejecting someone who has minor differences or has not yet arrived at a position of understanding is not Christian. But the other person must also be courteous and patient and kind.

You see, if we don't have the right attitude toward today's brethren, then how are we to get on with those of previous centuries we meet in the resurrection who had even less understanding than we do today? But perhaps their behaviours were better!

All doctrines matter; but what of the doctrine of peace; or hospitality; or graciousness (instead of abrasiveness)?

Practice the unity of the spirit and you will find that peace will eventually result (Ps. 133:1; John 17:21; ICor 1:10; Eph 4:4-6).

[NB: read the attached article *How God Desires to Be Worshipped—Revealed at Shechem for the Church*, which delves into this subject, albeit from a different perspective]

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Our purpose and desire are to foster Biblical, historical and related studies that strengthen the Church of God's message & mission and provides further support to its traditional doctrinal positions

How God Desires to Be Worshipped—Revealed at Shechem for the Church

By Lee Lisman

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[How God Desires to Be Worshipped—Revealed at Shechem for the Church – The Gospel Unveiled](#)

This article has been written particularly for those who are attending one of the many breakaway churches from the old Worldwide Church of God along with other Sabbath keepers with a similar WCG background who may be simply staying at home.

In Part 1 we saw how, apart from Jerusalem itself, Shechem was the most important city in Israel's history. It was where Abraham first went when he came to the land of Canaan and there God promised to give his descendants the land. It was where all of the sons of Jacob (including Joseph) chose to be buried. It was where all of Israel gathered twice under Joshua to hear the words of the law read, the blessings and the cursings at the foot of two mountains and for them to make a covenant to continue in God's ways. Shechem was also a city of massacres, first at the hands of Simeon & Levi and hundreds of years later at the hands of Abimelech. It was also a city of repentance where the sons of Jacob, after the slaughter of the men of Shechem, buried their idols and hundred of years later the children of Israel under Joshua buried theirs. Shechem was also a city of divisions— not just during the times of the massacres, but this was where all Israel gathered only to divide under Rehoboam and Jeroboam. Jeroboam then resided at Shechem.

Jesus chose this very location to reveal to the Samaritan woman at the well that He was the Messiah and told her how God really wants to be worshipped in spirit and in truth— not any way or location as man sees fit. When His disciples returned to the scene at Jacob's well they marveled when they saw Jesus talking to her and even she wondered why He was even speaking to her "for Jews have no dealings with Samaritans" (John 4:9). When His disciples saw the men of Shechem coming to them in the fields, Jesus told His disciples, "Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!" (John 4:35). **The historical divisive "us vs. them" attitude which existed during the days of ancient Israel and among the 1st century Jewish people had to end.** It would take several years after the church began for the gospel to be preached to the Samaritans and then later to the gentiles. Still, in the hearts of some brethren, the "us vs. them" attitude among the Jewish brethren and gentile brethren continued on for decades. Even among brethren in the gentile church at Corinth, the "us vs. them" divisive attitude existed— "I'm of Paul," "I'm of Apollos," "I'm of Cephas".

The lessons learned from Shechem are also for us today in all of the churches of God, especially for those brethren who are attending congregations where many there were once part of the old Worldwide Church of God (WCG). The lessons are also for brethren who are no longer attending Sabbath services with anyone. There are times when we all need to spiritually step away in our minds to reexamine how we are worshipping God along with the relationships we have with other believers who are a part of the greater body of Christ. We should make sure that the "us vs. them" attitude that existed in ancient Israel and in the 1st century churches of

God doesn't continue on among any of us who today are part of what Paul called in Gal. 6:16 "the Israel of God".

Examining ourselves in how we worship God and our relationships with other believers first begins with drawing close to God in prayer and humbly seeking His will and understanding—looking at everything from His perspective. We need to "think outside the box" so to speak as God doesn't reside in a box. The actual teaching of Christ at Shechem was that God desires to be worshiped in spirit and in truth in a relationship that transcends all religious human trappings. He is not in a box, on a mountain or a place where our access to Him is through other human beings at a temple. Our Father is not someone we draw near to once a week at the sanctuary or every few months on a holy day in a pilgrimage festival at the Temple. Through Christ Jesus we now have access to our heavenly Father and can daily come before our Father's Throne. We call Him *Abba*, Father. Emanuel, God with us, is here. Every day He sees you, He loves you and He watches over you. The very hairs on your head are numbered and He provides for you. God *personally* called you (it wasn't a conference call). Your heavenly Father loves you, He leads you and He teaches you as He instructed any father to do. So each day you should commune with your Father as shown in Deut. 6:7 "...when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up". **Your Father daily wants that personal relationship with you and He desires to be worshiped in spirit and in truth.**

Jesus told the woman at the well that it's not about this location or that one, but about God our Father who doesn't reside on a particular mountain or in buildings made by human hands (Acts 7:48). It's not about where you go, but who you are and as a new creature in Christ the growing relationship you have with Him. We are part of the body of Christ and belong to Him. We already know this and that the church isn't a building, but it is the saints or called out ones. You don't go to church, you *are* the church. Along the same lines, we also know that people may ask us, "What church do you belong to?" We aren't supposed to belong to a church. We belong to Christ and are part of His body, which is not the "corpus" of a corporation or a church organization. You and I weren't baptized into an organization of men, but into the body of Jesus Christ, accepting Him as our personal savior. Unfortunately, some brethren today can be subconsciously behaving as though they were baptized into a church organization and they feel that they somehow belong to a particular church. While they recognize other church groups as technically being part of the greater body of Christ, they have never even considered occasionally visiting any other congregation outside of their own acronymic XYZ type of Church of God for they are committed to only be with brethren who are attending what they consider to be for them "the best (or most compatible) church of God." There are also other brethren who, apart from health or distance reasons, are choosing to just stay at home each Sabbath and not venture out to visit any church of God congregation.

For the remainder of this article and the following one we're going to look at what has happened and is happening among many brethren who were once part of the old Worldwide Church of God (WCG). We'll see the historical reasons for the distancing of ourselves from one another and I'll blend in my own personal experiences and lessons learned. **While visiting other churches of God isn't something each of us *must* do (we all have different personalities and gifts), it helps to understand what may be making us hesitant or reluctant to do so or what might be keeping many of our brethren away from even attending any church of God. The conclusion is**

that we should try to look at our relationships with our brethren from God's perspective and not our own or what seems comfortable to us.

Over the years, whenever I occasionally go to visit any of the independent churches of God (not any with actual heretical teachings) or visit any of the various somewhat more centralized ones which are usually identified by their acronyms, I found brethren there who love God and an accepting ministry who love the brethren. Yet still, while almost all of them basically have the same beliefs and acknowledge other church of God groups as being part of the greater body of Christ, I find that most of the brethren in each group will only actually see one another at weddings or funerals. The differences between them are so minuscule I sometimes feel like the character Gulliver (in the book *Gulliver's Travels*) among the Lilliputians who are arguing over which end of the egg should be opened first ("us vs. them"). The actual differences among the brethren in the NT churches (including those 7 churches in Revelation 2 & 3) were 10 times greater than what many of the various churches of God have now, but we are too often known by our intolerance and divisions instead of our love for one another.

We are all part of a ministry of reconciliation which, through love and example, should also include a reconciliation with one another. There are brethren, however, who might even be living in the same neighborhood and shopping at the same grocery store looking for matzo crackers before the days of Unleavened Bread, but they don't even know each other exists. There are brethren in the various independent and more centralized churches of God congregations who are driving 45 minutes in opposite directions to Sabbath services while passing each other on the highway to go to their respective congregations singing, "we are not divided, all one body we; one in hope and doctrine, one in charity...." **In reality, while most brethren acknowledge brethren in the other churches of God to be as it says in Eph. 2:19 "fellow citizens of the saints and of the household of God", they will usually have nothing to do with each other as they are attending what is in their own minds to be "the best church of God" (or the most compatible one). Even old friends from years gone by don't really have peace with one another.** They only have a type of truce as they avoid seeing each other (out of sight, out of mind). This should not be the case. There are also probably thousands of brethren out there who, apart from health or distance reasons, are choosing to just stay at home each Sabbath and not attend anywhere. For some of those staying at home this can be because of past actions made by an overbearing, unloving WCG ministry, two thirds of whom back in 1995 lead their family and friends back into orthodox Christianity. Today many of these brethren who are staying at home want nothing to do with organized religion, especially anything resembling the past "government from the top down" practice of any church organization. You may even be wondering "what ever happened to so & so?" Some may have wondered the same thing about me as I have about them.

For me personally, I've had to look at myself in the mirror and change my attitude toward other ministers and brethren in various church groups. For two decades my primary source of a "Sabbath service" had been with my wife and a friend reading our Bibles together. Between 1995 and 2016 my wife and I at Passover time usually observed the Lord's Supper at home by ourselves. Apart from attending an independent Feast site, all through that time period we pretty much kept to ourselves. During those years I wrote articles for *The Journal* (while it was still publishing) and for this website. In 2017, after my wife and that friend had died, I found myself mainly just tuning into Sabbath services online from a couple independent churches of

God. I came to realize, however, that I had not been putting into practice the practical application of God's love toward His children. I had been occasionally giving sermons as a guest speaker at independent churches, but not living those sermons. Intellectually I knew that the church was to function as a body with many members, but I wasn't with a brother in Christ who may have lost his job nor was I visiting a sister in Christ who was suddenly taken to the hospital. I was practicing a form of spectator Christianity— not bearing any burdens of other brethren and so I was not fulfilling the law of Christ. If we aren't careful, we can set standards for fellowship so high that we can almost gravitate into being like spiritual hermits, figuratively staying at home to bury our talent and wait on the Lord. We are supposed to be active participants within a body of believers so when one member suffers we all suffer.

Imperfect as any body of believers might be, we are to be loving examples of salt & light. Those of us who have been staying at home each Sabbath should seriously ask ourselves, "What would Jesus do?" If you are currently staying at home each Sabbath, you may be learning a lot from your personal Bible studies or listening to messages online, but please reconsider what you are doing. Maybe it's time to get off the couch and begin making the practical application of what you know to be your true function within the body of Christ. Looking at my own situation, back in 2017 I saw that what I had been doing was wrong and therefore (in the greater Portland, Oregon area) I more frequently started attending services with other congregations. This included an independent group that, because of the distance between them, only met on the third Sabbath of each month in Woodburn, Oregon. I also later often attended with a new local Church of God, International (CGI) group in Kalama, Washington. As I was frequently traveling down to Southern California, where my aging mother lives, I also attended services there with brethren in various independent groups on the Sabbath and Holy Days. This also occasionally included the United Church of God (UCG) in Los Angeles where I had some old friends serving in the ministry there. As it happened, one time while visiting a UCG congregation with my sister in Orange County California, I met, then fell in love with and in 2021 married my wonderful wife Kerry Heesch, a widow who is a long time member of the UCG. Had I not stepped out of my comfort zone among the independent churches of God to visit a UCG congregation I never would have met her. While I'm now primarily attending with a local UCG congregation (although I'm not a member), Kerry and I will both still occasionally visit other Sabbath/Holy Day keeping churches of God.

In occasionally visiting other church of God groups on the Sabbath, I've found that in all of the churches of God, including the larger more centralized ones, that for the most part they have learned many lessons from past mistakes like those we all have made. Those in the ministry aren't perfect (none of us are) and they are still learning lessons, but they also aren't like many of the controlling ministers many of us have seen in the old WCG ministry of the past and we shouldn't from the sidelines stereotype them as such. The ones I've met truly love and serve the brethren. I would like to encourage brethren who are currently staying at home to visit on the Sabbath, even occasionally, other churches of God. Their locations can be found by going to websites like the Church of God Network. The same is true for those who have never visited a church of God outside of their current church organization. Notice, I wrote "visit", not "join". You or others in your congregation occasionally visiting another church of God isn't giving approval of an organization's past or present leadership decisions, but it's merely acknowledging and spending time with other brethren within the greater body of Christ, many of whom are old friends— friends you once went to the Feast with, maybe sang in the choir together, your children

played together and some were old college alumni or even are still Facebook friends. I would also like to encourage all of the more centralized churches of God to continue to have even more openness in their relationships with all brethren everywhere and be even more inclusive, like it was among those in the 1st century churches of God.

I'm not in any way advocating for brethren to do any kind of church hopping each Sabbath (going from church to church) and not mainly attending with a primary congregation. Any visiting should only be done occasionally. Nor am I advocating an ecumenical movement to form one large church like it used to be in the old WCG in the 1960's, 70's and 80's with congregations of 300 to 400 brethren. That number would have been an untenable number of people in the 1st century churches of God and it also greatly limits the opportunity for service many members now participate in along with the mentoring of young men & women that can now exist in today's smaller church of God congregations. Among the various churches of God, however, there shouldn't exist an "us vs. them" relationship between ministers or brethren in different groups. While there should be some organizational structure, we all should avoid the human tendency (with our good intentions) of going in the direction of exclusivity in our relationships with other brethren or ministers in different fellowship groups. After all, we are all brethren— not competing club members.

For myself, what I've learned in visiting many of the various churches of God is that it's very important to have a primary congregation where we each can function within the body of Christ as we have been taught in the NT. By the same token however, in our mobile society and our proximity to one another, it's perfectly alright to on occasion visit other congregations where old friends are or new ones are to be found. That's how, as a widower, I met my wife Kerry while visiting a UCG congregation. Let's face it, besides widows and widowers, there are also young ladies in their 30's fellowshiping in smaller church of God congregations which have a lot of older married couples and maybe only a few single men who may not be compatible with them for marriage. These young ladies probably won't meet "Mr. Right" by never visiting other nearby churches of God or only hoping to meet a special someone at a Feast site some 3,000 miles away from home. They and their brethren should feel free to *occasionally* visit other likeminded brethren regardless of any organizational differences. Visiting another congregation doesn't mean proselytizing, causing divisions or comparing ourselves among ourselves. Anyone visiting would be a guest. Col. 4:6 says, "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt..." . We are to be loving our brothers and sisters in Christ as we are loved by Him. The same is true for those who may be visiting our primary congregation. We are to love one another and express that love in word and in deed. As it says in Rom. 12:10 we are to "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another" . Likewise, a visitor/guest isn't to be seen as a prospective member for us to convince to join or be a part of what we consider to be a better church organization, but instead be treated as a beloved brother or sister-in-Christ.

When it comes to visiting other churches of God, I've found that sometimes it's the young people and not the old time members who feel more free to step out of their comfort zones to actually visit other churches of God. Many younger members aren't carrying the baggage of intolerance that existed for decades in the old WCG where visiting other congregations outside of what we called "the one true church" was strictly forbidden. These young adults were only children or not even born when various church divisions occurred and family or friends were separated.

Often times this wasn't because of heresy or major doctrinal differences, but over administrative differences which sometimes were driven by nothing but carnal human ego without any consideration for its affect on the brethren. Paul wrote in I Cor. 3:3 "For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you are you not carnal and behave like mere men?" For some of those who were children at the time those divisions occurred, the divisions they experienced back then were like a family being torn apart by divorce ("who do you want to live with, Mom or Dad?"). Many of these young people had lost their childhood friends, but today these young adults and teens are still keeping in touch. There are also some divisions between brethren that have continued on for decades because "once upon a time" almost 30 years ago one local church pastor and some brethren chose the newly formed UCG instead of going with the existing Global Church of God. This was usually because of some personality or administrative differences between men, many of whom have long since died or are now old retired men in their late 70's and 80's. So now today almost 30 years later a young lady in her 30's who is attending with the UCG dare not visit an LCG congregation or vice versa because once upon a time...? Is this "once upon a time" division supposed to continue for another 30 years with their children's children? I'm sure the angels in heaven must be shaking their heads in disbelief as they see the lengths some of God's people will go to avoid seeing one another. We as His people should instead turn our hearts toward one another in love and see ourselves as God sees us.

Thankfully however, there are some old time members who are doing just that and they feel comfortable occasionally visiting God's people in different congregations or at a nearby Feast site. They are peacemakers, building bridges between brethren. So are some of the internet websites such as the Church of God Network, The Bible Sabbath Association and others which encourage interaction between brethren. Many brethren from different church organizations or independent groups or those staying at home each Sabbath are also still friends on social media, such as Facebook. They pray for one another and encourage one another, yet many may still be hesitant to worship with one another because of past divisions among their respective church organizations or their "best church of God" is more conservative or is doing a better job in spreading the gospel than the others. While I'm not saying that as a Christian we *must* occasionally visit other churches of God, it may take some time, but if enough are moved by the Holy Spirit to *occasionally* visit another congregation, they would be like peacemakers throwing a rope across a divide while those on the other side are doing the same thing. If enough brethren are figuratively throwing ropes in each direction they would be building a bridge making it easier for others to cross over and have relationships among more of God's children.

Let's take an honest look at why some of us are not having loving relationships with other likeminded brethren outside of our particular church organization and why many brethren are choosing to just stay at home. Historically, there have always been divisions among some of God's people, even through acts of mistrust or questionable motives within the ministry. Such was the case that happened between Paul and Barnabas. Acts 15:39-40 reads, "Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cypress, but Paul chose Silas and departed...." Barnabas may have felt that Paul was saying untruthful and presumptuous things about Mark and that Paul was stubbornly insisting on having his own way. Paul may have felt that Barnabas was lacking sound judgement by insisting on taking Mark instead of someone like Silas. Yet years later we know that Paul never held a grudge against either Mark or Barnabas. There was no hardness of heart between

any of them. Sometimes when contentions are great and divisive it also takes time to heal those old animosities. Years later Mark was with Paul while he was in a Roman prison and was useful to him (II Tim. 4:11). Mark was probably also with Peter when Mark wrote the gospel account bearing his own name. Mark was a peacemaker and a bridge builder between brethren. In Col. 4:10 Paul sent greetings to the Colossian church from "Mark the cousin of Barnabas (about whom you received instructions: if he comes to you, welcome him)". Paul and Barnabas didn't come together to form one large mega-church or go out on another missionary journey together, but they recognized each other's ministry and encouraged brethren to welcome those with different ministries within the greater body of Christ. Though they had separate ministries they were still beloved brothers in Christ and the brethren loved them both.

Most of the boundaries today that keep brethren apart in the various churches of God aren't major doctrinal boundaries, but are only artificial ones created by men during times of sharp contentions (or even merely personality differences among those in leadership positions). This too often has resulted in a party spirit of "us vs. them" and prejudices that can continue on for decades separating the brethren. Paul taught against this type of thing in I Cor. 1:10-17. Being judgmental, stereotyping others and avoiding one another (out of sight, out of mind) can be a way of preventing any cognitive dissonance that can occur when brethren actually get to know one another. Avoiding one another can also be a form of quiet retaliation for what others might have said or done to us. The unintended consequences of church divisions or disagreements in church leadership is the separation of the brethren and their children from one another. We can see how this type of separation and avoidance can even have a damaging effect in physical families. There can be an overbearing mother-in-law not getting along with her daughter-in-law or uncles who aren't talking to one another because of something like "once upon a time" one brother sold the other brother his used car and 4 months later the transmission went out on the car. A heated argument ensued so now the uncles avoid seeing each other. The unintended consequences of these family divisions involves the children. Cousins are no longer playing with one another. Children can rarely see their grandpa. Everyone is avoiding one another because once upon a time something happened. The unintended consequences of physical family divisions also happens among our spiritual family members as well. We create an ongoing avoidance of one another or an "us vs. them" attitude. That ongoing "us vs. them" attitude and avoidance (out of sight, out of mind) was part of the tragedy exhibited in the city of Shechem's history. It was also exhibited in the 1st century churches between the Jews, the Samaritans, the gentiles and others following a particular human teacher with all of them comparing themselves among themselves. Even an apostle like Peter, along with many other Jews including Barnabas, got caught up in the cultural divide between the Jewish brethren and the uncircumscribed gentiles when certain men from the Jerusalem church came to Antioch. There Paul withstood Peter to his face (Gal. 2:11-14). Partisanship can even be exhibited politically in America today separating its citizens into different camps and this stereotyping partisanship has even spilled over into some of our churches. Some ministers may be subconsciously thinking, "I have absolutely no partisanship at all in my heart. I don't hate or look down on my old former companion and AC college buddy- I just don't want to see or have anything to do with him" (probably because of a once upon a time event).

Partisanship and stereotyping others is what Satan, the accuser of the brethren and the author of confusion, wants to see happen. He wants to promulgate the rumor mill, have brethren believe the worst about each other and turn brother against brother. He is a whisperer

separating chief friends and wants them to stay away from each other.(out of sight, out of mind). Paul asked the question we all need to ask ourselves in v-13, "Is Christ divided?". You see, it's not a question of your acknowledging brethren in other church organizations or independent groups or even those brethren who are staying at home as being technically part of the greater body of Christ, but it's about avoiding ever seeing them. If you as a father had 5 sons and daughters who acknowledged you as their father and each other as siblings, but they never actually spoke to one another or had anything to do with one another except for maybe briefly at a relative's funeral, how would that make you feel? How does our heavenly Father feel when we do the same thing? Heb. 2:11-12 reads, "For both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, saying: 'I will declare Your name to My brethren; In the midst of the assembly I will sing praise to You'". We can't call others brethren and treat one another as though were not.

We can have all kinds of "yeah, but..." excuses for not seeing other brethren, however, all of us, including those in the ministry, should look at our relationships with other brethren within the body of Christ from God's perspective and consider how He feels. It's not supposed to be about a church organization's official policy or our feelings or perspective, but about God's feelings and His perspective. We may sometimes find ourselves avoiding other ministers and brethren because of their past actions or inactions or there's a difference of opinion on how best to preach the gospel or we find other reasons to avoid them. We need to remember, however, that the love, mercy and forgiveness that Jesus taught on the sermon on the mount and the oneness He prayed for in John 17 weren't conditional upon "as soon as they admit they were wrong and I was right, then I'll forgive them, treat them like brothers and show them mercy and love." **Often our human reasoning and pride can get in the way of seeking God's will. We compare ourselves among ourselves when we should instead be pursuing the things that make for peace and edifying one another (Rom. 14:19).** When we look at ourselves in the mirror, I think we all have regrets over our own past actions or inactions during our sojourn to God's kingdom and we appreciate the great patience God has shown us, giving us time for repentance and growth. We've learned many lessons, have changed and we should allow for that change to occur in others even if that change isn't happening as rapidly as we think it should.

If today Paul could have written a letter to all of us in the various churches of God (including those brethren who each Sabbath are just staying at home like I used to do), I imagine he might have written to us as it says in Eph. 4:1-6 & vs. 31-32,, "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.... Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you". Paul also would have written to us what he wrote in Col. 3:12-15, "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful".

We are all to get rid of the artificial barriers keeping us apart and start behaving as true brethren the way Christ sees us. We are God's children and though we make mistakes, just as our children make mistakes with us, He still delights in all of us as He sees beyond the present time into our inheriting His Kingdom. We call Him *Abba* (Daddy) and if He is Daddy, then for Him we are His kids. Sometimes we can behave like kids arguing over certain toys or playing king of the mountain. I'm sure He is shaking His head at some of our antics or greatly saddened at other ones. Oftentimes we can also behave like insecure teenagers— always wanting to fit in, forming cliques and avoiding those who are sitting at the popular cheerleader table or other kids at the geek/nerd table. Oftentimes teenagers also think they know everything and they don't want to hear their dad's advice. Yet God, our loving Father, expects changes in us as we grow and mature in Christ. First we need to grow in the grace and knowledge of God our Father and His son Jesus Christ and let Christ's mind be in us— hear our Shepherd's voice. Phil. 3:15 reads, "Therefore, as many of us are mature, have this mind and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you." Usually, after teenagers become mature adults, only then do they understand and acknowledge their parent's wise advice. We were called to maturely have open minds toward His will and yet at the same time as little children have absolute trust in Him.

At one point in time God called each one of us to be part of His family and opened our minds to His truths. Our minds were opened to see the importance and relevance of the 4th commandment. Our relatives thought we were crazy when we started to observe God's Holy Days, stopped celebrating Christmas and stopped eating pork. Our minds were opened by His Holy Spirit to see these truths. We are His sons & daughters and are joint heirs of salvation with Christ. We are all God's children and should see each other as such. In His Father's house, Christ is not arranging abodes for us on separate floors so 10,000 years from now we can avoid running into someone who was once a part of the acronymic XYZ Church of God. He's not saying, "Now those who were in the UCG will be on this floor, COGWA members over there will be two floors down. LCG brethren, CGI brethren, those who were once with the Church of the Great God, those who stayed at home or supported this or that man's end time ministry, those in various messianic groups, those of Cephas, those of Apollos and others of my fold who none of them ever heard of, will all also all be on separate floors so they'll never have to see one another." Today, right now, He walks among our various candlesticks. We are His people and the sheep of His pasture. As such we are to reflect the love of God toward each other as we will be spending eternity together. Our names are written in the Lamb's book of life. We are His little flock. Jesus says we are to love one another "as I have loved you." That's a tall order! By example, we need to become peacemakers among all of God's people and avoid the "us vs. them" party spirit of Shechem that goes against the oneness prayed for by Jesus in John 17. We each should also reread I John 4:4-21 in prayer, including v-11 "Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another." As we are walking in the light we should have fellowship with one another (v-14).

Brethren, I realize this article is long (maybe even too long), but it is a very important subject that needs our full attention at this time. I'm breaking off here to create another part for you to read or listen to at your convenience. Part 3 gets into some of the reasons why many brethren are hesitant or reluctant to ever visit another church of God congregation and why others are reluctant to attend services anywhere. My purpose in writing these and other articles on my website along with my fellowship in any of the Sabbath/Holy Day keeping churches of God is to point my brethren to Jesus Christ, that we love one another as He loves us and we get back to the faith once delivered to the saints.

[emphasis mine throughout]