

**UNCOVERING THE PATTERN:
GOD'S WAY OF UNITY FOR DISCIPLES TODAY
KEITH DORRICOTT**

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PREFACE

This book is intended to be used as a Bible study guide, either by individuals or by groups, preferably with the guidance of a teacher knowledgeable in the subject. A few discussion and review questions are included at the end of each chapter.

The scriptural truth regarding God's way of unity for disciples today is an integrated pattern of teaching which can only be uncovered by careful Bible study. It is a truth which can easily be missed, and yet it is one which is central to God's purposes for us as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is hoped that the study of this book and the scriptures referred to herein will help many believers, both inside and outside the Churches of God in the Fellowship of God's Son, to understand and be convinced about this vital truth.

Scripture References

You may think that there is a very large number of scripture references throughout the text. But I hope you realize that this is the whole point of this book - to enable you to study these scriptures for yourself. Some scriptures are quoted right in the text, while only references are given for others.

The quotations are generally from the English Revised Version (1884). While it is not as common as several other versions, and uses 19th century English, I have used it because of its exactness. Just to give a couple of examples:

(a) The King James Authorized Version sometimes interchanges the words child(ren) and son(s), whereas these have quite distinct meanings in scripture. For example, I John 3:2 is translated "...now are we the sons of God", where the Greek word is "teknon" which means "children", which is quite different. The New King James Version has corrected this.

(b) In 1 Corinthians 3:9, the New International Version translates the word "husbandry" as "field", which loses the significance of the distinction between individual plants growing among weeds in the field (symbolically, the world) and plants in an enclosed cultivated garden.

The Old and New Testaments

It is important to point out how we should apply the two portions of the Bible in our study of them. The New Testament is what directly applies to us today; it is where we get our teaching. We are under the new covenant (testament). The Old Testament included different dispensations and introduced a different covenant, which has now been replaced. It is rich with illustrations to help us understand and appreciate our New Testament teaching, but its specific instructions are not always directly applicable to us today. For example, the tabernacle in the wilderness, and the subsequent temples in Jerusalem, were God's house in those days. But, as Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "the hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father" (John 4:21). However, as Hebrews tells us, that tabernacle and its service is "a parable for the time now present" (Heb.9:9); we can compare

it with the spiritual house and service that applies to us today to help us to understand it better.

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I. GOD'S PURPOSES ARE COLLECTIVE

A person's final words in this life are usually thought to be very important. We would expect this especially to be the case with the Lord Jesus Christ. In John chapter 17 we have a verbatim account of the Lord's personal prayer to His Father in heaven on His last night before Calvary. What was He praying for? He said, "I pray not for the world, but for those whom thou hast given me ... for them also that believe on me through their word" (v.9,20). We are included in that second category, if we have believed on Christ based on the testimony of the apostles as recorded in the New Testament. In other words, He was praying for us that night. And what was particularly on His mind? It was this: "that they may all be one ... perfected into one" (v.21,23). What was of uppermost concern to Him at that point was the unity of those who would believe. If it was that important to Him, it must be of paramount importance to us too.

To all of us as believers, our salvation was a momentous event. It totally changed our eternal destiny, and also our direction in our life. It made possible a living relationship with God and His Son, access to Him in prayer, and many, many other blessings. We value these greatly. But the more we look into God's Word as we grow as obedient disciples of the Lord Jesus, the more we realize that this salvation was just the beginning of a great journey. God has so much planned for us, if we want to follow all the way. And, not surprisingly, much of it relates to

what the Lord was praying for so earnestly that night - unity among us.

A. Can God be served “acceptably” by us just as individuals?

The Bible teaches that God's purposes for us today are ultimately collective. When God begins His work with us, He works with us as individuals (such as: choosing us, calling us, and saving us), but always with a view to our becoming part of His collective purposes. The Old Testament is an example of this, where the book of Genesis deals with several individuals (Adam, Noah, Abraham, etc.) in preparation for what follows; Exodus and all subsequent books deal with a collective people - God's chosen people, Israel. We can't fulfill God's desires for us apart from each other. We can't serve God fully alone.

Without minimizing in any way the blessings that come to us as individuals, if we focus only on these and stop short of fully realizing the collective purposes, we shall miss a large part of God's will for us. These are things which Hebrews 6:11 says “accompany salvation”. We shall also miss the full significance of the positions and work that Christ now has and which resulted from His victory at Calvary and His exaltation in heaven, since many of these pertain to these collective purposes.

It is primarily in these collective purposes that God receives the service He desires from believers today. They are not primarily for our benefit, although they do have blessings for us. They are primarily for Him, and that is the more important aspect of His divine purpose. It is therefore vital that we understand

what kind of divine service God considers to be “acceptable”.
For example:

“Ye ... are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy
priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable
to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet.2:5)

“Wherefore, receiving a kingdom which cannot be
shaken, let us have grace, whereby we may offer ser-
vice well pleasing to God with reverence and awe:”
(Heb.12:28)

We shall see later how these requirements are met today.

B. What are His collective purposes?

There are many examples in scripture of the individual bless-
ings of salvation being just a partial fulfilment of the full collec-
tive blessings that are available to believers. Scripture uses many
different metaphors in describing these. Let's examine some of
them:

(1) From new creatures to the Body of Christ

At our salvation we become “new creatures in Christ” (2
Cor.5:17); we have a new spiritual nature and become alive
to God. However, in addition, at the same time, whether we
are aware of it or not, Christ baptizes (immerses) us spiritually
in the Holy Spirit into “the Church the Body of Christ” (1
Cor.12:13; John 1:33). This is quite distinct from our water
baptism which may follow. The Church the Body of Christ is
an invisible, indivisible, spiritual union of believers with Him

and with each other. We become “members” of that one body, of which Christ is the head. This requires no action on our part. God wants, not just individual new creatures, but one spiritual body.

(2) From children to a people

At our salvation we become “children of God” through the new birth, through receiving Christ as our Saviour (John 1:12). But we also become sons and receive “the Spirit of adoption” (the Holy Spirit), who works to produce in us the character of sonship to God.

(Note that some translations, including the King James Authorized Version don't consistently differentiate between the words “child” {Greek: “teknon”} and “son” {Greek: “huios”}.) Being a “child” of God focuses on our spiritual origin, that we are born of God; being a “son” of God focuses more on our development in the likeness of God as we move towards our inheritance as His sons of perfect unity and glory with Him. Adoption means “son-placing.”

As sons and daughters of God, we become the “people of God”, and also brethren and sisters of one another, as these scriptures show:

“... they shall be my people ... I will be to you a Father, and ye shall be to me sons and daughters ...” (2 Cor.6:16-18).

“I will call that my people which was not my people
...There shall they be called sons of the living God”
(Rom.9:25,26).

And so becoming a child of God is just the beginning of a relationship that should culminate in all children of God becoming God's collective people. God wants, not just children, but a people for Himself.

(3) From sheep to a flock

At our salvation, we become Christ's “sheep” (a metaphor which would be especially well understood in Bible times). He, as the good shepherd, gives us eternal life (John 10:28). But sheep have a natural tendency to wander, to go their own way. God intends us to be gathered into one “flock” in one sheepfold, under Christ as our shepherd: “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also must I bring, and they shall hear my voice; and they shall become one flock, one shepherd” (John 10:16). [The “other sheep” are the Gentiles.]

The parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15 illustrates this. The sheep was in the wrong place; it should have been gathered together with the others in the fold. Christ is also the great shepherd, who gathers on the basis of the new covenant (Heb.13:20). And so, under His care, the sheep should not be apart; they should be together in the safety of the sheepfold. And so God wants, not just scattered sheep, but a flock of sheep for Himself.

(4) From holy ones to a holy nation

At our salvation we are set apart by God for Himself (that is, we are “sanctified”); we become “saints” (holy ones). But, in addition, God intends that these holy ones be united into a “holy nation” (1 Pet.2:9), to be one spiritual nation for Him among all the nations of the earth. Becoming and remaining this holy nation involves the continuing work of sanctification throughout our lifetimes. Sanctification is a work that God does and in which we also have a corresponding part to play. And so God wants, not just individual saints, but a nation for Himself.

(5) From plants to a garden

At our salvation, by receiving the seed of the Word of God by faith, which is preached in the world (the field), we become living plants, capable of bearing fruit (Matt.13:23,38). But God intends that those plants should be transplanted from the world into His enclosed cultivated garden, which He refers to as His “husbandry” (1 Cor.3:9 - not “field” as in the NIV), to be cared for by Him as the husbandman, or gardener. In that garden each plant will have its appropriate place and will bear its particular fruit so that the total garden will be pleasing to God, not like the field outside with its weeds and disarray. And so God wants, not just plants, but a garden for Himself.

(6) From disciples to a kingdom

At our salvation, when we acknowledge Christ as our Lord, we become His “disciples” (Matt.28:19,20), His followers. But God intends that these disciples enter and inherit the “kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22), which is a united group of disciples who are under the full authority of Christ in order that His will

might be done among them. And so God wants, not just individual disciples, but a kingdom for Himself.

(7) From stones to a house

At our salvation we become “living stones” (1 Pet.2:5). But these stones have no purpose by themselves. God intends that these stones be built up to be a spiritual house, a place for God to be at rest among His people (Acts 7:49) and to receive their spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet.2:5). He has placed Christ (who is a living stone Himself) as chief corner stone, as head of the corner of this house (which is different from His position as head of the Church which is His Body into which we can be built), to which we can be built in as we come to Him for this purpose.

God has looked for a place of rest among His human creatures since He finished His work of creation. This is not rest in the sense of relaxation, but rather the enjoyment of what He has worked for. He wants to have fellowship among a people who are His very own, who are holy as He is, and who are occupied in united service to Him. He cannot have that rest among different unrelated groups of people.

David in the Old Testament was one person who really appreciated the reality of God's house. For example, he said: “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple.” (Ps.27:4). And so God wants, not just individual living stones, but a house for Himself.

(8) From priests to a priesthood

At our salvation we are given the spiritual capacity to become “priests” to God, for the purpose of offering service to Him. But that is not a service that can be exercised individually. God intends that we become a “priesthood” to offer acceptable service to Him (1 Pet.2:5,9). He has appointed His Son as high priest for ever to receive our sacrifices and present them to Himself (Heb.5:6; 4:14). Christ is high priest to the priesthood. And so God wants, not just priests, but a priesthood for Himself.

(9) From believers to a community of churches

As believers, God also intends that we be baptized in water into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt.28:19) and gathered together into “churches of God” as the spiritual association in which to carry out these things, until Christ returns. These churches form a united community which is accountable to Christ (1 Cor.1:2,9; Rev.2:1; 1:20). And so God wants, not just scattered believers, but a community on earth for Himself.

These are nine examples which show that, while God always begins by dealing with us as individuals, He has more than that in mind for us. God's purposes are ultimately collective. But why is this the case?

C. Why are God's purposes collective?

(a) God's own unity

God Himself is a God of unity; oneness is integral to His nature: "The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut.6:4). Anything that is fragmented is contrary to His inherent nature. He cannot accept compromise or variance. (He always joins together what is the same, and separates what is different; He did it at creation for instance.) The Lord's prayer for unity in John 17 was not just that we would be united like the godhead, but united with the godhead: "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us" (John 17:21).

In Psalm 133, brethren dwelling together in unity is shown to be a condition of God's blessing (Ps.133:1,3). Because God Himself is one, those who are His own should also be one, with Him. This is the first reason why God wants to bring believers together.

(b) God's glory

This divine unity cannot be achieved by human effort. To the extent it is achieved, it is a proof of the work of God in us, not man, as human beings subject themselves to Him and separate themselves from everything that is contrary to Him. As this happens, the glory is God's, not ours, which is as it should be: "that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ" (1 Pet.4:11). That is why it is referred to as "the unity of the Spirit" (Eph.4:3); it is only the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives that can overcome our natural inclinations ("the flesh") and bring about this unity with each other in practice. This is a second reason why God's purposes are collective.

(c) God's peace

God is also described as a "God of peace" (Heb.13:20). He is not the author of confusion (1 Cor.14:33) or of conflict. Because He desires peace (but without compromise) (Heb.12:14), He desires to reconcile all things to Himself and to overcome alienation (Col.1:20,21). His purpose is never complete, therefore, whenever there is still any divergence among those whom He has chosen. This is a third reason for God working collectively - His desire for harmony.

(d) God's truth

God is truth, the scripture says (Deut.32:4). Anything contrary in any way to God is therefore false. Christ said "I am the truth" (John 14:6). He said to Pilate: "... to this end am I come into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth" (John 19:37). It is now the work of the Holy Spirit to guide us into all the truth (John 16:13). There is, therefore, such a thing as absolute truth, which the world at large denies.

This truth of God allows no room for alternative versions of truth. Just as there is only one way of salvation (Acts 4:12), so the truth of God is singular and unique. And, when it is known, anything less than full conformity to it is missing the mark and is therefore incomplete in the eyes of God. The church in Sardis was warned by the Lord that "I have found no works of thine fulfilled before my God"; they were falling short of full obedience (Rev.3:2).

God has only one way of salvation, and only one teaching for believers to follow. While believers are all different from each

other, and are given differing gifts to use, the purpose is that these gifts be used to bring us all into a unity (Eph.4:12,13). The singularity of God's truth is a fourth reason for His desire for unity of those He redeems.

(e) Interdependency

Some things by their nature can only function with united action, and cannot function with just a single individual. Common examples are:

- (i) a marriage relationship: it requires a combination of two people;
- (ii) team sports: a person may have all the skills, but they cannot really play the game unless they are on a team;
- (iii) body parts: no part of the body can function on its own.

God cannot have a functioning house, for example, if the living stones are not yet built together. Similarly a kingdom can't function if it is not united, as the Lord Himself said: "every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation" (Matt.12:25).

This interdependency has some very practical benefits. Since each one of us is very limited in our abilities, combining them with others complements them. Each of us as disciples of the Lord Jesus needs others for support, which is why the Lord Jesus stressed so much that we should love one another. In fact

He said it was the way in which others would know that disciples were His disciples (John 13:35). And so the purposes of God require collectivity in order to function fully.

D. What are the collective relationships?

It will be apparent from the previous examples that scripture refers to several collective relationships (or entities) for disciples today, as follows:

- (1) the people of God (also known as the holy nation and the flock of God);
- (2) the kingdom of God;
- (3) the house of God;
- (4) the priesthood;
- (5) the Church the Body of Christ; and
- (6) the churches of God.

(1) to (4) are dealt with in chapter II of this book, (5) and (6) in chapter III.

The question therefore arises: are these all just different names for the same thing? Is a believer in Christ automatically a part of all these entities, and thereby enjoying the spiritual blessings that come from them? The answer to this is not obvious. It requires a careful study of scripture, “rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim.2:15), which alone is able to distinguish things that differ (Heb.4:12), to uncover the truth of God about this.

It is important to remember that these entities are of divine origin, not of human design (no matter how well-intentioned). They are "of God" - His origin, His ownership and His purpose, and not ours. He has presented their pattern in the Bible, from which it can be revealed to us by the indwelling Holy Spirit (1 Cor.2:10). We are to live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God (Matt.4:4); but we are also told not go beyond what is written (1 Cor.4:6). So this question can be properly answered only by God's Word.

But God does not necessarily reveal to us truth that we do not intend to obey; the Lord Jesus said: "If any man willeth to do His will, he shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God ..." (John 7:17). Willingness to do it, in advance, can be a condition of having it revealed to us. That is why, for example, the Lord Jesus would not perform miracles in Nazareth and wouldn't answer Herod (Matt.13:58; Lk.23:8,9); it was because of their lack of faith. He wouldn't do His works just to impress or entertain them, or satisfy their curiosity. And so our attitude in carefully studying the Scriptures, as we try to answer this question, is all-important. Are we in fact willing to do what God will show us?

E. God's work of gathering (and ours)

For unity to be realized, there must also be union - a joining together. Union is the putting into practice what is in fact united. A married couple have been united by law; but unless they co-habit and share their lives with each other, they may be no different from if they weren't married. God is a God who gathers and joins things and people together; that is the process by

which He brings them into unity. Examples from scripture are as follows:

(i) Christ referred to gathering as the culmination of sowing and reaping crops (John 4:36; Matt.6:26), whereby it is harvested;

(ii) He also referred to it as how a hen protects her chickens, which is the illustration He used about His desire to gather the people of Jerusalem together: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not!” (Matt.23:37).

(iii) God joins a man and woman together in marriage (Matt.19:6).

Christ referred to Himself as someone who was engaged in this work of gathering: “He that gathereth not with me scattereth” (Matt.12:30). Caiaphas' prophecy about the death of Christ was that He would gather together the scattered children of God (John 11:52).

God's work of gathering individual believers into His collective purpose is part of His work of sanctifying them. He sanctifies believers to Himself, and away from the world and from sin, at the time of their salvation. Sanctification necessarily involves cleansing and purifying; only clean ones can associate with God. Christ ... “gave Himself for us that He might redeem us

from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a people for His own possession ..." (Tit.2:14).

Sanctification is a work in which we must also be actively engaged. Since God sanctifies us, we must respond by sanctifying ourselves (1 Pet.3:15). Therefore, as God gathers us together, we must respond by gathering ourselves together - not in any way that we may wish, but in accordance with His divine pattern. In this way, we have union, the unity in practice. At Pentecost and the days following, for example, the Lord added the new disciples to those already established (Acts 2:47); that was God gathering. But those disciples also had to gather themselves together, which they did by continuing steadfastly in fellowship with each other (Acts 2:42).

F. Why it's important

(a) An integrated pattern

The truth about these entities, God's way of unity for disciples today, is an integrated pattern. Like God Himself, it is very much a united whole; but it requires discernment by us to properly understand it. It can't be fully discovered only by looking at isolated scriptures. To illustrate: each piece in a jigsaw puzzle may be colourful and attractive but the full beauty can only be appreciated when all the pieces are fitted together in the right way; that takes work and patience.

(b) A central theme of the Scriptures

This truth of the unity of believers on the earth is not just an incidental aspect of God's purposes; it is a central and perva-

sive theme of the New Testament. If we fall short of it, we miss a large part of God's purposes for us. He will fail to receive the acceptable service that He yearns for from us, and Christ will fail to receive the full glory to which He is entitled.

(c) Position before condition

Serious Christians are continually concerned, rightly, with their spiritual condition before God. Our devotion to the Lord and the holiness of our lives are vital. But it is important that we first get our spiritual position right, and then concern ourselves with the condition that should match that position. Our spiritual position is a matter of our relationships - with God and with each other. To illustrate this, consider these examples:

(i) obviously a man should not try to act like a good husband until he is in fact married; he is not entitled to those privileges until he is; the position of married man should be achieved first.

(ii) a person cannot expect to live a godly life until he or she has first become a believer in the Lord Jesus and received the Holy Spirit; they cannot succeed without receiving the new nature, and no amount of effort will achieve the position of being a believer; the relationship with Christ must come first.

The position and relationship comes first. A full understanding of our spiritual position - our identity, who we are in our relationship with the Lord - is what will motivate us regarding our

condition. Many of the epistles in the New Testament begin with teaching about our spiritual position, and from that conclude with exhortation regarding our spiritual conduct (notice the frequent linking words “wherefore” or “therefore” - Heb.12:28, for example; whenever you see them, pause and go back to see what the connection is).

(d) It will motivate and stabilize us

Another way of saying it is: who we are will determine how we act. Commitment depends not on greater effort, but on greater belief. The more deeply we believe the truths regarding who and what we are in the Lord, the greater will be our personal commitment to be obedient to Him. It will be an “anchor to our souls”, to protect us from drifting away when difficulties come (Heb.6:19). It will help us to be prepared to separate ourselves from other things, even when it is unpopular or difficult to do so.

(e) We shall be able to testify to others

A full understanding of these truths, and obedience to them, will also equip us to testify effectively to others about them. We shall not be limited or defensive in how we talk about them to others. We shall be able to preach and teach the kingdom of God, the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:25,27), as the apostles did. In fact, it will give us a zeal to do this, based on a concern for others, that they also might know and have fellowship with us in these precious things (1 John 1:3).

There is today, sadly, a widespread disunity among believers in the world. As we see so many different Christian churches

and denominations, we might be reminded of Paul's comment in Athens: "you are very religious". The places of worship are many and varied. Yet our religious beliefs have to do with what is the truth about God. A diversity of teachings can't be of God. As believers, as we appreciate the invisible, spiritual unity we all share in the Church the Body of Christ, we should be concerned that it is not being expressed in practice by the gathering together of all believers to carry out the same teaching and beliefs. There are, perhaps, several reasons for this, which we shall look at later. But this should concern us just as much as the fact that so many people in this world do not have salvation.

In what follows, we shall endeavour to uncover God's pattern from scripture. We shall examine these entities, not just in isolation, but especially in relation to each other, in order to understand them more fully and give effect to them in obedience to God's will for believers today. (Other literature is available which examines each of the individual components in more detail.)

PART I: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How did the Lord Jesus describe His desire for the future unity of His disciples, in His prayer to His Father in John 17?
2. Why does God look for collective, rather than just individual, service from those people He has redeemed? (Refer to section A.)
3. What is the significance of God's people being described in scripture as "a flock"? (Refer to section B(3).)
4. How do the attributes of God Himself help us to understand why He gathers believers into a collective people? (Refer to section C.)
5. Why is uncovering the scriptural pattern of the unity of disciples of the Lord Jesus important to us today? (Refer to section F.)

II. GOD'S COVENANT ENTITIES

A. God makes covenants with people

When God created the heavens and the earth, He also created time, and so called it “the beginning” (Gen.1:1). He divided that time into periods or “ages” (Greek: “aeons” (Heb.1:2)). He is the King of all the ages (1 Tim.1:17). Each of these ages (or “dispensations”) is a period of time in man's history during which God deals with Him in a consistent way. What God expects from men, and what He offers to give them, do not change during the course of a dispensation, but may change with the following one. It is generally agreed that scripture refers to 8 dispensations:

(1) from the creation of Adam until his sin in the garden of Eden...

(2) ... until the flood at the time of Noah ...

(3) ... until the call of Abram ...

(4) ... until Israel's redemption from Egypt ...

(5) ... until Christ's ascension ...

(6) ... until the “rapture” ... (i.e. the day of grace)

(7) ... until the great white throne ... (i.e. the day of the Lord)

(8) ... the eternal state (i.e. the day of God).

We today are in the sixth of these dispensations. The final two are still future. In several of these dispensations, God has established His expectations and His promises with men in a covenant, in which He alone sets the terms. He is a covenant-keeping God (Deut.7:9). He does this in order to display His faithfulness in contrast to men's unfaithfulness (2 Tim.2:13). The first explicit covenant was with Noah and his descendants and all living creatures (Gen.9:9,10). The second was with Abram (Gen.15:18). The first collective covenant was with His chosen people Israel at Sinai (Ex.19:5,6); this is the one referred to as the "old covenant". In this present dispensation God has also made a collective covenant - the "new covenant". The Lord Jesus announced this on His last night before His death after He kept the Passover with His eleven apostles: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk.22:20). The "New Testament" means the new covenant.

(Some of the present doctrinal differences among people relate to a misunderstanding of the differences between the dispensations. For example: observing the sabbath day instead of the first day of the week (based on Christ's resurrection); and attributing the 144 thousand witnesses of the future tribulation period to today.)

B. The old covenant - and why it's relevant

This covenant was added to the everlasting covenant that also applied to Israel as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Gal.3:19). Israel had been chosen by God from among the nations for Himself (Deut.7:7). They were uniquely to be "the people of God" (Ex.8:1). They were told the essence of the

covenant when they were at Mount Sinai: “if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me from among all peoples ... and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation” (Ex.19:5,6).

On the basis of their commitment to be obedient:

(i) Moses sprinkled the blood of the covenant on the book of the law, on the altar and on the people, confirming them as the covenanted people of God (Ex.24:6-8; Heb.9:19); and

(ii) God then said to him: “let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them” (Ex.15:8). This was the tabernacle which they made in the wilderness. When this was done, Moses sprinkled it with blood also (Heb.9:21). This was different from the Passover blood by which they had been redeemed in Egypt; this was the blood of the covenant at Sinai. They became the people of the sprinkled blood, which is what Peter refers to in describing those he wrote to in his first epistle.

And so four things were brought together under this covenant: the people of God (Israel); the book of the law (which was the law of God's kingdom); the altar (where their offerings would be made to God through priests); and the tabernacle (the house of God).

Thus, under this covenant, the people of Israel were given the privilege of being exclusively:

- the people of God (the holy nation, belonging to Him); and
- the kingdom of God (under His authority); and
- the priesthood (engaged in His spiritual service); and of having:
- the house (sanctuary) of God (and so living in His presence).

All of these were inter-connected - the people of the holy nation, living in association with God's house, under his authority (kingdom), occupied with praising Him and approaching Him in priestly service. (Priestly service is service through a priest as an intermediary - both in worship and prayer, and also as ambassadors for God in speaking His Word to others.) As a result, these four "entities" were also co-extensive. That is, they were different functions of the same people; they didn't consist of different groups of people.

These were all collective privileges that they could only enjoy as a gathered people. They were God's earthly people in that they functioned on earth in a physical way. They had a physical sanctuary (the tabernacle) and physical sacrifices (animal offerings). From them, God expected to receive the service that He desired from men; to them pertained "the service of God" (Rom.9:4). Any other persons during this time who were also faithful to God could enjoy certain individual blessings but could not participate in these collective privileges unless they were joined to Israel. God only had one people.

C. Israel's failure and its consequences

Israel for most of their history were a disobedient and complaining people (Rom.10:21). God brought increasing discipline upon them to cause them to repent. He divided the kingdom; then He had them taken captive to Babylon; then He had their land occupied by the Romans. But they did not repent. Their greatest sin of all was in the rejection of their Messiah when He came; they delivered up their king to be crucified, for which God will hold them accountable as a nation (Acts 4:10).

As a result of their rejection of Christ in unbelief (even though they were given a last opportunity after His crucifixion (Acts 3:19-21)), God set aside the nation of Israel (Rom.11:7,20) for the duration of this dispensation. However those of Israel who did have faith, who were very much in the minority, constituted a “remnant” (that is, a remainder); to them the new covenant was given in place of the old. The initial nucleus of this remnant was the Lord's 12 apostles; He referred to them as the “little flock” (Lk.12:32).

Romans chapter 11 explains how God has cut off the nation of Israel, but He has not cast them off forever. They will be restored in the future millennial period, so that all the promises made to them will at that time be completely fulfilled.

D. The new and better covenant

Israel's inability to keep their covenant revealed the limitations of that covenant; while it set out very clearly God's righteous requirements, it couldn't provide a remedy when Israel failed to

meet them. Hundreds of years before, God had acknowledged the limitations of this covenant, and had promised to replace it with a new covenant (Heb.8:7,8; Jer.31:31-34). This new and better covenant also provided for the remission of sins on the basis of the completed sacrifice of Christ (rather than just temporary forbearance based on animal sacrifices). He is the mediator and the guarantor of the new covenant (Heb.12:24; 7:22). This allowed God to fulfil His purposes with Israel, which He could not do under the old covenant. When the Gentiles were brought in, they too became recipients of this new covenant. Previously they had been “strangers from the covenants” (to Abraham and Israel (Eph.2:12)); they were now “fellow-citizens” (Eph.2:19). Previously they had been “no people”; now they became “the people of God” (1 Pet.2:10; Rom.9:25).

And so the new covenant is not fundamentally different from the old covenant. Neither of them were made with individuals. Its purposes are similar, but it is much better in many respects (Heb.7:22; 2 Cor.3:6-9; Gal.4:24); for example:

- (i) its blessings and service are spiritual rather than physical; it provides for true worship in the true sanctuary in heaven, rather than in the replica on earth;
- (ii) it provides freedom from sin, not bondage because of the law; salvation is by God's grace, not our works; and

(iii) the law of God has now been written in our hearts and minds directly, rather than on stone tablets hidden in the tabernacle.

Just as with the old covenant, so also the new covenant (testament) includes the following collective entities:

- the people of God (the holy nation; the flock of God);
- the kingdom of God;
- the house of God; and
- the priesthood.

Again, as previously, these are primarily for God, and are the way that God can be served acceptably today (Heb.12:28;1 Pet.2:5). Again, they consist of the same people and are interconnected - a people belonging to God, dwelling with God in His house, under His authority, engaged in priestly service. It is the question of how we as believers in Christ become part of those entities today that we are exploring in this book.

E. The transition period

The early days of the apostles in this present dispensation, described in the early chapters of the book of Acts, were a transition period from the old covenant to the new covenant. As with most transition periods, not everything that occurred was a pattern for the rest of the dispensation. It is important in reading these scriptures to be able to distinguish the pattern for us today from those things which were transitional; misinterpretation of this is something that leads to doctrinal error. There were primarily four of these transitional aspects; they

have to do with: the Jewish people; baptism; the apostles; and miracles.

Remnants: God often uses “remnants” in transition from one age to the next. Noah and his family were the only ones saved out of the whole population of the earth before the flood - to begin the next dispensation. Abraham was a remnant from the descendants of Seth; from him God began His purposes for the nation of Israel. At the end of the Old Testament times, Ezra and Nehemiah led a remnant back from Babylon and restored the temple and the wall of Jerusalem. So also there was a remnant of the Jews who would make the transition from the old covenant of the law to the new covenant of grace. The number of people involved is never as important to God as the preservation of His truth and the progress of His purpose.

(a) *“To the Jew first” (Rom.1:16)*

In order that the Jewish people should have no excuse, they were given a priority in the preaching of the gospel in the early days. Initially the message was restricted to them; but from the time of Cornelius in Acts 10, the Gentiles were also brought in. (This inclusion of the Gentiles is referred to in scripture by two metaphors: as wild olive branches being grafted into the good olive tree (Rom.11:24); and also as the “other” sheep which must be brought into the fold (John 10:16).) But even when the Gentiles were included, Paul, who was the apostle to the Gentiles, first preached to the Jews in his travels (often by going first to the synagogues (Acts13:5)). Mostly, the message was rejected by the Jews (Acts 28:25-28).

Today also there is no distinction; the gospel is the same to Jew and Gentile. The perception that the Christian faith is contrary to the Jewish faith in God's plans is not correct. The Gentiles have in fact been included in a covenant relationship that was given initially to the Jews. The New Testament words of the apostles contain numerous quotations of Old Testament scriptures, showing how those scriptures were now being fulfilled. When Apollos preached the gospel in Achaia, he did it on the basis of the Old Testament Scriptures, which the Jews accepted (Acts 18:28). The New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old.

(b) Baptism

Water baptism is a public witness to the spiritual change that occurred when we died and were raised with Christ, and an acknowledgement of our subjection to Him. In the early days, when a Jewish person in faith acknowledged Jesus of Nazareth as Christ and Lord, it was necessary for them publicly to disassociate themselves from the nation's rejection of Him (Acts.2:40). Their baptism in water also showed this. The baptism itself didn't save them (this is the error of the teaching of "baptismal regeneration"), but it was required in the very early days in order for them to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This requirement did not apply to the Gentiles, as they were not accountable for the rejection of Christ. And so Cornelius, for example, received the Holy Spirit immediately upon receiving the gospel by faith; he was then commanded to be baptized in water (Acts 10:44,48). This is the pattern for today. Water baptism is not a part of our receiving salvation; it is something we are to do after salvation.

(c) The apostles

Apostles were given by God at the beginning of this dispensation to lay the foundation teaching for disciples (Eph.4:11; Eph.2:20; 1 Cor.3:10,11). They had been personal witnesses of the Lord Jesus (Acts 1:21,22; 1 Cor.9:1) and had received their teaching and their commission directly from Him (Matt.28:20; Acts 1:3; 1 Cor.11:23). They later appointed elders and it was these elders, not other apostles, who collectively succeeded them (referred to as the “presbytery” in 1 Tim.4:14). Scripture does not teach “apostolic succession”.

The 12 apostles were the nucleus of the New Testament people of God after Christ's ascension to heaven. To them, together with the rest of the 120 who were gathered at Pentecost (Acts 1:15), were added the 3000 or so that day (Acts 2:41), and many others thereafter. There are no apostles of the Lord Jesus today; the leadership of God's people today is by elders.

(d) Miracles

God used miracles performed through men during the transition period for the purpose of authenticating the new teaching of the apostles and prophets, just as He had done to bear witness to the identity of Christ on the earth (John 5:36): “God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders, and by manifold powers, and by gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to His own will” (Heb.2:4).

These miracles showed their authority (2 Cor.12:2), that they spoke the Word of God (Luke 4:36). The apostle Paul referred to them as “the signs of an apostle” (2 Cor.12:12). As the teach-

ing was delivered in its entirety (Jude v.3), and became documented in the New Testament Scriptures, the need for this initial authentication was eliminated. Miraculous gifts went out of existence (1 Cor.13:8). There is no basis to expect such gifts of miracles in men today; the reason for them no longer exists.

Some of the wrong teaching that exists among Christian groups today stems from misunderstanding the reason for the miraculous gifts of tongues and healing during those transitional days. For example, “baptism of the Holy Spirit” and the “second blessing” are not taught in scripture. The Bible teaches that believers are baptized in the Holy Spirit at their salvation; we are then instructed to be filled with the Spirit (Eph.5:18).

F. Can the new covenant entities exist today?

Sometimes the question is asked whether or not these entities exist today. Is there a house of God in these days? Is the kingdom of God in existence on the earth? Does their existence depend on the actions of believers? Are they conditional or not? These are just some of the questions.

When God exalted the Lord Jesus Christ after His resurrection, He glorified Him by giving Him positions of great honour and authority, positions that were central to the purposes of God for people on this earth. For example:

“all authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth” (Matt.28:18)

“... the head of all principality and power”
(Col.2:10)

“... the head of the body, the church” (Col.1:18;
Eph.1:22,23)

“... the mediator of a new covenant” (Heb.12:24;
8:6; 9:15)

“I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion”
(Ps.2:6)

“... son, over His house” (Heb.3:6)

“... great priest over the house of God” (Heb.10:21;
5:6)

Several of these positions relate to the new covenant. Because of this, God has permanently established the basis of these new covenant entities, on the completed and victorious work of Christ. As a result, they can exist and function today - but conditional on believers being included in them. The participation of believers affects the extent to which these entities can function on earth, but their establishment is for ever. Let's look at the four of them, one at a time.

(a) The people of God

Is there a scriptural basis for us to be able to say that there is a people of God in this dispensation? The answer is very certainly, yes: God has established the believing remnant of Israel, together with the believing Gentiles as a spiritual people, a people “for His name” (Acts 15:14); Christ died to purify a people for

His own possession (Tit.2:14) and He sanctified them through His blood (Heb.13:12); this work of sanctification is what establishes a people for God as a holy nation: “Ye are ... a holy nation, a people for God's own possession” (1 Pet.2:9). The position of “people of God” therefore has been permanently established by God, based on the completed sanctifying work of Christ.

Another term for the people of God is the “flock of God” (1 Pet.5:2). Israel was referred to as God's flock in the Old Testament (Ps.100:3; Ezek.34:30,31). Due to false shepherds and hirelings, the sheep became scattered. (Christ referred to them as “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Mat.25:33)). With the transition to the new covenant, the 12 apostles became “the little flock” (Lk.12:32). They were scattered at His death when their shepherd was smitten (Matt.26:31,56; Zech.13:7). At Christ's resurrection, He became the great shepherd who gathered the sheep together under the new covenant (Heb.13:20). The flock grew as other disciples gathered together with the apostles. Elders were appointed in the churches of God to take care of the flock of God, under Christ as the chief shepherd (1 Pet.5:1-4; Acts 20:28).

Scripture teaches us therefore that there is a basis for there being the people of God on the earth today. The question remains however: who are they? Does it include all believers or, if not, which ones?

(b) The kingdom of God

The same question applies to the second of the covenant entities: Is there a basis for the kingdom of God to exist on earth today? Again, yes: Israel's leaders were told by the Lord that the kingdom of God would be taken away from them and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits that Israel should have produced: "The kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof" (Matt.21:43).

The apostles were told that it was the Father's good pleasure to give them, as the little flock, the kingdom of God (Lk.12:32). This kingdom is based on the total authority of Christ (Matt.28:18), which is not yet visible on earth (Heb.2:8), but will be in future (Phil.2:10,11). Meanwhile to those who willingly subject themselves to His authority, it is a spiritual kingdom, a place where God's will is done collectively. "He has made us to be a kingdom" (Rev.1:6). It cannot be shaken and will outlast this earth (Heb.12:25-28). "Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us have grace, whereby we may offer service well-pleasing to God with reverence and awe" (Heb.12:28). While the king is today within His sanctuary, and not visible to the world, it is a testimony to Him; for this reason the kingdom of God is preached in the world (Acts 28:23).

The basis of the kingdom of God therefore has been permanently established by God, based on the unending authority of the ascended Lord Jesus, who is the appointed king, who is presently on His Father's throne and who will have absolute rule in future dispensations.

“Yet I have set my king upon my holy hill of Zion”
(Ps.2:6).

“But of the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for
ever and ever” (Heb.1:8).

Again the question applies: who is in this kingdom?

(c) The house of God

Thirdly, has God established a house for Himself in this dispensation? This of course is not a physical structure, as was the case with Israel, but the spiritual reality, where men and women in this world can serve God in spirit. That is, today the house of God is not a place on earth, but people: when Christ began His earthly ministry, He referred to the Temple in Jerusalem as His Father's house; later, as a result of the deterioration that had taken place, He referred to it to the Jews as “your house”. Then He told them that their house was left to them desolate, because of their refusal to respond to His words (Matt.23:38).

The builders (the Jewish leaders) rejected Him, but God has chosen Him to be the corner-stone of His new spiritual house, which He has laid in Zion in heaven (1 Pet.2:5-8; Acts 4:11; Ps.118:22): “Behold, I lay in Zion a chief corner stone”; and “The stone which the builders rejected, the same was made the head of the corner”. Christ is Son over the house (Heb.3:6). That house is now the true place for worship (John 4:20-24) and the place of God's rest with His people (Acts 7:49; Heb.4:9). The house of God is today “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Tim.3:15).

“the Lord hath chosen Zion; He hath desired it for His habitation. This is my resting place for ever: Here will I dwell; for I have desired it” (Ps.132:13,14).

“ye ... are built up a spiritual house” (1 Pet.2:5).

The basis of the house of God therefore has been permanently established by God, based on Christ's permanent position as Son over it, as the chief corner-stone. Just as the tabernacle consisted of a sanctuary (most holy place) and a holy place, so the sanctuary of this spiritual house is in heaven, because that is where God the Father and the Son are on the throne of God, and where the priesthood enters in spirit in worship; the remainder is on earth where the lampstands (the churches of God) are.

(d) The priesthood

Lastly, has a priesthood been established for God today? Israel's last high priest under the old covenant, Caiaphas, was the one who committed Christ to be put to death (Matt.26:65). The tearing of the veil in the temple from top to bottom signified the end of the Levitical priesthood and its service in that place (Matt.27:51). Upon His ascension into heaven, God has, by an oath, established His Son as great high priest over the house of God for ever:

“Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb.5:6).

“Named of God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb.5:10).

“having a great priest over the house of God” (Heb.10:21).

And so the priesthood has changed from the old covenant to the new covenant (Heb.7:12), but Christ's priesthood is permanent: “But He, because He abideth for ever, hath His priesthood unchangeable” (Heb.7:24). The spiritual house of God operates as a priesthood to God and for God: “Ye are ... a holy priesthood ... ye are ... a royal priesthood ...” (2 Peter 2:5,9). The basis of the priesthood therefore has also been established by God, on His appointment of Christ as the high priest for ever.

In the case of all four new covenant entities, the basis for them to exist on this earth in this dispensation has been established by God as part of the exaltation of His Son. It is therefore apparent that in the case of all four new covenant entities, the basis for them to exist on this earth in this dispensation has been established by God as part of the exaltation of His Son at His right hand. This is not surprising since the four of them, as we have seen, are inter-related and co-extensive. These four entities functioned during the time of the New Testament churches. The question is: do they function today, nearly two thousand years later towards the end of the dispensation, and if so who comprises them?

G. Are they functioning today?

While the bases of these four entities have been established unconditionally by God, they can only function to the extent

that there are human participants. For example, Christ as high priest needs something to offer to God (Heb.8:3), which can only be received from those in the priesthood. Similarly, if the living stones have not come to the chief corner stone to be built up, the house cannot function.

To the extent that believers in Christ are not part of these collective entities, God is deprived of that service, just as He was in Old Testament times during Israel's captivity in Babylon. The temple site continued to exist, but it was silent. However, God does not change His requirements during a dispensation. If men and women once again meet the conditions, the entities can function again, just as the temple did in Ezra's time when the remnant returned from Babylon. What then are these conditions?

H. What are the conditions of my involvement?

Our inclusion as individuals in these four new covenant entities is conditional on our continued obedience. An example of this is given in Jude's epistle from Old Testament times: "the Lord, having saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed them that believed not" (Jude v.5).

Those individuals who, because of their lack of obedience by faith, refused to go into Canaan, lost their place among the people of God and consequently the blessings that went with it. They had been initially redeemed from Egypt along with the others, but they lost their opportunity to serve God among His people because they would not go into the land.

The conditions of a believer being a part of each of the new covenant entities are as follows, according to scripture:

(a) The people of God

God will only receive us as His people if we separate ourselves to Him from associations that are contrary to Him:

“We are a temple of the living God; even as God said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come ye out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; and I will receive you” (2 Cor.6:16-18).

“Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us therefore go forth unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach” (Heb.13:12,13).

If, due to unbelief and disobedience (which are closely connected in scripture (Rom.16:26)), we do not continue in God's goodness, like Israel we may be cut off as His people: “Behold then the goodness and severity of God: toward them that fell, severity; but toward thee, God's goodness, if thou continue in His goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off” (Rom.11:22).

(b) The kingdom of God

Our participation in the kingdom of God today requires that we acknowledge the lordship of the Lord Jesus Christ. In part,

this involves being baptized in water as a disciple. Because discipleship is a public declaration of allegiance to the Lord Jesus, it can sometimes involve persecution and hardship: “they [Paul and Barnabas] returned to Lystra, and to Iconium, and to Antioch, confirming the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21,22).

Those who habitually do the works of the flesh shall not inherit the kingdom (Gal.5:19-21; Eph.5:5): “... they which practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Gal.5:21). No man who looks back is fit for it, the Lord said (Lk.9:62).

(c) The house of God and the priesthood

The book of Hebrews shows clearly the association between the house (sanctuary) of God, and the priesthood that functions within that house. As individuals, our participation in that house and priesthood depends on our continued faith and obedience. Hebrews 3:6 does not refer to the existence of the house, but whether we are part of it: “whose house are we, if we hold fast our boldness and the glorying of our hope firm unto the end”.

“Holding fast” always refers to our service, not our eternal salvation (e.g.Col.2:19). What is this boldness of hope that we are to hold fast to in order to be part of the spiritual house of God? It is not, as might be assumed, the future hope of Christ's return for us, to complete our salvation. It is the present hope which is the theme of the book of Hebrews and which is defined in chapters 6 and 7:

“... to lay hold of the hope set before us; which we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and entering into that which is within the veil” (Heb.6:19).

“... a bringing in thereupon of a better hope, through which we draw nigh unto God” (Heb.7:19).

and which is referred to in chapters 4 and 10:

“having then a great high priest, who hath passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession ... let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need” (Heb.4:14,16).

“having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holy place ... and having a great priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in fulness of faith ... let us hold fast the confession of our hope that it waver not” (Heb.10:19-23).

Our place in the house of God is conditional, therefore, on our continued drawing near (spiritually) into the presence of God as His people. This hope, as these four scriptures show, is the privilege of collective access spiritually into the immediate presence of God in heaven, through Christ as our high priest, to worship Him and to pray to Him as a people. This is the hope that those in the house of God must hold fast to if they are to continue to be part of God's spiritual house today. Our

place in the house of God is conditional, therefore, on our continued drawing near (spiritually) into the presence of God as His people (not as individuals). The writer of Hebrews warned each of his readers: “let us fear lest any of you seem to come short of it” (Heb.4:1).

The book of Hebrews contains many warnings to individuals not to risk losing their position among the people of God by:

- falling away (3:12; 6:6);
- coming short (4:1; 12:15);
- disobeying (4:11);
- neglecting (2:3);
- sinning wilfully (10:26);
- becoming weary (12:3); and
- refusing (12:25).

Clearly then, even though our salvation is eternally secure, we can see from the Scriptures that our place in the new covenant entities for collective service to God is conditional.

Future Dispensations: The present dispensation, which began after the ascension of Christ, will continue until He comes to the air for believers. At that time, all believers of this dispensation (that is, the Church the Body of Christ) will be made complete. Their bodies will be glorified and their sinful natures will be eradicated. Their salvation will be complete and thereafter there will be no disobedience or falling short of God's purposes. From that time all believers will be the people of God and be engaged totally in the service of God.

During the Millennial reign of Christ on the earth, all four covenant entities will again be seen:

(1) Israel will be restored to their position as God's earthly people. God will gather them from the nations and will fulfil his covenants to them (Rom.11:12,15,23,26; Acts 3:21; Ezek.37:21,22).

(2) The kingdom of God will be on earth, with Christ ruling visibly from His throne in Jerusalem as Son of David (2 Sam.7:16; Lk.1:33; Rev.12:10).

(3) The temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem as the earthly house of God (Ezek.37:26,40).

(4) And Israel will again be the earthly priesthood, offering animal sacrifices (Ezek.45:18-25).

Similarly, in the final eternal state on the new earth, the new covenant will be fulfilled in totality:

(1) The faithful of all generations will be united as the people of God (Rev.21:3) and they will bring glory and honour to Him (Rev.21:26).

(2) God's kingdom and authority will be total and everlasting (2 Pet.1:11).

(3) God will dwell with man in the new Jerusalem (Rev.21:2,3) and so there will be no need for a temple (Rev.21:22).

(4) They will do Him service (Rev.22:3).

All these future fulfilments are based on the new, eternal covenant.

PART II: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

6. Compare Hebrews 9:19,21 with Exodus 24:6-8. How did the blood of the covenant link those people and things on which it was sprinkled? (Refer section B.)
7. What does it mean that the four “entities” were inter-connected and co-extensive? (Refer to section B.)
8. What are some of the ways in which the new covenant is (a) similar to, and (b) different from, the old covenant? (Refer to section D.)
9. Why do we need to exercise care in applying what was done in the very early days of the Acts to today? (Refer to section E.)
10. How do we know that the bases for the four covenant entities have been established for today? (Refer to section F.)
11. How do we know that the inclusion of believers in these four entities is conditional? And on what does it depend? (Refer to sections G and H.)

III. CHURCHES OF THIS DISPENSATION

There are two collective entities that did not exist prior to the present dispensation and which therefore were not part of God's covenant with Israel. They are both referred to as "churches" (the Greek word "ecclesia" means "called out and called together" - a congregation). However it is important to notice the connections between these two churches, and also the distinctions between them. They are: "the Church the Body of Christ" and "the church of God". We will examine both of them.

A. The Church the Body of Christ

This is a unique spiritual entity into which every believer in Christ is placed unconditionally by God (1 Cor.12:18), through Christ baptizing them in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.12:13) at the time of their salvation (Acts 10:44). The truth of this entity was hidden during Old Testament times (it was "a mystery hidden in God" (Eph.3:9)), and it was given especially to the apostle Paul to reveal it (Eph.3:8,9). He referred to it in four of his epistles. It is a perfect unity in spirit (1 Cor.12:12) but will be also perfectly united in body at Christ's return when the dead in Christ and the living in Christ will meet Him together (1 Thess.4:16,17). Because it is spiritual, there are no distinctions between Jew and Gentile, and between male and female. It could not have existed in Old Testament times since Gentiles were excluded from the promises of

God. It will have a unique place with Christ in His glory in future dispensations (Eph.5:27).

The essence of this church is seen in its likeness to a human body: the intimate and inter-dependent relationship between the members and their head (Christ) and thus each other (Col.2:19; 1 Cor.12:25). The membership of this body is not recognizable in the world other than by the conduct of its members; their lives are hidden with Christ in God (Col.3:3). Their spiritual position is described as “seated in the heavenly places together with Christ” (Eph.2:6). Christ is head of this church (Col.1:18) (distinct from His positions as head of the corner of the house of God (1 Pet.2:7) and head of all principalities and powers (Col.2:10)), and he is also head over all things to this church (Eph.1:22).

Being a member of the Church the Body of Christ is a marvelous privilege, but it is the beginning of our experience as disciples of Christ, not the completion of it. It remains for us to put into practice the truths about the Body. Scripture describes these truths as follows:

- (1) it is the fulness of Christ (Eph.1:23; Col.1:18);
- (2) it is heavenly in character (Eph.2:6);
- (3) its purpose is to be to God's praise and glory (Eph.1:6; 3:10);
- (4) it involves our intimate union with Christ (Eph.5:23-32);

(5) Christ is its head and we are its members, subject to Him (Eph.1:22; 5:23; Col.1:18);

(6) it has accomplished spiritual reconciliation among Jewish and Gentile believers (Eph.3:6; 4:4; Col.1:18; 3:15; Gal.3:28);

(7) it is to be built up in truth and love (Eph.4:7,15,17);

(8) the members have varying functions and gifts (Rom.12:4-6);

(9) it is all brought about in our lives by the Holy Spirit (His baptism, His dispensing of gifts, the unity He achieves, His fruit, etc.) (1 Cor.12:12-18).

It is God's desire that the perfect unity which is true spiritually of the Church the Body of Christ also be exhibited in practice by its members on this earth (Col.3:1,2; Eph.4:1-3). This is part of "holding fast" (again referring to our lives and service, not our salvation) to Christ as the head (Col.2:19).

B. Building up the Body of Christ

(a) Ephesians 4:1-16

In Ephesians chapter 4, Paul emphasizes this unity in encouraging the Ephesian saints to be united in practice. He begins by appealing to them to live with one another in love and peace, keeping the unity of the Spirit. Then he gives them a list of 7

things in verses 4 to 6 which are singular and around which our unity is to be based.

The first three are those which pertain to our initial salvation: one body (the Church the Body of Christ); one Spirit (the indwelling Holy Spirit); and one hope (the calling of God to our hope of being totally united with Him). Then he lists three that involve obedience on our part once we have received the first three: one Lord (the lordship of Christ); one baptism (our water baptism as disciples); and one faith (which is the teaching of Christ and the apostles that we are to adhere to). Finally he refers to God the Father as the culmination of that unity.

These things are all important aspects of our unity in the things of God. The apostle then proceeds to refer to the gifted men who were given (apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers (v.11)) for the purpose that the members of that Body might be built up and become complete. They were given to equip the saints for this work (v.12); as we have seen, the saints are the people of God. The goal of all this is that we may all come to “the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God” in complete measure (v.13). In this way we won't have a problem with wrong teachings and we shall grow up in all things into Christ, who is the head of the Body. This is the prescription for members of the Body of Christ to achieve unity in practice. Obviously, critical elements are “the faith” and understanding and experiencing the many positions that Christ occupies today:

“for the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of

Christ: till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ ..." (Eph.4:12,13).

That's how the Body will mature in practice into a complete unity.

While many members of the Body of Christ are loyally and effectively working for the Lord Jesus these days, the Body is not functioning as a cohesive whole. This scripture shows us that what is needed to achieve that unity is "the faith" - the doctrine of the Lord Jesus. Thus, instead of doctrine dividing believers, as sometimes happens, conformity to the full doctrine is to be the basis of that divine unity. A unity or collaboration that is not on the basis of full observance of all that the Lord commanded His apostles is not going to bring about the "full-grown man". We cannot merely ignore differing teachings. This also requires that those evangelists and teachers and pastors who already have and practice "the faith", preach and teach it to other believers.

And so, while the Church the Body's spiritual position is perfect in Christ, it needs to be matched with a development of the characteristics of that Body in practice here on the earth. Paul laboured and suffered for just this - for the sake of those who were in the Church the Body of Christ: "I ... fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His body's sake, which is the church ... that we may present every man perfect in Christ" (Col.1:24,28,29).

(b) Ephesians 2

Chapter 2 of Ephesians also presents a progression. Paul begins by describing the position of the Ephesians before they were saved as being “dead through your trespasses and sins” (v.1) and separate from Christ (v.12). Then he shows their progress at salvation to being made alive and saved (v.5,8) and being reconciled in one body (v.13,16) - the Church the Body of Christ (“one new man” (v.15)). Finally He shows them that they are now of the household (i.e. house) of God (v.19).

In verses 19 to 22, Paul describes that last phase by telling the saints at Ephesus that:

- they were now fellow-citizens with the saints (i.e. part of the holy nation);
- they were of the household of God (i.e. part of the house of God);
- they were built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (i.e. their position was based on the apostles’ and prophets’ teaching (1 Cor.3:10,11));
- Christ Jesus was the chief cornerstone (i.e. of the house of God (1 Pet.2:5-7));
- in that house every building, fitly framed together, was growing into a holy temple in the Lord (i.e. each church of God, like a building (1 Cor.3:9), was joined with others in forming a sanctuary “in the Lord”);
- they also were built together in the Lord for a habitation of God in the Spirit (i.e. the church in Ephesus was part of this process of forming the house of God, where God the Holy Spirit was dwelling

among them).

And so they began as dead to God; then they were saved and brought into the Body of Christ; then they became part of the house of God.

Putting the truths of the Body of Christ into practice brings us into association with other members of the Body. This brings us to the subject of the other church referred to in the New Testament, the church of God. Whereas there is one Church the Body of Christ, consisting of all believers in Christ, there were many churches of God in the New Testament, in various towns. Were all living members of the Body in these churches?

C. The churches of God

The churches of God in the New Testament were the only divinely sanctioned gatherings of disciples, the only ones established by God. They did not exist prior to Pentecost, and will not exist after Christ's return. They can exist on earth only during His absence from earth, and are a testimony to Him in His absence. Two different metaphors are used to describe them.

As a testimony, they are referred to as golden lampstands (Rev.1:12,13,20; 2:1). In Revelation chapters 1 to 3, the ascended Christ is seen as walking among these lampstands, examining them. They are also referred to as being the temple of God and so share the same character as God's sanctuary (this is distinct from our individual bodies, which are described as temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.6:19)): "know ye not that ye (plural) are a temple of God ... the temple of God is holy, which

temple ye are” (1 Cor.3:16,17) (written to the Church of God at Corinth). (The word “a” before “temple” is not in the original Greek; where it is omitted it refers to the character of the thing; it is not indicating here that the church in Corinth was a temple by itself.)

Christ is intimately involved with these churches. For example: When Paul was persecuting the church of God (1 Cor.15:9; Gal.1:13), Christ referred to it as persecuting Him personally (Acts 9:4); and God purchased the church of God with the blood of His own Son (Acts 20:28).

(a) The first church of God

The churches of God consist of all disciples who have been added into them, having been baptized in water: “they then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly ...” (Acts 2:41,42).

Verse 41 shows us the three one-time things that took place that Pentecost day in Jerusalem with the approximately 3000 individuals. They:

1. received his word - this was their salvation by faith;
2. were baptized - this was their immersion in water as a public declaration of their allegiance to Christ, into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost (Matt.28:19); and
3. were added - they were joined to the 120 who were already gathered together as commanded by the Lord Himself (Acts 1:5,14).

Verse 42 then shows the four things that they collectively “continued steadfastly” in:

1. the apostles’ doctrine - what the apostles had learned from Christ (Matt.28:20; Acts 1:2), which later became known as “the faith”;
2. fellowship - the community in which the apostles and others in the church were visibly linked (1 Cor.1:9);
3. the breaking of bread - the weekly remembrance of the Lord’s death in the symbols of bread and wine (1 Cor.11:23-26) and worship; and
4. the prayers - the collective gathering for prayer (Acts 4:31; 12:5).

This was the pattern of the first church of God, at Jerusalem.

(b) “In the Lord”

Those who were in these churches are also referred to as being “in the Lord”. They were in this relationship because they were added by the Lord:

“and the Lord added to them...” (Acts 2:47)

... and also added to the Lord:

“and believers were the more added to the Lord”
(Acts 5:14)

... and so were in the Lord:

“ye are of the household of God ... in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord” (Eph.2:19-21).

“In the Lord” (the original Greek is: “en kurios”) indicates a fixed relationship under the authority of the lordship of Christ, and is not synonymous with the expression “in Christ” which describes believers' eternal association with Christ. Elders were appointed and the scope of their responsibility was restricted to those who were among them in the churches of God, not all believers (1 Cor.5:12; 1 Tim.3:5; 1 Pet.5:2). Thus they were over the saints “in the Lord”: “we beseech you, brethren, to know them that labour among you, and are over you in the Lord” (1 Thess.5:12).

When Paul was instructing the Church of God in Corinth to put away a brother from among them, he said: “what have I to do with judging them that are without? ... them that are without God judgeth” (1 Cor.5:12,13; compare Heb.13:4).

This is also seen in Acts 11 when Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to Antioch. They had heard about many people believing the preaching of the gospel there:

“a great number that believed turned unto the Lord ... Barnabas ... when he was come, and had seen the grace of God, was glad; and he exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord ... and much people was added unto the Lord ... for a whole year they were gathered together with the church” (Acts 11:19-26).

Barnabas spoke to those who had believed. Many of them were then added to the Lord, and so the Church of God in Antioch came into existence. This adding together of disciples enables them to function collectively on earth for God. Each church is established by God, and they are “fitly framed together” (Eph.2:21). They are therefore not casual or occasional gatherings of disciples. Nor can they be a “mixed multitude” with unbelievers (2 Cor.6:16; Acts 19:9; Neh.13:3).

The place for the “breaking of bread” in remembrance of the death and resurrection of Christ is the churches of God; in referring to it in 1 Corinthians 11:18-34 Paul said to the Church of God in Corinth “when you come together as a church”; he also said to them, when describing how they were mis-using that occasion, “despise ye the church of God ...?”. There is no record of the apostle Paul breaking bread on his travels other than in churches of God; he stayed to the first day of the week in order to do so (Acts 20:6,7).

The scripture “Where two or three are gathered together in my name” (Matt.18:20) is sometimes thought to be the basis for believers to gather together. But this is not the basis for establishment of a church of God; it refers rather to the exercising of judgment within a church (vv.15-20). “There am I in the midst of them” does not refer to collective worship; that takes place in the sanctuary in heaven, as the book of Hebrews shows clearly. Christ does not come down to us in our worship; the people of God ascend into His presence.

The only gathering on earth where the unity of the Church the Body of Christ can properly be reflected by its members is in

churches of God. The Acts and the epistles envisage all disciples being gathered in these churches (1 Cor.10:32); there is no provision for any other gathering. The epistles are addressed to saints who were in the churches of God. A few examples are given of disciples that were not so gathered, and increasing warnings of defections are given in the later epistles, but no other gatherings are scripturally authorized.

D. The visible unity of the churches of God

The distinctive feature of the churches of God in the New Testament was that they were visibly and obviously united. They were a practising community on earth, and not only an invisible, spiritual unity. They were known by others and referred to as “the Way” (Acts 9:2) and by the apostle as “the fellowship of God's Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor.1:9; see also Acts 2:42). They went to great lengths to ensure that this visible and practical unity was maintained, as they gathered themselves together in response to God's work of gathering and joining them. This is evident in all phases of their development as recorded throughout the book of Acts, as follows:

(a) Ch. 1 - 7: Early days in Jerusalem

- (1) They began gathered together in the upper room, as the Lord had commanded them (1:14,15;2:1); they were all together in one place (literally: on one basis);

(2) The newly baptized disciples were added to them (2:42), the many being added to the few that were already established;

(3) They continued steadfastly in fellowship with them (2:42);

(4) They were all together (2:44), with one accord (2:46; 5:12);

(5) They assembled together in homes and in Solomon's porch (a large public area) (4:31; 6:2).

(b) Ch. 8 - 9: Scattered by persecution

(6) When Saul persecuted the church of God (Gal.1:13), he referred to them as "all that call on thy name" (9:14; cf.1 Cor.1:2);

(7) He knew which houses to enter to find the disciples, because they were known publicly (8:3);

(8) When disciples were first made outside Jerusalem, in Samaria by Philip, the apostles went there to link them with the church in Jerusalem (8:14);

(9) After his conversion, Saul gathered at Damascus with the disciples already there (9:19);

(10) The apostle Peter visited the various churches throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria (9:31,32).

(c) Ch. 10 - 12: Including the Gentiles

(11) Peter was queried by the Judaeen apostles and brethren about his going to the Gentiles, to ensure there was no variation in teaching (11:1,2);

(12) Barnabas was sent from Jerusalem to Antioch to link that church (of Gentiles) with the others that existed (11:22);

(13) Prophets went from Jerusalem to Antioch to teach (11:27);

(14) The disciples in the church at Antioch sent money to help their brethren in Judaea, via their elders (11:29);

(15) Prayer was made for Peter's release from prison by the whole church of God at Jerusalem, although they were gathered in various places (12:5,17).

(d) Ch. 13 - 28: Paul's journeys

(16) Paul (and his companions) visited the churches of God several times to confirm the disciples to continue in the faith (14:22; 18:23; 20:6,17; 21:4,7,8,17);

(17) They ordained elders in every church (14:23);

(18) They reported back to the church at Antioch, which had sent them out (14:27;13:3);

(19) Brethren were sent from Antioch to Jerusalem to resolve an apparent doctrinal difference to ensure unity of teaching (15:2,6,22);

(20) They visited the brethren in Phoenicia and Samaria on the way (15:3);

(21) Paul and Silas re-visited the churches to confirm them and to deliver the decrees from the apostles' and elders' meeting in Jerusalem for all the churches to keep, which strengthened them in the faith (15:41;16:4);

(22) Apollos was commended from Ephesus to the churches in Achaia (18:27);

(23) Paul reported the work taking place elsewhere to the elders at Jerusalem (21:1);

In addition to the historical account in Acts, there are several other references to this unity in practice of the churches of God; for example:

“even as I teach everywhere in every church” (1 Cor.4:17).

“so I ordain in all the churches” (1 Cor.7:17).

“we have no such custom, neither the church of God” (1 Cor.11:16).

“as in all the churches of the saints” (1 Cor.14:33).

“... throughout all the churches” (2 Cor.8:18).

“... the care of all the churches” (2 Cor.11:28).

“cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans” (Col.4:16).

“ye ... became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judaea” (1 Thess.2:14).

“what the Spirit saith to the churches” (Rev.2:7, etc.).

The unity was maintained, under the leadership of the apostles and elders, by various means:

- visitation and teaching by the apostles (Acts 8:14; 11:22; 15:36);
- written epistles (which became part of the Scriptures (2 Pet.3:16)) (2 Pet.3:2);
- interchange of ministry of the Word by prophets (Acts 16:4; 20:2);
- resolution of doctrinal disagreements (Acts 15:6);
- on-going communications between the churches (Acts 16:4);
- financial support of other churches (Acts 11:27-30; Rom.15:26);
- commendation of saints from one church to others (Rom.16:1);
- only one church of God per town, even if (due to numbers) saints had to assemble in different

- companies (Acts 12:5;14:27);
- churches grouped into regions (e.g. Judaea, Galatia, Asia, Achaia) (Gal.1:2; Acts 18:23).

These were churches which were obviously “fitly framed together” in a fellowship (Eph.2:21; 1 Cor.1:9).

E. On what basis were these churches of God united?

(a) The faith

The above evidences in Acts of the visible unity of the churches of God, despite their geographic dispersion and ethnic diversity, show that the primary basis of the unity was their doctrine, referred to as “the apostles' doctrine” (Acts 2:42) and “the faith” (Acts 14:22). This was “the unity of the faith” that Ephesians 4:13 refers to, which was the object of the work of the apostles and others towards the Church the Body of Christ (Eph.4:13). It was accomplished under the power of the Holy Spirit (“the unity of the Spirit” (Eph.4:3)). Paul said to those in the Church of God in Rome: “thanks be to God, that, whereas ye were servants of sin, ye became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching whereunto ye were delivered” (Rom.6:17).

It is notable in these words that Paul does not say here that the teaching was delivered to them, although that was the case also. But the point he was making is they were delivered to it as a pattern (literally, a mould that they were being poured into to conform to in every respect).

The apostles were taught the faith directly by the Lord Jesus as He gave them His commandments for disciples to observe in their entirety (Matt.28:20; Acts 1:2) and this is what they taught. Jude describes the faith this way:

“while I was giving all diligence to write unto you of our common salvation, I was constrained to write unto you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints” (Jude v.3).

As this verse shows, it involves more than the salvation that all believers share, and it must be contended for. At the end of his life, the apostle Paul said that he had kept the faith. It is one of the mysteries of God (1 Tim.3:9) that requires divine revelation.

(b) The elderhood

The primary means by which this unity was maintained was governance by a united elderhood, who were responsible to teach and care for the disciples in all the churches (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet.5:1-3; 1 Tim.3:5):

“Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in the which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops (overseers), to feed the church of God, which He purchased with His own blood” [spoken by Paul, to the elders of the church of God at Ephesus] (Acts 20:28).

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account” (Heb.13:17).

The elders collectively took over these responsibilities from the apostles (who were also elders (1 Pet.5:1)), since there was no apostolic succession. They were appointed first by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28) and then by the apostles or their delegates (Acts 14:23; Tit.1:5).

F. Being in a church of God is conditional

God's ideal is that all living members of the Church the Body of Christ should be gathered in these churches of God and so reflect in practice the reality of the spiritual unity of the Body. God “willeth that all men should be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim.2:4).

When Paul was correcting the saints in the Church of God at Corinth for their divisiveness, he reminded them that they were part of the Body of Christ (1 Cor.12:27). What then does it take for a disciple to be part of a church of God? After salvation, disciples must be baptized in water and added to an existing church of God in order to be in a true church of God (Acts 2:41). (The only exception is where the church is being initially planted; in this case it needs to be linked with existing churches of God.) These are the only entrance requirements; further teaching should then take place inside the church of God. The book of Acts has three examples of disciples who were saved but not immediately added to a church of God:

- the eunuch from Ethiopia (Acts 8:38,39);
- Apollos when he first came to Ephesus (Acts 18:25); and
- the 12 disciples that Paul found at Ephesus (Acts 19:1-7).

In the latter two cases (at least), they were soon added to a church of God.

On the other hand, being in a church of God may, sadly, not always be permanent. Warnings are given against the possibility of people having to be put away from the church or that they may leave of their own accord:

Putting Away - a specific case is given in 1 Corinthians 5:13 which involved immoral conduct. The brother was to be put away, lest the rest become infected. It is a disciplinary action by the Lord which is intended to bring about correction of the problem and then restoration. Paul described the excommunication as delivering the person to Satan, for the destruction of the flesh, the same expression he uses about the two men who held blasphemous teaching (1 Tim.1:20). Putting away from the church is comparable to a person in the Old Testament being cut off from the people of Israel for sin (Lev.17:4; Matt.18:17).

Withdrawing - people may also of course leave voluntarily. Paul refers in his epistles to several people who were unfaithful. In 2 Timothy he refers to: "all that are in Asia" (1:15), Hymenaeus and Philetus (2:17), and Demas (4:10), in this category. The apostle John refers to those who: "went out from us ... they

went out, that they might be made manifest how that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). James refers to the possibility of wandering (NKJV) from the truth (5:19).

These people did not, of course, lose their eternal salvation or their place in the Church the Body of Christ when they left the church of God. And restoration is possible where repentance occurs (e.g. 2 Cor.2:5-7, 7:8-12 - referring to the man in 1 Cor.5) and is very much to be hoped for.

Because baptism after salvation is required before addition, and because of the possibility of departure thereafter, in practice not all those in Church the Body of Christ are in the churches of God. This sometimes can give rise to accusations of sectarianism. Even in New Testament times they were referred to as a sect (Acts 24:14; 28:22). However, separating ourselves to what is of God is not what causes schism or divisiveness among believers; it is the failure to do so that causes it. Ongoing obedience is a condition of being in a church of God (unlike the Church the Body), just as we saw it is with the new covenant entities.

Not only is the individual's place in the churches of God conditional, the continued existence of an entire church is conditional - for example, the church at Ephesus (which had been given much of the teaching about the Church the Body of Christ in Paul's epistle to them, but whose elders had later been warned by him about false teachers (Acts 20:29,30)), was cautioned by the Lord that, unless they returned to their first love of Him, He would remove their lampstand, the church of God (Rev.2:5;1:20).

Churches of God form the house of God, the temple of God, as Paul told the church at Corinth: “ye are a temple of God” (1 Cor.3:16). He told them that this temple is capable of being destroyed by men. Paul warned the Corinthians that if anyone destroyed the temple of God, God would destroy him (1 Cor.3:17).

Colossae, in the region of Asia, was a place which had a church of God (to which Paul wrote an epistle) but the church appeared to go out of existence during New Testament times; it is not included in the seven churches in Asia referred to in Revelation 1-3. In the course of time, all the New Testament churches of God ceased to exist. Five of the seven churches of God in Revelation 2 and 3 were warned by the Lord about problems: Ephesus - a lack of love; Pergamos - compromise on doctrine; Thyatira - corruption; Sardis - spiritual death and defilement; Laodicea - complacency.

G. The need for separation in churches of God

Because churches of God are the only sanctioned gatherings for disciples, it requires that the saints in them must separate themselves from every other type of gathering. This is a separation to the truth of God. God can only receive us as we separate ourselves from everything that is contrary to Him (2 Cor.6:17). (Note that at our salvation we receive Christ through the Word of God and so become children of God (John 1:12); thereafter, however, God needs to receive us if we are to be His people, and that requires our obedience and separation to Him.)

“Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us therefore go forth unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach.” (Heb.13:14,15).

The churches of God have a distinct inside and an outside (1 Cor.5:12; Col.4:5), which is why they involve adding to and putting away from. (In Old Testament times, the holy city of Jerusalem had a wall around it to make a similarly clear distinction. That is why Nehemiah realized that it was so important to rebuild this wall that had been broken down.) The Lord's table (the breaking of the bread) is for those in churches of God (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor.11:22). Also, marriage for such disciples is to be “only in the Lord”, that is, to someone also in the church of God (1 Cor.7:39).

It seems that this issue of maintaining separation from other believers is an issue that can cause difficulty to some. It is perfectly understandable why some might say: “Why should we not associate fully with others who share our faith in Christ, who are members with us of the Church the Body of Christ?”. Others may feel that, because of the unique position of those who are the people of God, they should be careful never to join in service with other believers. This can become a big issue when situations arise such as attendance at meetings of other churches of believers, interdenominational rallies, joint fundraising activities and, perhaps most of all, marriage to a believer not in a church of God. Only a clear understanding and appreciation of our position in the Lord and what its implications are, based on scripture, will bring us unitedly and with conviction to a proper response to these situations. The topic of sep-

aration is sometimes avoided as being negative, and therefore unpopular, because it imposes restrictions. However scripture presents it as being separation to God and essential to our acceptance by Him.

Where some inside the church are being disobedient, there is also a need for the others to be separated from them, so as not to become a partaker in their sins. If they persist in this disobedience, it may call for judgment on them, perhaps to the extent of their being put away: For example:

- “not to keep company with...” (1 Cor.5:11) those involved in immoral conduct;
- “... turn away from them” (Rom.16:17) who were promulgating contrary teaching;
- “withdraw yourselves ...” (2 Thess.3:6) from those who were walking disorderly;
- “... have no company with” (2 Thess.3:14) those who were being disobedient;
- “... refuse” (Tit.3:10) those who practice heresy;
- “... receive him not ...” (2 John v.10) referring to someone who rejected the doctrine of the Lord;
- “... purge himself from these” (2 Tim.2:21) - those who practice unrighteousness.

There is again a parallel with Israel in the Old Testament. If a person committed a serious sin, the whole nation was considered guilty. An example is Achan's theft of the “devoted thing” where God said: “Israel hath sinned” (Josh.7:11), showing that the whole people were implicated. However, if the people sep-

arated themselves from the guilty person and his actions, they would be spared from the judgment of God (Num.16:22,26).

There is a clear similarity between the foregoing conditions and warnings regarding continuing in the churches of God and those referred to earlier regarding the four new covenant entities. No such conditions of course exist regarding membership in the Church the Body of Christ.

H. The churches of God are linked with the new covenant entities

It becomes clear therefore that the connection between believers and the new covenant service of God is by means of the churches of God, and not the Church the Body of Christ. There is a need to be gathered together, in the same way as the early disciples were, in order to function as the new covenant entities; the unity must be reflected in union in practice. This is shown by the many connections in scripture between the churches of God and these four entities, as follows:

(1) The churches of God are where the Remembrance is kept. (Paul rebuked the church at Corinth for treating the Remembrance lightly, saying “despise ye the church of God?”) The cup of wine represents the blood of the new covenant which sanctifies the people of God in the house of God. It is associated with Christ in His resurrection as great shepherd of the flock of God. (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor.11:22-25; Heb.13:12,20; Heb.10:29,21). Thus the church of God is linked with the new covenant.

(2) Paul instructed Timothy about the requirements for elders, including “how shall they take care of the church of God?”, so that he might know “how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God” (1 Tim.3:5,15). Churches of God together form “the church of the living God”, which is a reference to the house of God. Thus the church of God is linked with the house of God.

(3) The churches of God are represented as golden lampstands (candlesticks): “the seven candlesticks are seven churches” (Rev.1:20). Writing to those seven churches, John said: “He has made us to be a kingdom, priests unto His God and Father”. The place of the lampstands is in the house of God (as it was in the tabernacle and temples in the Old Testament). Christ is described in Revelation 2:1 as walking in the midst of the lampstands; God’s promise to the people of God is that He will “walk in them”. (Rev.1:20,6; Heb.9:2; Rev.2:1; 2 Cor.6:16) Thus the churches of God are linked with the kingdom, the priesthood, the people and the house of God.

(4) The churches of God are a holy temple. Fitly framed together, they grow into a holy temple in the Lord to be a house (habitation) for God (1 Cor.3:16,17; Eph.2:20-22). Again this shows a link between the churches of God and the house of God.

(5) Paul told the Thessalonian church that: “we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God ... that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God” (2 Thess.1:4,5). Here is a link with the kingdom of God.

(6) Paul and Barnabas encouraged the disciples in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch: “that through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed for them elders in every church...” (Acts 14:22,23). This is another link between the churches of God and the kingdom of God.

(7) Paul told the elders of the Church of God at Ephesus that they had been appointed overseers over all the flock: “Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in the which the Holy Ghost hath made you bishops, to feed the church of God ...” (Acts 20:28). This shows the link between the churches of God and the flock (people) of God. This oversight responsibility is not limited to the local assembly but to saints in all the churches.

(8) Peter wrote to the elders in the churches in five provinces (1 Pet.1:1) exhorting them to “feed the flock of God” (1 Pet.5:2).

(9) To the Church of God in Ephesus, Paul wrote: “ye are fellow-citizens with the saints and of the household of God” (Eph.2:19).

(10) To those in the churches in the five regions in Asia Minor, Peter wrote: “ye ... are ... a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood ...”; ye are ... a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession ...”. He also said to them: “it is time for judgment to begin at the house of God: and if it begin first at us ...” (1 Pet.2:5,9;4:17).

(11) To the Church of God in Corinth, Paul wrote: “ye are God's husbandry, God's building ... ye are a temple (sanctuary) of God” (1 Cor.1:2;3:9,16).

(12) In his second epistle to them, he said: “We are a temple of the living God; even as God said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Cor.6:16).

There is no such direct connection between the Church the Body of Christ and the new covenant entities. It is through gathering together and functioning in churches of God that believers can fulfill the collective new covenant service to God. But many believers are not gathered together in this way. Things are so different today from the early days.

I. Why are believers not united today?

There would appear to be several reasons why Christians are so scattered in these latter days of this dispensation.

There is much wrong teaching, which is what caused the initial deterioration in the early churches and caused them to cease, as the apostles had warned. The collective truth of God has been recovered gradually in recent years, but only by some believers, resulting in fragmentation of the others. Perhaps in some cases the wrong and incomplete teaching is aided by an over-reliance on secondary materials (e.g. commentaries) rather than patient study and meditation of the Scriptures themselves. Perhaps some of it is due to misinterpretation of transitional aspects, as referred to earlier; perhaps some is due to considering

practices in the New Testament as not being culturally or otherwise relevant today, and some is due to the intervention of human traditions which have grown up in the past.

Some of the error may be caused by making implicit assumptions, and failing to see distinctions between things that appear on the surface to be the same but which, upon deeper study, are different. An example is the assumption that the Church the Body of Christ and the church of God are the same. Another is assuming that every church of believers is a church of God. Unfortunately some of the more popular Bible versions unintentionally blur important distinctions for the sake of ease of understanding.

“Ecclesiastical” (church) position may sometimes be considered of only secondary importance by some believers. Yet our fellowship with each other must be based on the truth of God, not just our common salvation - on “light, not life”. Variety of choice and independence is encouraged in the world these days, and this can include which church to attend, whereas with God there is only one way, just as there is with the gospel. Being in a church of God may therefore impose restrictions on personal freedom, which may be a stumbling-block to some. It's like the mould of Romans 6:17 that we have been poured into.

Putting into practice the truth of God regarding the churches of God requires us to take a definite position and separate ourselves from those who don't do so. Separation can be an unpopular and distasteful subject to some. Concern regarding smallness, and accusations of narrow-mindedness or elitism by other

believers can add to the difficulties. The early disciples experienced the same pressures from the Jews. The Churches of God are a unique gathering of disciples on this earth, united around all aspects of the faith, but available to all who are willing to be obedient to it.

The truth of God can only be received by divine revelation. God does not reveal it merely to satisfy our curiosity; He reveals His truth to those who are prepared to carry it out. It requires that we have an attitude towards the Scriptures of their sole and unquestioned authority, and that we believe that the New Testament does in fact prescribe a pattern for church order, as it does for other aspects of Christian living.

Many churches came into existence over the years because of a concern about a particular aspect of scriptural teaching that they felt was not being properly observed. They followed the scriptural pattern by coming out of their past churches in order to be able to practice what they believed. They may since have tended to emphasize that aspect of the Lord's teaching to the exclusion of some other aspects.

PART III: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

12. How does scripture describe the unity of the Church the Body of Christ? (Refer to section A.)
13. How is the Church the Body of Christ to be built up, and to what purpose? (Refer to section B.)
14. How did the Church of God in Jerusalem come into existence? (Refer to section C(a)).
15. What is the meaning of the expression “in the Lord” when it refers to people? How does it relate to the expression “in Christ”? (Refer to section C(b).)
16. What were some of the ways in which the disciples in the churches of God in the book of the Acts maintained their unity with each other? (Refer to section D.)
17. What were the two fundamental bases on which the churches of God established and maintained their unity? How were these put into practice? (Refer to section E.)
18. In what ways are being in a church of God conditional? (Refer to section F.)
19. Why is separation from others expected of those in churches of God, and how should it be applied? (Refer to section G.)
20. In what way do the Scriptures connect the churches of God with the four new covenant entities, and what do they teach us

about the character and practices of those churches? (Refer to section H.)

21. Why do you think there is so much diversity of teaching and practice among believers today? (Refer to section I.)

IV. OUR PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

While it is God's purpose that believers on His Son should be united to Him in His collective relationships, our accountability to Him with respect to that is personal and individual.

A. God chooses and calls us as individuals

Although God establishes collective entities for His purpose, He chooses and then calls individuals into them.

(a) Our choosing by God

God chooses (elects, ordains) those to whom He will reveal His Word, in His foreknowledge. Not all men have faith (2 Thess.3:2). The sequence is: fore-knowledge, fore-ordination (choosing), calling, justifying, glorifying: "whom He foreknew, He also foreordained ... whom He foreordained, them He also called ..." (Rom.8:29,30).

Peter described those to whom he wrote his first epistle as: "elect (chosen)...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father ... unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet.1:1,2) (which relates it to the new covenant (Heb.12:24; 9:18-21)).

We have been chosen by God to obedience of His truth. Those individuals were chosen before the foundation of the world to be to the praise of God's glory (Eph.1:4-6), chosen both to be

members of the Body of Christ and to obedience under the new covenant.

“as many as were ordained to eternal life believed”
(Acts 13:48);

“God chose you from the beginning unto salvation in sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: whereunto He called you through our gospel ...” (2 Thess.2:13);

“Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice” [Jesus to Pilate] (John 18:37).

This choosing by God may initially seem to us to be unfair to those not chosen. But God is sovereign and is justified in all His actions. Christ died for all men. The gospel is available to all men in grace. All men have sinned and therefore none deserves God’s salvation. And so God justifies those who believe, and yet is totally just: “... that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom.3:26).

As a result of this, all people in the world are in one or the other of these two categories: those who have been chosen by God; and those who have not been chosen. The scripture says: “few are chosen” (Matt.22:14), and “not many mighty, not many noble are called” (1 Cor.1:26). Since we do not know in advance who are the chosen ones, we must preach the gospel to all, as Paul did (Acts 20:26; 1 Cor.9:22).

B. Our calling by God

For those who have been chosen, when the right time comes in their lifetime, God then calls (summons) them. He does this by bringing His Word, the Scriptures, to them. The Lord Jesus said: “my sheep hear my voice ... and they follow me” (John 10:27).

For this purpose God uses human preaching:

“How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher?” (Rom.10:14)

“it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the preaching to save them that believe” (1 Cor.1:21).

Those who have been chosen are given the faith necessary to believe the Word, as a gift from God, and this faith must be exercised in the Word of God (Eph.2:8;1 Cor.13:2); they must believe it to be true and act accordingly:

“according as God hath dealt to each man a measure of faith ... according to the proportion of our faith” (Rom.12:3,6).

“For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Eph.2:8).

Their response to God's call is to “call on His name”, to confess Him (Rom.10:13; Acts 2:21; Acts 9:14; Acts 22:16; 1 Cor.1:2). Realizing that we have been called by God to fulfill His purpose can be a very powerful motivation to us in our obedience.

God chooses and calls us to salvation and to obedience to His full purposes for us. But our response may just be partial. Some may just hear the call in scripture to the extent of salvation, but not hear the call into the fellowship of God's Son: “God is faithful, through whom ye were called into the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Cor.1:9).

When God calls someone, He does not later reverse it: “the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance” (Rom.11:29). Where He calls into the fellowship of disciples in the churches of God, He will not later call them out of it.

For those who have been chosen and called by God, they must first hear the Word of God, and then do it. The Lord Jesus said: “... my brethren are those which hear the word of God, and do it” (Lk.8:21). For those who have been chosen and called by God, therefore, the conditions for fulfilling God's purposes are: (1) Firstly, to receive the Word of God - “to hear it”; and then (2) to obey it - “to do it”. Hearing it without then applying it is self-deception, as James points out in his epistle (Jas.1:22,25).

Not having opportunity to hear (or read) the Word of God absolves a person of responsibility for it (Acts 10:35; 19:2); we are only accountable for whatever we are given opportunity

to know (Rom.1:19,20; Lk.12:48). Refusal to listen, however, brings accountability (Rev.2:7; Heb.12:25). Whether it is heard orally, or read verbally, whether through teachers or alone, the Word of God can only be received and understood spiritually by divine revelation:

“unto us God revealed them through the Spirit ... the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God” (1 Cor.2:10,14).

“Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven” (Matt.16:17).

This revelation takes place through the work of the Holy Spirit in our human spirits (Prov.20:27; Rom.8:16). Our spirits, not our senses, are where we receive spiritual understanding from God.

Those excluded from the calling of God cannot understand the mysteries of God, even though they may hear them or even study them, because they are only spiritually discerned (1 Cor.2:14). One of the ways in which the new covenant is described as being superior to the old covenant is that God now puts His law in our hearts and our minds (Heb.10:16), rather than on tables of stone. Correspondingly, the onus is greater on us today because God has not spoken through prophets or angels but through His own Son (Heb.2:1-3).

It is possible to differentiate from scripture certain degrees of individual accountability, depending on what has been re-

vealed in each case. In all cases, however, the expectation is the same - faith in what has been revealed; but the revelation can vary:

Some may never have heard of the living God, but everyone alive and fully conscious has the evidence of creation that there is a creator:

“that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them. For the invisible things of Him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, even His everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse” (Rom.1:19,20).

Those who have only this revelation but receive it by faith will be “saved”, although they are not in the Body of Christ. Some may know and believe in God, but not have heard the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord: “Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to Him” (Acts 10:34,35). These too will be saved, because they believe what they have received, but again they are not in the Body of Christ.

Some may have heard and believed the gospel and so received eternal salvation, but have not understood the necessity to be added to a church of God. Since they have the indwelling Holy Spirit, if they have access to the Scriptures, even in the absence of human teachers, they may have accountability for not going

farther. These are in the Church the Body of Christ, but are not part of the people of God, and so they do not participate in the service of the new covenant entities.

Some have heard and believed the full gospel of salvation and obedience to the truth, have taken their places in churches of God, and are continuing to enjoy full new covenant privileges collectively. Their accountability is for continued obedience and holy living out of love to the Lord.

C. Preaching the Word

Since hearing the Word brings accountability, and since hearing comes through preaching, there is a great onus on preachers and teachers to correctly and fully present the truth of God. For example:

- Teachers are warned that they have greater accountability (Jas.3:1).
- The apostles warned about false teachers (Acts 20:29,30).
- Paul claimed to have declared “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), thus setting an example for those who would follow.
- Both the Lord and Paul preached “the kingdom of God” (Mk.1:14,15; Acts 28:30,31), not just eternal salvation.
- The purpose of the royal priesthood is to “shew forth” the excellencies of God (1 Pet.2:9).
- The apostle Paul said that he was prepared to endure all things for the sake of those who had been chosen,

that they might obtain their salvation (2 Tim.2:10).

The fact that those who heard the preaching in the New Testament and responded in faith were baptized in water and gathered together in churches of God, to enjoy full new covenant blessings, is also implicit evidence that the need to do so had been preached to them. We must therefore be careful in our gospel preaching not to short-change our audience. Some of the direct quotations from apostolic preaching that we may (rightly) use in our preaching are not necessarily the entire message that was preached on those occasions. Two examples of this from the apostle Paul's preaching are:

“Repent and ... be baptized ...”; to this is added “and with many other words he testified ...” (Acts 2:38-40).

“Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved ...”; to this is added “and they spake the word of the Lord unto him ...” (Acts 16:31,32).

This preaching of the Word of God should also be accompanied by the disciples in those churches being living examples of the gospel in action, for it to have credibility. We are to be role models to be imitated:

“by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt.7:20).

“our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power ... as ye know what manner of men we shewed ourselves toward you for your sake. And

ye became imitators of us, and of the Lord ... so that ye became an ensample to all that believe ... in every place your faith to God-ward is gone forth;" (1 Thess.1:5-8).

D. Obeying the Word

God does not reveal His Word apart from the purpose that it be obeyed; to obtain the knowledge itself is not enough. Willingness to do it can be a prerequisite for receiving it (John 7:17). It must be received with meekness, being prepared to be changed by it (Jas.1:21). Revelation brings responsibility.

Discipleship involves continued obedience. Obedience stems from faith; the two cannot be separated: "unto obedience of faith" (Rom.16:26). Peter refers in his epistle to: "them that obey not the gospel" (1 Pet.4:17). Obedience without faith is just empty compliance and is not pleasing to God (Heb.11:6). On the other hand, faith without resulting obedience is "dead" (Jas.1:22; John 8:31); mere profession of faith is not enough; Christ said: "why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" (Lk.6:46). Anything less than obedience to the whole truth that we have heard is disobedience.

Disobedience to the Word of God can occur when it is initially received and also by not continuing in obedience. The book of Hebrews refers to the possibility of "falling short" (Heb.4:1) or "neglecting" (Heb.2:3). Hebrews 10:26 refers to sinning "wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth" and shows that this has very serious consequences. Hebrews also refers to "falling away" (Heb.3:12). The Lord said to those

who believed: “if ye abide (continue) in my word, then are ye truly my disciples” (John 8:31).

Discipleship therefore involves continued obedience. For example, those who were saved, baptized and added to the Church of God at Jerusalem at Pentecost continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and other things (Acts 2:42). The book of Hebrews contains two particularly serious warnings to the people of God regarding disobedience to the revealed will of God:

Hebrews 6:4-8 - This refers to those who fall away after receiving the Holy Spirit; it is impossible to renew them to repentance while they are doing so, and they lose all fruitfulness for God.

Hebrews 10:26-31 - This refers to those who sin willfully after they have received the knowledge of the truth; they will be judged by God, who judges His people.

E. “Every wind of doctrine”

When Paul referred in Ephesians 4 to building up the Body of Christ in the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, he described it as a maturing process: “that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine” (v.14). Today there are many erroneous teachings in the world that we as believers need to guard against as we search for the truth of God. Some of these (together with off-setting scriptural references) are as follows:

(a) Errors regarding the Scriptures

- the Bible contains errors and so is not totally authoritative (2 Tim.3:16);
- parts of the Bible, while appearing to be historical and literal, are only allegorical (e.g. creation, the flood, Jonah (Matt.12:40));
- other books of religious writings have equal or greater status than the Bible (Matt.15:3);

(b) Errors regarding the person of God

- there are many different gods (or, everything is God) (1 Tim.2:5);
- Christ was not eternally God the Son (John 1:1-3,14);
- the Holy Spirit is just an influence, and not a separate person of the godhead (Acts 5:3; Mk.1:10,11).

(c) Errors regarding salvation

- we are saved by our own good life (Eph.2:8,9);
- we can lose our salvation (John 10:28);
- God will not punish unbelievers eternally (2 Thess.1:9);
- our prayers and offerings for those who have died will determine their destiny (Acts 16:31).

(d) Errors regarding baptism

- baptism is necessary in order to be saved (Rom.5:1);

- sprinkling is an acceptable alternative to immersion (Acts 8:38,39);
- parents should have infants and household members baptized (Acts 2:41);
- baptism is optional for a disciple (Acts 10:48);
- baptism need not be into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt.28:20; Acts 19:3-5).

(e) Errors regarding church gathering

- believers are free to worship at whatever church they choose (Acts 18:26);
- churches should operate independently of each other (1 Cor.7:17);
- all believers are in the priesthood (1 Pet.2:5,9);
- believers should gather based on their common salvation, regardless of their baptism or further obedience (1 Tim.3:15);
- all believers are free to participate in the breaking of the bread (“an open table”) (Acts 2:41,42;1 Cor.11:22);
- the Scriptures do not prescribe how we should gather or operate today (2 Thess.2:15);
- believers and unbelievers can be gathered together in a church (Acts 19:9);
- when added to a church of God, it is not necessary to leave other churches (Gal.2:18);
- addition to a church is not necessary; we are free to come and go at any time (Acts 2:41).

(f) Errors regarding leadership

- there are still apostles today (“apostolic succession”) (1 Cor.1:9 - the apostles were eyewitnesses of the Lord and were commissioned by Him);
- elders should not be appointed today (Tit.1:5);
- clergy should be appointed to undertake many of the church’s services (1 Cor.14:26);
- women may undertake leadership roles (1 Cor.14:34; 1 Tim.2:11,12).

(g) Errors regarding the work of the Holy Spirit

- miraculous gifts of healing and tongues still apply today (Heb.2:4; 1 Cor.13:8).
- believers should look for and pray for a “second blessing”, to be baptized by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor.12:13 - they were baptized in the Holy Spirit at salvation; Eph.5:18 - thereafter they are told to be filled with the Spirit).

(h) Other errors

At the breaking of the bread, the bread and wine are trans-substantiated into the Lord’s actual body and blood (Matt.26:26, spoken while He was still alive.

F. Searching for the truth of God

Even though there are many, many true believers in Christ in the world today, they are actually a very small proportion of the

world's population. Even nominal Christians are very much a minority in this world, compared for example with some of the eastern religions. If the Christian faith as described in the Bible is in fact the one and only truth, then why does God only have a minority?

Further, there are a huge number of Christian denominations and churches, and the doctrines that they hold vary widely. Can they all be the truth of God; can God's truth have so much variety and contradiction in it? Clearly that can't be the case. Why then are Christians so divided today, and does it really matter? Is it enough that they have a common salvation, are all members of the Body of Christ and will be united perfectly with Christ one day? Is the lack of unity just undesirable but not really all that important? Is that how God views it? These are questions that many concerned disciples of the Lord Jesus ask. Why are Christians so divided today?

It didn't start out that way after the return of Christ to heaven. Although many people had believed on Him during His lifetime, and He had healed probably hundreds of them, He began with just twelve men. They were left behind to carry on after His departure, and from them it grew. While they were alive it stayed together for the most part, as far as we can tell. But over 1900 years have elapsed since that time, most of them "dark ages" as far as scriptural knowledge was concerned, and in the aftermath of that a multitude of versions of Christianity has sprung up. Today you can't even count the number of Christian churches and denominations.

But God is still a God of unity. The Lord Jesus' prayer to His Father on His last night on earth was "That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee" (John 17:21). He still desires that those whom He has chosen and saved will be united for Him on this earth, not just on the basis of their salvation but, as we have seen, on the basis of "the faith" - all that He commanded. The Lord posed the question in Luke 18:8: when He returned would He find the faith on the earth?

But, some believers will say, we are all one in Christ Jesus. There is no division spiritually in the Body of Christ, which consists of all believers. Is putting that unity into practice on earth a laudable objective, or a requirement for being the new covenant people of God? Serious disciples of the Lord Jesus will want to answer that question for themselves; it is far too important a question to ignore.

How should we begin? Only by going back to the Scriptures, as we have been doing in this book, can we see what God's pattern is for us. Then we can compare that with where we presently are.

G. Is my church a church of God?

Since God intends that all disciples of the Lord Jesus should be united in churches of God, as a condition of being His people, kingdom, house and priesthood, a critical question for each disciple is: "am I in a church of God?". Many churches have this name, but that is not conclusive.

(a) The unity of the faith

The first criterion, as we have seen, is: does the doctrine and practice of my church conform fully to the doctrine and practice of the New Testament churches (other than the transitional aspects, which as we have seen are not applicable today)? That is, does it conform to “the faith” (2 Cor.13:5), since the unity of the faith is the first criterion of unity. This is absolutely necessary, but not of itself sufficient.

It is useful here to remind ourselves of the pattern that was established when the first church of God (at Jerusalem) came into existence:

“They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:41,42).

(b) The unity of the elderhood

The second criterion is: is my church linked with all the other churches of God in a fellowship of assemblies under a united elderhood? Is it “fitly framed together”? Based on what we have examined in this booklet, we can summarize what we should expect to find in a gathering of believers that is truly a church of God according to the pattern shown to us in the New Testament:

(a) Who are in it? Only those who have exercised personal faith in Christ for eternal salvation, and have then been baptized as disciples of the Lord Je-

sus Christ into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, will be in such a church. They will have severed any connection with any other church and been added to this church.

(b) What do they do? They continue regularly on the Lord's Day to keep the remembrance of the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, using the emblems of bread and wine, and in the worship of His God and Father, with brethren voluntarily leading the assembly. Others not numbered with that or other churches of God may observe but they will not participate with them in this. They also continue in collective (as well as individual) prayer. They enjoy full fellowship with each other, while keeping themselves separate from teaching and practices that are contrary to scripture. They minister the Scriptures to each other, teaching the doctrine of Christ and the apostles. They evangelize to others, and undertake good works, as they have opportunity. Because of the scriptural teaching of headship, women cover their heads and do not speak out audibly in worship, prayer or ministry of the Word.

(c) How are they governed? Brethren meeting the scriptural qualifications are appointed as elders and they collectively provide leadership and rule throughout all the churches, ensuring the on-going unity of teaching and practice. There is no clergy. Deacons are appointed in accordance with scriptur-

al qualifications, and serve the assembly. The various forms of ministry are undertaken by those brethren and sisters gifted to do so, under the general guidance of the elderhood.

This of course is not a full description of a church of God in action. However, as a result of applying these criteria, the question can be asked: am I in a church “of God”? There are logically only three possibilities with respect to the existence of churches of God in the world today:

- The possibility that all gatherings of believers are churches of God. However this cannot be the case due to the diversity of doctrine and the division that exists among these various churches and gatherings. Such a lack of unity cannot be of God.
- Another possibility is that no gatherings of disciples are churches of God today because they went out of existence permanently. But God has not withdrawn the privilege of churches of God during this dispensation since Pentecost. Where the conditions are met, He will continue to honour His Word and will recognize them.
- The only other possibility is that there is a community of churches meeting the criteria and so are the divinely-recognized churches of God today. We believe that this has in fact been the case since the late nineteenth century when the scriptural truth of the churches of God forming the house of God was re-discovered, and disciples came out of other gatherings

to form them.

These things are not intended in any way to cause offence to believers who have been content with their present church association. Saying that a gathering of disciples is not a scriptural church of God is not any reflection on the quality or genuineness of the people involved or of their personal dedication to the Lord. This is not a matter of personalities but of the doctrine of the Lord, and to refrain from teaching it and challenging disciples with it will incur the judgment of the Lord. God is no respecter of persons (Acts 10:34).

Also the fact that believers not in churches of God may experience the Lord's blessing in their lives and work for Him does not in any way invalidate this. What God receives collectively from believers not gathered according to the scriptural pattern only He can say; undoubtedly their dedication on a personal basis and their obedience to what has been shown to them is very acceptable to Him (2 Cor.8:12). God often uses people and things of His own choosing to serve His purposes. But our standard for self-examination should be the Word of God, not other people.

Rather our desire is that this will encourage believers to look more deeply into these things, that they might see that this pattern is of the Lord, and that they have been called to obedience to it.

All of us as disciples are conscious of our own short-comings. None of us, we are sure, is satisfied with our own obedience or love to the Lord. Do we not have enough to concern ourselves

with in our own devotion to the Lord? But perhaps it might be useful to ask ourselves if either of these two possibilities could be true: that we know these things and yet are not prepared to be obedient to them, and so be in the wrong spiritual position; or that we are in the right spiritual position and yet not acting worthily of it, and so be in the wrong spiritual condition? Both are clearly serious matters.

Our visible unity as disciples of Christ (who is “the light” of the world) should be a light to attract others to Him. In His prayer that we began with, Christ said that our unity would be a witness of Him to the world (John 17:23). Conversely, divisions between us can be a stumbling-block to them.

H. A summary

The foregoing material has arrived at the following conclusions based on the Scriptures referred to:

- (1) All God's purposes for us are ultimately collective; focusing only on our individual blessings will cause us to miss a large part of God's purpose for our lives, especially with respect to the worship and other service that He wishes to receive from us. We can't fully serve God alone.
- (2) In His foreknowledge, God chooses individuals and calls them through faith to full obedience.
- (3) As they respond to His Word by faith, He justifies them and places them unconditionally in the Church the Body of Christ, which is a spiritual position unique to believers in this dispensation.

(4) As they further obey His Word by being baptized and added to a church of God, they become part of the people of God, the kingdom of God, the house of God and the priesthood under the new covenant, and so are in the position to enjoy its full collective privileges in divine service.

(5) These collective new covenant blessings cannot be enjoyed by believers not gathered in unity in churches of God - either individually, or in other associations. They are not based on membership in the Church the Body of Christ. This is no reflection on the devotion of those believers to the Lord in other respects; it is a matter of adherence to the divine pattern.

(6) So that those who come to Christ may enter into those full blessings, it is necessary that the full truth of God be preached and taught, and be both initially and continuously obeyed by those who hear it.

(7) All believers therefore need to examine themselves to see if they are "in the faith", whether their church is a "church of God" according to scripture, and if not, to seek to be added instead to such a church.

(8) It also requires that those in the churches of God dedicate themselves to the service of God and to a life pleasing to the Lord, in accordance with the high standard expected of the people of God, and to be a living testimony to the truth of God in action.

PART IV: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

22. Relate God's work of choosing and calling us to our responsibility to receive and respond to the Word of God. (Refer to section A and B.)

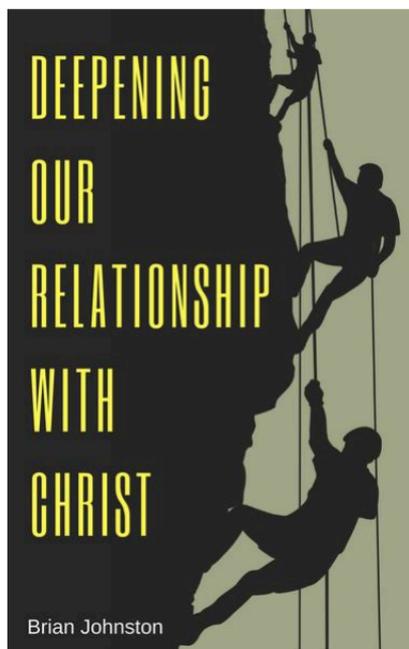
23. How serious is it in God's eyes to disregard or disobey what He has revealed to us in His Word? (Refer to section D.)

24. What are some of the most prevalent errors in the teaching and practice of some groups of Christians. In each case, what is their rationale for them, and how do the Scriptures teach otherwise? (Refer to section E.)

25. How can a believer today undertake to determine whether or not they are in a scriptural church of God? (Refer to section G.)

26. How can those who are in churches of God effectively show other believers the importance of those believers also being linked with them in churches of God?

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3. In being United by and with Him
4. In following Him
5. In owning Him as Head of the Body
6. In being added alongside Him

7. In being subject to Him as Son over God's House

8. In remembering Him



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