

# **GOD'S WAY OF UNITY**

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## INTRODUCTION

THIS booklet is intended specially for Christians. But who are Christians? It is true that many who profess the name "Christian" have never known the experience of the new birth, and have no assurance of eternal life. True believers are those who have been born of God, and therefore have the Spirit of Christ indwelling them. "... unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (Jn 3:3). "... if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His" (Rom.8:9). To all who are Christ's this booklet is affectionately addressed. The writer hopes that the reader will give careful thought to what is written, it has been written with the conviction that there is a way of true unity — God's way. This was the longing of our Lord Jesus Christ when He prayed: "that they all may be one, as You, Father, *are* in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (Jn 17:21).

## THE HOPE OF THE BELIEVER

As believers on the Lord Jesus Christ we have much in common. We have, each of us, been saved from wrath to come through the work of our great Redeemer. We are members of His Body, and therefore dear to Him, our risen Head. Not only so, but being joined to Him, we are members one of another, and should love each other, because the love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts, through the Holy Spirit which was given to us. During the coming ages we shall share the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then all the differences which exist among believers today will be done away. The thought of His coming should gladden all our hearts. We delight to think of that day, when, united with the myriads of fellow-saints who have gone before us, we shall rise to meet Him, whom not having seen we love (1 Thess.4:14-18).

## OUR LOVE FOR GOD'S WORD

Another point which we should share in common is a love for God's word, so that the Bible is to each of us a constant companion. Others may deny its truth, but we know it to be the word of God which liveth and abideth. We do not live by bread only, but by God's word.

## OUR LOVE FOR THE GOSPEL

We rejoice also in the precious message of the Gospel. Our hearts warm to the story of redeeming love. God has imparted to us His own love for the souls of men, and we rejoice that Christ is being preached, and that men in every land are being turned from darkness to light. We have therefore a very great deal in which we can rejoice together, and much that we can talk about in a Christ-like way. A helpful promise has been given to us by the Lord Jesus when He said, "If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine ..." (Jn 7:17). Again through the apostle Paul, "... if in any-

thing you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you" (Phil.3:15). God will not leave us in ignorance of His will, if only we are willing to obey Him. We have no doubt that it is His will that we should be perfected together in the same mind, and in the same judgement (1 Cor.1:10). As already stated, the divisions which exist among believers today will one day be taken away, but it is His will for us, even now, that we should be one, even as the Father and the Son are one.

## THE UNITY OF BELIEVERS

The unity of believers (that is, unity in doctrine and practice) is inseparable from the truth of the Church and the Churches of God (1 Thess.2:13,14, etc.), and it is this subject which I wish to bring before you, and to leave with you to consider before the Lord. It must be obvious to each one that unity in practice can only be attained among believers who are one in doctrine. We must believe the same things. We can only be united in the Lord through collective obedience to the word of the Lord. It

is not sufficient that we should know Jesus as our Saviour, we must each bow to Him as Lord and Master.

That is, we must obey His word given to us through His apostles. We know that at the beginning all the believers were together holding the same doctrines and doing the same things. What a difference we see today! Now, believers are scattered in many different denominations and are often joined in church fellowship with those who are still unsaved. Many believers accept these divisions as inevitable and look upon all the different denominations as different branches of the Christian Church. That this is not so, we hope to show clearly in this booklet. The Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Truth has been given to guide us into all the truth (Jn 16:13). If we are willing-hearted He will teach us all the will of God, and this will is the same for us all. This is the way to Unity.

## THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST

Before we consider the subject of the Church and Churches of God let me write briefly concerning the Church which is the Body of Christ, and concerning baptism. All true believers are members of Christ, because they are members of the Church which is His Body. Therefore, we are all one in Christ and this Church comprises every believer from the day of Pentecost until the coming again of the Lord Jesus Christ. A knowledge of this truth will keep us from the error that a believer can fall away and perish. Please read Matt.16:18, Jn 10:27-29 and 1 Cor.3:13-15. The epistles to Ephesians and Colossians deal particularly with this truth concerning the Church which is the Body of Christ.

## BAPTISM IN THE SPIRIT

"For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...", wrote Paul to the Church of God in Corinth (1

Cor.12:13 ESV). This is the fulfilment of the Lord's promise in Acts 1:5. The one Body is the Church which is the Body of Christ. We should guard against the error of praying for the baptism of the Holy Spirit, but we should seek to manifest the Holy Spirit in our lives, day by day. Baptism in the Spirit into the Body of Christ takes place the moment a person puts faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Acts 10:44 and Acts 11:15-17 show clearly that the Gentile believers received the Holy Spirit when they believed. The apparent exceptions to this in Acts 8:14-17 and Acts 19:1-6 were Samaritans and Jews with whom God was dealing in a special way at the beginning of this dispensation.

## THE FULNESS OF THE SPIRIT

As believers on the Lord Jesus Christ we should seek to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Eph.5:18). This will be our experience if we yield ourselves to God (Rom.6:13; Rom.12:1), and if we are led by the Spirit of God. Apart from this, we shall bear little fruit. We have been bought

with a price and we are not our own. Let us not live unto ourselves, but into Him who for our sakes died and rose again (2 Cor.5:14,15).

## BAPTISM IN WATER

It is clearly taught in the Scriptures that baptism in water comes before church fellowship (Acts 2:41,42). It is evident from Acts 10:47 that baptism in water follows baptism in the Holy Spirit. The baptism of unbelievers or of infants is unknown in the Scriptures. In Acts 18:8 we read, "... many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized". This is the divine order. Only immersion or dipping will satisfy the word of the Lord. This is evident from Acts 8:38 and Rom.6:4. Baptism in water is a definite command by the Lord to His disciples. This we learn from Matt.28:19 and Acts 10:48. We are not left to choose our own way. As disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ we are commanded to be baptized. In Acts 8:36 we see the quick response in the heart of a disciple to the word of the Lord, "See, *here is* water. What

hinders me from being baptized?" The Master Himself has left us an example, that we should follow His steps (Matt.3:13-17). If you have not yet followed the Lord, being buried with Him by baptism (Rom.6:4), I would urge you not to delay in this, the first step of obedience.

## THE CHURCH OF GOD

The expression "the church of God" is found eight times in the Scriptures, and on each occasion it refers to a local assembly of believers. I would especially draw your attention to this, because many believers speak about the church of God when they are referring to the Church which is the Body of Christ. Others again seem to infer that the church of God comprises all professing Christians or church-goers, among whom, alas! are many who have never been born of God. I do earnestly ask that you will thoughtfully and prayerfully consider such Scriptural expressions as "the Church which is the Body of Christ", "the church of God", and "the churches of God". Real progress in doing the will of God, and in collective

testimony for Him, is impossible unless we have a clear understanding of the meaning of these expressions, and to whom they apply.

It will be helpful for us to examine the occurrences of the expression “the church of God”. In Acts 20:28, Paul is speaking to the overseers or elders of the church in Ephesus, and he says that the Holy Spirit had made them overseers to feed the church of God. They were not called upon to feed a part of the church of God, as though it was a world-wide thing, but to feed the church of God which was at Ephesus. The church of God at Ephesus was the company of baptized disciples in that city, called together of God. In 1 Cor.1:2, and 2 Cor.1:1, Paul is addressing the assembly of saints in Corinth, whom he terms the church of God at Corinth.

In 1 Cor.10:32, he exhorts the saints in Corinth to give no offence, either to Jews or Gentiles or to the church of God. Here the expression is defined by those whom

he addresses in 1 Cor.1:2. The expression “the church of God” in 1 Cor.11:22 in connection with the Breaking of the Bread shows that this is to be kept by the Lord's disciples who are together in churches of God. It was when they (the church) were assembled together that this ordinance was to be kept. Alas! the condition of many of the believers in Corinth called for reproof. They were in a right position, but in a wrong condition.

We should note in passing that there is no such thing in Scripture as occasional fellowship in a church of God, nor of any “breaking bread” who had not first been baptized and added, having, of course, first of all been born of God. Please note how carefully this is stated by the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:41-42. They received the word of the Lord through Peter (i.e. they were born again). They were baptized. They were added to those already together. Verse 47 shows that the Lord added them. They continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching. They continued also in (the) Fellowship. They continued in the breaking of the bread. They continued in the prayers (i.e.

the collective prayers of the church). Will you thoughtfully consider this?

In 1 Cor.15:9 Paul says, "I persecuted the church of God", reminding us of his life prior to his conversion, as seen in Acts 8:3 when he made havoc of the church in Jerusalem. He refers to the same time in Gal.1:13 when he writes, "I persecuted the church of God beyond measure and *tried to* destroy it". In 1 Tim.3:5 he speaks of the bishop or overseer taking care of the church of God. Here again the local assembly of saints is obviously in view. These scriptures show clearly that "the church of God" was the name by which each local assembly of saints was known in the beginning. They were "of God", that is, God brought the believers together in each place, because they were obedient to His word. It is evident that this name cannot rightly be applied to every gathering of professing Christians today, because of the obvious difference in doctrine and practice among them. Some churches are far removed in doctrine and practice

from those of the apostles, and the early churches of God.

Many believers will say that no company of Christians should now assume the name of the church of God, because there is now so much division among professing Christians. This is obviously wrong, because it implies that God cannot, or will not, bring together believers who obey Him, in the same way as He brought them together in the beginning. Those who love the Lord, and obey His word, will not agree to this. We must please God rather than men.

## THE CHURCHES OF GOD

Let us now consider the scriptures where we read about "the churches of God". This expression occurs three times. In 1 Cor.11:16 we read, "... if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor *do* the churches of God". Paul could write in this way about the churches of God, because they were linked together,

holding the same doctrines, and practicing the same things. Where the will of God is pre-eminent; contention ceases. In 1 Thess.2:14 it is written, "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus".

As the Gospel spread to Europe, the believers who were obedient to the word of the Lord were gathered together in churches of God, and these churches imitated the churches of God previously gathered together in Judaea. The churches of God in Judaea were obedient to the words of the apostles, and when the church in Thessalonica imitated them, they also showed that they were obedient to the words of the apostles. The words of the apostles are the words of the Lord, and when we obey their words, we obey His words. This is clearly taught in Lk.10:16 and 1 Cor.14:37.

Some believers stumble because they attach less importance to the teaching of the apostles than they do to the teaching of the Lord in the Gospels. Not so in the

churches of God — "... they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine" we read. The last occurrence of the expression "the churches of God" is in 2 Thess.1:4 "... we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith". The church of God in Thessalonica was a pattern to other churches of God in their faith and love and patience. So then the expression "the churches of God" clearly shows their plurality, and distinguishes them from the Church which is the Body of Christ, in which every believer is a member, and concerning which we read, "There is One Body" (Eph.4:4).

One scripture which might seem to present some difficulty is in 1 Cor.12:27 "Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually". It is evident, that though Paul was writing to the church of God in Corinth, he does not speak of the saints as being THE Body of Christ (the definite article "the" being omitted in the original); that is, he views them characteristically as Body of Christ, because they were "members in particu-

lar" of Christ's Body. This being their character the members should have a care one for another.

## THINGS THAT DIFFER

The vital difference should be clearly seen between the church of God, which is a local company of believers, and the Body of Christ which comprises all who have been born of God. The Church which is the Body of Christ is one, but the churches of God were, and are, many. Every believer, whether alive on the earth, or with Christ, is a member of His Body, and can never be severed from Him, but a person may be put away from the church of God because of sin (1 Cor.5:9), or even be wrongfully cast out, as we find in 3 Jn 10. How thankful we are, that this can never happen in the Church which is His Body! Neither failure on our part nor on the part of others can affect our eternal union with Christ Because He lives we shall live also. What a debt of love we owe Him! Surely we should no longer live unto ourselves but unto Him, who for our sake died and rose again.

Precious Saviour, Great Redeemer,  
Praise, eternal praise to Thee,  
Though so long a wandering sinner,  
Thou hast kindly welcomed me,  
Even me!"

## WHAT A CHURCH OF GOD IS

The meaning of the word "church" is of course an assembly, a company of "called out" people. A church of God is an assembly of persons who have been called together by God. Just as a child of God is one who has been born of God, so a church of God is a divinely-called-out and brought-together company. Such a call of God is seen in connection with the church in Antioch (Acts 11:19-22). When the church in Jerusalem heard of the work which had been done in Antioch, they sent forth Barnabas. Thus, the work there was established in fellow-

ship with the churches of God in Judaea. Though the call and the bringing-together were of God, yet He used His servants to do His will. The apostle Paul wrote about his work in Corinth, "I planted, Apollos watered ... for we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, *you are* God's building" (1 Cor.3:6-9).

## THE UNITY OF THE CHURCHES OF GOD

No church of God was planted except in fellowship with what had already been planted of God through His servants. Thus, the unity of the churches of God was assured, and so it is written of the church in Thessalonica, that they "became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess.2:14). In Acts 15 we see the unity of the churches in doctrine and practice, and in Acts 15:23-28 we see divine government throughout the whole. "... it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us", is the word of the apostles and elders. The word spoken through them became part of the faith

for all the churches (Acts 16:4,5). The work begun in fellowship was continued in fellowship. So, the churches of God, planted in fellowship, continued in the Fellowship (1 Cor.1:9).

## ELDERS IN THE CHURCHES OF GOD

We do not find in the Scriptures the one-man ministry of "the pastor" or "the minister" in any of the churches of God. We read in Acts 14:23 that the apostles appointed elders in every church. The appointing of one man for the ministry of the word of God and to rule in the church, shows that professing Christians have departed from the example of the apostles and the early churches of God. In Acts 20:28 we read that the elders of the church in Ephesus had been made overseers to feed the church of God. In the church at Philippi there were bishops (i.e. overseers, or elders) and deacons (Phil.1:1). In Titus 1:5 Paul commands Titus to appoint elders in every city (i.e. in every church). In Acts 15 we find the el-

ders meeting with the apostles in Jerusalem in regard to the will of God for His together-people.

We are thankful today for such guidance from the Word of God as to how the Lord would lead those who obey Him in the churches of God. One point which I would seek to emphasize, is the fact that though men were used in planting and governing, the whole was of God. We can only continue with God if we begin with Him. Because God uses elders in the government of His assemblies, we are exhorted to obey them, and to submit ourselves because they watch out for our souls (Heb.13:17).

It is evident then from the Scriptures that the churches of God were joined together. The leadership was one, and the doctrine and practice, one. The church of God in any town is one, no matter how many may be its meeting places. It is not a number of disconnected companies neither is it the aggregate of all the believers in all the different denominations, but it is composed of those whom

God has brought together, according to His word, in any city, town or village.

## CHURCHES OF GOD—HOW THEY ARE RECOGNISED

I should now like to examine the Scriptures in regard to the character of a church of God and how it can be recognized. In writing this I have no doubt about the fact that as God brings together an assembly, so will He bring to His assemblies those who call on Him out of a pure heart (2 Tim.2:22). Peter emphasized this when he said, "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). It is always a privilege to be called to do the will of God.

In Acts 2:41,42, we have marked out for us, as previously shown, the character of the church in Jerusalem, the first church of God. "Then those who gladly received his word were baptized; and that day about three thousand

souls were added *to them*. And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers". We should note that none was added who was unbaptized, and such as were added continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine (teaching). The apostles' teaching was to the disciples the teaching of the Lord. They continued also in (the) Fellowship. They were together as one. They continued also in the breaking of bread (the Remembrance of the Lord Jesus) and in the prayers. This was the nucleus of a work which was to spread through many provinces, even to Rome, but the principles throughout were the same.

The same order was observed — salvation, baptism, adding, continuing in the doctrine of the apostles, and in the Fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers. However many the churches of God may have been, the Fellowship was one — a community of persons which was of the Son of God (1 Cor.1:9). In Eph.2:20,21, these churches of God are seen as fitted or framed together growing into a holy temple in the Lord. This is the pat-

tern, and to this we should seek, as those who wish to be well-pleasing to God.

## ONE THING, COLLECTIVELY FOR GOD

It may be urged against such a unity, that there are many dear children of God who would be outside of it, either because of ignorance of it, or because they are remote from any one of the churches of God. We do not seek to judge the children of God, and He can find great pleasure in the individual lives of those who fear Him, in every land. But God's desire is that His scattered children should be gathered into one (thing) and this was one of the purposes of the death of Christ (Jn 11:52). It has pleased God both in the time of the Old Covenant and of the New to bring together a people for His Name. In Old Covenant times there was the place of the Name (Deut.12 and Deut.16) where alone they could keep the feasts of the Lord and offer sacrifices upon His altar. God is the God of His people; and He called those who

had made a covenant with Him by sacrifice to be gathered to Him (Ps.50:5 and Ex.24:1-11).

## THE EFFECT OF OBEDIENCE

In the New Covenant, God's requirements, after a spiritual kind, are the same. No new circumstances have arisen that God should alter the guidance given for us in the Acts of the Apostles. If we wish to be found in God's house — for God's people are God's house today (Heb.3:6) — then we must bow to His will, and He, who brings together His saints in churches of God, will surely bring those who seek Him out of a pure heart. We sincerely believe that God has wrought again in the hearts of His servants, and that today, according to the divine pattern as given to us in the Scriptures, He has brought together some of His saints in churches of God. To some this has cost much, for truth must be bought. "Buy the truth, and do not sell it", said the writer of the Proverbs (Prov.23:23). If first of all we give ourselves to

the Lord, then the truth and all that pertains to Him, will be dear to us.

## TO THE READER

In closing, I ask your prayerful thought on the Scriptures we have cited. If we have willing hearts, God will surely reveal His will to us, and fulfil in us the desire of the Lord Jesus even now "that they may all be one". That we are all one in Christ is something in which we can rejoice together. This oneness in Christ is ours through being born of God, but our oneness in the Lord can only be through obedience to the word of the Lord.

GUY JARVIE

The reader is warmly invited to write to the Publishers concerning the things written in this booklet.



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