

The Purpose for Fellowship Groups and Congregations



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All of us are *refugees* from one of the various churches of God. Most of these organizations have sprung up as a result of the apostatizing, scattering, and destruction of the Worldwide Church of God. We have all seen and experienced what it is like to *play church, play politics, play socials, play deacon/deaconess*—or *play elder, with command and control tactics*. Whether we were part of the playing or victims of the playing, we have all come out of those hypocritical practices. Moreover, it is also clearly evident that God the Father and Jesus Christ, who is the *Head* of the Church, are most displeased with many of the various spin-off church organizations. Why? Because they continue to use the same old corporate, carnal methods of operation—business as usual. And unless there is deep repentance of these practices, God will continue to scatter the brethren and will ultimately bring down those organizations.

In order for us to gain a better perspective, perhaps we need to understand what our true spiritual condition really was. The truth is this: although we had the Holy Spirit of God, the church organization itself, with its ministry, was conducted as a human, hierarchical, corporate organization. It should, however, have been conducted as a part of the body of Christ—by following the plain instructions of the New Testament. Yes, we had the Bible. Yes, we understood about the commandments of God, the Sabbath, the holy days, and all of the other teachings we had. Indeed, the appearance was given that the Word of God was consulted. And by all appearances, our activities looked religious. However, instead of following Scripture, we did what “seemed right in our own eyes” after the manner of a worldly, business corporation. Consequently, we assumed that everything was great and that we were “right with God.” But we were not! We did not see our true spiritual condition, because our eyes were blinded to the reality of the gross, carnal depths to which we had sunk.

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The truth is, **we were probably all Laodiceans**—and may have been from day one—but didn't know it. And what we have all experienced *over the past few years* has been **the correction of God**. Let us read Jesus' message to the church of the Laodiceans—and take His words to heart, realizing that He is speaking directly to each one of us. “And to the angel of the church of *the* Laodiceans, write: These things says the **Amen** [This refers to Christ as the finisher of the plan of salvation. He is the final authority, not man!], the faithful and true Witness, the Beginner of the creation of God. **‘I know your works** [nothing is hidden from God], that **YOU** [not somebody else—you, me] **are neither cold nor hot; I would** [The Greek verb *opheiloo* means “you must be” or “you are obligated.”] *that you be either cold or hot.*

“So then, **because you are lukewarm**, and *are* neither cold nor hot, **I will spew you out of My mouth** [like vomit]. For you say [proudly proclaim], “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing” [That self-satisfied condition could be expressed this way: “Just look at all we have—members, income, schools, youth camps, magazines, TV programs. And *we* have the *correct* understanding of the Bible!”]; and [yet] you do not understand that you are [spiritually] wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked’ ” (Rev. 3:14-17).

They are *lukewarm* because they do not love God with all their hearts and minds. Here is a good description of the Laodicean *comfort zone*: “be balanced, get along, don't rock the boat” and “always be politically correct.” Although a Laodicean is half-hearted in his relationship to God, he attaches the name of Jesus to his religious activities. So he appears religious and feels good about himself; he is righteous in his own eyes. But God isn't fooled.

Laodiceans believe that *physical blessings* indicate spiritual strength and “right standing” with God. But they don't. *Spiritual* things are never accomplished through *physical* means.

So Christ removed all of the physical things that we trusted in—which were really idols before God. He took away lands, buildings, colleges, Feast sites, radio and television programs, magazines, books, booklets, jobs, cars, buses—and

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the veneer of security all those physical things seemed to provide. Those physical things did not produce a deep spiritual love for God or zeal to serve Him. Rather, spiritual apathy developed, and trust in physical things replaced faith in God. Social fellowship with one another replaced spiritual fellowship with God the Father and Jesus Christ. Various “church activities” replaced prayer and Bible study. Church leaders kept the ministers and members so *busy* that they did not have time to develop a close, personal relationship with the Father and Christ.

Even the evangelistic outreach to the world on radio and television was changed. The messages were softened, made lukewarm, and politically correct. Instead of the unmitigated Gospel of the kingdom, including repentance and faith in God, we preached a “gospel” of psychology expounding humanistic ideas such as “get along, go along, be happy” and “feel good.” The literature was likewise changed. Worst of all, basic doctrines were changed. Instead of being taught the strong spiritual meat of God’s Word, we were fed the sing-song pabulum of psychological platitudes served up like warm skim milk. This all appealed to our lukewarm Laodicean comfort zone—which Jesus found most repugnant. So in effect He said, “I am vomiting you out of My mouth.”

Indeed, Christ is now *correcting* His people because of our sins. He is removing all artificial “comfort zones.” This is why the Church *continues* to be scattered—and it will continue until God has our undivided attention. He is compelling *each one of us to stand on our own*. He is destroying all of our idols, and all of the religious/social nonsense we called “church”—*so that we may find Him!* Salvation is found in Christ alone. **God is leading us to repentance because He loves us.** Notice what Jesus says to the Laodicean: “I counsel you to buy from Me gold purified by fire so that you may be rich; and white garments so that you may be clothed, and the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and to anoint your eyes with eye salve, so that you may see. **As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore, be zealous and repent!**” (Rev. 3:18-19).

Here is a description of what many in the Church have been through, as indicated by countless stories told by brethren:

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“I did not understand what was happening to the Church, or to me. Everything was crazy and upside down. Christ was cast out of the Church! Every doctrine was changed! Then the world came in—lock, stock, and barrel! I cried out to God, ‘Help me to understand what on earth is going on!’ He answered that prayer only after I realized that **I was a piece of vomit!** I came to see that nothing was wrong with God, but everything was wrong with me and my church. I began to see that I myself was a Laodicean—rather than everyone else who I thought were Laodiceans. I was the one who was putrid, ugly, blind, and naked—nothing but a piece of spiritual vomit and swill. Then, I came to myself and began to truly repent. Wow! What a revelation! I had built my spiritual house out of wood, hay, and stubble. I realized that it was all burning to the ground and the ashes were being blown away. There I was, standing like a starved Holocaust victim—nothing but a hulk of skin and bones, spiritually starving, standing alone and empty. But God the Father and Jesus Christ are loving and merciful. Now I am being restored and made alive again through God’s Word and His Spirit—with zeal and dedication. I thank God for His great love and mercy!”

What a vivid description of the spiritual state of too many of us in the various churches of God. But God is calling us out of this condition!

Notice what else Christ says to the Laodicean: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door [of your heart and mind], I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with Me. To the one who overcomes will I give *authority* to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcame, and sat down with My Father in His throne. **The one who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches**” (verses 20-22).

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We have been personally called to eternal life—the greatest and most awesome calling possible. There are vital spiritual lessons God wants us to learn from all of this. May God grant us deep repentance and “ears to hear”! May God grant us the zeal to love Him and serve Him with all of our hearts!

Although we may have repented of many of our personal sins and spiritual shortcomings, we still have many things to learn about the *purpose* of a local fellowship group or congregation. Throughout this ongoing scattering, we have seen numerous local fellowship groups and spin-off congregations destroyed. Brethren were hurt and disillusioned *again*—sometimes repeatedly. Why does this continue to happen?

I think a very wise woman stated it most accurately. She said, **“You can get a person out of a church organization, but you can’t get the church organization out of a person.”** How true! This is a major cause of a great many troubles in fellowship groups and congregations. In spite of the fact that everyone desires to do what is right, it is all too easy to carry over the same old wrong ways and habits into our current fellowship—because that is all we have ever known.

Nearly all of the fellowship groups of the Christian Biblical Church of God (CBCG) have had peace and harmony—for the most part. But we have experienced some difficulties. In correcting those problems, the causes became apparent: most troubles could be traced back to doing things in the *same old ways* they had been done in the past! Nearly all such problems have, fortunately, been resolved. How? We applied the instructions of Jesus from Matthew 18.

God continues to call more and more brethren into fellowship with the Christian Biblical Church of God. And we are steadily adding brethren to our mailing list.

As the need for additional fellowship groups continues to grow, we must have a clear understanding of the *purpose* for fellowship groups and local church congregations. We need to understand from the Bible *how they should be conducted*. We cannot carry over the problematic methods of operation from past church organizations. To do so would only perpetuate the same old mistakes and problems.

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The Problems in Corinth

During his ministry, the apostle Paul experienced many of the same problems with the church at Corinth that we have experienced in the various churches of God. Too many of the brethren in the Corinthian congregations were self-centered, rather than Christ-centered. This resulted in strife and divisions, heresies, drunkenness, fornication, and false doctrines—all because they were carnal babes in Christ while *thinking* that they were spiritual. Paul even lamented that he could not speak to them as spiritual, but as carnal. “And, I, brethren, was not able to speak to you as to those who are spiritual, but as to those who are carnal—even as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, and not meat; for you were not yet able *to receive spiritual meat*; and neither are you able now, for you are still carnal. For since envy and contention and divisions *are* among you, are you not carnal? And *are you not* walking according to human ways [instead of God’s ways]?” (I Cor. 3:1-3).

Notice what Paul wrote concerning their church meetings. It was anything but spiritual. It was anything but edifying. It was anything but loving. It was a religious zoo! He wrote, “[W]hen you assemble together, it is not for the better **but for the worse**” (I Cor. 11:17). How many church meetings have you attended where you came with a good attitude—hoping to be edified and to enjoy fellowship with the brethren—only to come away distraught and depressed?

That is what the church at Corinth was like—but even worse. Some of the most self-centered, self-serving brethren were babbling in tongues in a vain display of foolishness. It was so bad that Paul had to write, “Therefore, if the whole church is assembled together in one place, and all are speaking in *unknown* languages, and unlearned persons or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you have lost your minds?” (I Cor. 14:23).

They had a competitive spirit among themselves—as to who was the greatest. Sabbath services had become contentious, an unending hassle. Yet they considered themselves spiritual. Notice what Paul had to write: “What is it then, brethren? When you assemble together, each of you has a psalm, has a doctrine, has a language, has a revelation, *or* has

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an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification [not for the gratification of your own carnal, self-serving motives]" (I Cor. 14:26).

Now you know why Paul wrote what he did about *love*. A short summary of First Corinthians is this: "If you do not have the *love of God*, nothing you do will serve God's eternal purpose. It is all vain and will all self-destruct." Brethren, that is exactly what we have been doing to ourselves in the various churches of God! We have been destroying each other. I am sure we are all sick and tired of going through this over and over again. And if *we* are sick and tired of it, we know that *God* is definitely not pleased either.

The Wrong Kind of Fellowship Takes You Away From God

Another reason that God's correction has been upon the churches of God is because of the wrong kind of fellowship. How did that happen? It began by seeking the approval and friendship of the world. In order to receive that approval and friendship, everything—the colleges, the television program, the literature, and doctrine itself—was changed and made "user-friendly" for the world.

Few realized that these changes, gradually implemented over a period of years, were actually spiritually adultery before God. Notice what the apostle James wrote, "*You adulterers and adulteresses, don't you know that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever desires to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*" (James 4:4).

A wrong kind of fellowship subsequently developed. Paul wrote this warning to the church at Ephesus: "Do not let anyone deceive you with vain words; for because of these things [the works of the flesh and works of the world] the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore, do not be joint partakers with them. For you were once darkness; but now *you are* light in *the* Lord. Walk as children of light.... And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose *them*" (Eph. 5:6-11).

Once this kind of carnal fellowship is established, in nearly every case it goes to the next level—fellowship with

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demons. Paul also warned the church at Corinth of that very thing. “But that which the Gentiles sacrifice [to idols], they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not wish you to have fellowship with demons. You cannot drink *the* cup of *the* Lord, and *the* cup of demons. You cannot partake of *the* table of *the* Lord, and *the* table of demons” (I Cor. 10:20-21).

The leaders and ministers of the churches of God have led the brethren right back into the world by making friends with the world and seeking their approval. The next step in that process is fellowship with demons. And that is beginning to happen. Furthermore, they are blinded by their own intellect. Instead of being led by the Holy Spirit and trusting in the Word of God, they are relying on their own wisdom and seeking the endorsement of men and the world.

For many in those organizations, it may be too late to stop and reverse course. But we need to understand how to stop such *worldliness* in our own personal lives. Wrong kinds of fellowship can be stopped—but only if we turn to God with all of our hearts and minds and quit “playing church” and “social club.” Then we can learn what true, Christian fellowship really is—and how to maintain it.

It All Begins With True Repentance

The first thing we need to realize is that Christ is leading us to repentance. Repentance means a complete change of heart and mind—a complete change of direction—from carnal to spiritual, from lukewarm to zealous. We must return to God the Father and Jesus Christ with all of our hearts and minds. Superficial change or cosmetic reorganization/restructuring is not true repentance—and is doomed to failure. Yet nearly all of the various spin-off church organizations have reorganized or restructured instead of repenting. So nothing has changed! This is why the heavy hand of Christ’s correction will continue upon them.

We need to understand that human wisdom and methods, regardless of how good and right they appear in our eyes, change nothing. At best, human psychological changes tend only to redirect the same old carnal efforts. All worldly, carnal success formulas employ such methods of redirection. But that is not godly repentance—i.e., *change*. This kind of sorrow or

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redirection is only carnal remorse. Our repentance must come from the depth of our beings. It is not enough to be intellectually convinced of things right and wrong. We must have repentance (change) unto real conversion of the heart and mind.

Notice how God pleads earnestly with His people to repent and turn to Him: “ ‘Therefore even now,’ says the LORD, ‘turn to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, and with weeping, and with mourning. Yes, rend your heart and not your garments, and return to the LORD your God: for He *is* gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness, and He repents of the evil [relents of His planned harsh correction]’ ” (Joel 2:12-13).

True, deep, heart-rending repentance brings us back to God, through His grace and forgiveness. Godly repentance leads to conversion and a changed nature. God then imparts His love, enabling us to begin growing again in grace and knowledge, empowering us to have the mind of Christ. We can begin viewing things through the lens of God’s Word, as led by the Holy Spirit. We will no longer view things for the self or carnal purposes. Once the love of God becomes the craving desire and burning focus of your life, you will begin to understand. God will lead you by His Spirit. Your whole perspective will change, not only on an individual level, but as a fellowship group or congregation. This is why we need to understand the all-important purpose of godly fellowship.

What is True Christian Fellowship?

The true importance of Christian fellowship is not limited to social interaction with each other. There is a deeper, more profound foundation upon which Christian fellowship is built. Paul makes it clear that Jesus is the only foundation on which to build your Christian life. “For no one is able to lay any other foundation besides that which has been laid, which is Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 3:11). That is the *only foundation* for everything we are and do!

Similarly, our fellowship *begins* with Jesus Christ. “God *is* faithful, by Whom you were **called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord**” (I Cor. 1:9). The word “fellowship” comes from the Greek *koinooma*, meaning “fellowship [with someone], a close relationship, communion,

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association, participation and sharing” (*Arndt and Gingrich*). So we need to understand that we have not been called into a social club, or a religion, or a church organization. **We have been called into fellowship with Jesus Christ!**

We have been called, chosen, and selected by God the Father through Christ; and He has given us His Holy Spirit. That is the power of our fellowship—not human, social relationships. Our fellowship is based on God’s love and grace, as Paul wrote in closing his second epistle to the Corinthians: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit *be* with you all. Amen” (II Cor. 13:13). It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we can have godly fellowship based on God’s love and grace.

The apostle John reveals more about godly fellowship. Like Paul, he also begins with Jesus as the foundation of our fellowship. “That which was from *the* beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our own eyes, that which we observed for ourselves and our own hands handled, concerning the Word of life (and the life was manifested, and we have seen, and are bearing witness, and are reporting to you the eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested to us). That which we have seen and have heard we are reporting to you in order that you also may have fellowship with us; **for the fellowship—indeed, our fellowship—*is* with the Father and with His own Son, Jesus Christ” (I John 1:1-3).**

True spiritual fellowship always *begins* with God—before any genuine fellowship with each other. Why? **Because God the Father and Jesus Christ have called us into a deep personal spiritual relationship with them.** This fellowship can only be maintained by prayer and Bible study—and we also need to meditate and occasionally fast.

And we need to understand that a church—an assembly of brethren as a congregation or fellowship group—is not simply a “social function.” *It is a spiritual function!* This is why John referred to it as “*the fellowship*.” This special fellowship *begins* with God. Then it becomes “*our fellowship*” with each other—based on our genuine fellowship with God the Father and Jesus Christ—grounded in love and grace.

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On the night of His last Passover, Jesus instructed His disciples that this close personal relationship is all **based on the love of God**. The following passage that John was inspired to record includes some of the most profound words of Christ: “If you love Me, keep the commandments—namely, My commandments.... The one who has My commandments and is keeping them, that is the one who loves Me; and the one who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will manifest Myself to him.... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and **We will come to him and make Our abode with him**” (John 14:15, 21, 23).

Brethren, this is absolutely wonderful! Through the power of the Holy Spirit, both God the Father and Jesus Christ *are in us!* No wonder John wrote, “**The fellowship—indeed, our fellowship—is with the Father and with His own Son, Jesus Christ.**”

But we must *develop* this fellowship through the power of the Holy Spirit—through prayer, Bible study, and by living in the grace and love of God. *This is our primary fellowship.* We must love God and receive the love of God back to us. This is how we can fulfill the “new commandment” that Jesus gave to His disciples concerning godly fellowship with each other. “A new commandment I give to you: that you love one another in the same way that I have loved you, that *is how* you are to love one another. By this shall everyone know that you are My disciples—if you love one another.... As the Father has loved Me, I also have loved you; live in My love. If you keep My commandments, you shall live in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and live in His love. These things I have spoken to you, in order that My joy may dwell in you, and *that* your joy may be full. **This is My commandment: that you love one another, as I have loved you**” (John 13:34-35; 15:9-12).

When we assemble together for Sabbath and holy day services, God wants our fellowship to be based on *love*. Knowing that he would soon die, Paul wrote to the Philippians from the depths of his heart—desiring earnestly that they remain in the love and fellowship of Christ. He encouraged them with these words: “Now then, if *there be* any encouragement

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in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any **fellowship of the Spirit**, if any *deep* inner affections and compassions, fulfill my joy, that you be of the same mind, having the same love, being joined together in soul, minding the one thing [attaining the Kingdom of God]. *Let* nothing *be* done through contention or vainglory, but in humility, each esteeming the others above himself. Let each one look not *only* after his own things, but *let* each one also *consider* the things of others” (Phil. 2:1-4).

What Paul wrote to the Philippians describes the godly standard for fellowship and personal relationships in the Church: no strife, no tension, no vain-glorying, no self-serving attitudes. Rather, we are to grow into the *mind of Christ*. Paul sums up: “Let this mind be in you, which *was* also in Christ Jesus” (verse 5).

This is exactly the attitude we need to have. With God’s grace and guidance, we must all strive to develop this kind of loving fellowship in the fellowship groups and congregations of the Christian Biblical Church of God. Only then can we end the strife we have all experienced, and truly grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

What the Mind of Christ in Us Will Do

Writing to the Ephesians, Paul added to the instructions he had given to the Philippians: “Therefore, I, the prisoner of *the* Lord, am exhorting you to walk worthily of the calling to which you were called with all humility and meekness, with long-suffering, forbearing one another in love; being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. *There is* one body and one Spirit, even as you were also called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, Who *is* over all, and through all, and in you all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Eph. 4:1-7).

Just imagine how much more profitable our Sabbath services and personal fellowship could be if we diligently seek to foster this kind of atmosphere in our assemblies. Imagine how much God will be pleased as well—to enjoy genuine fellowship with His children! And if we are pleasing God, will He not pour out His Holy Spirit, His grace and understanding, His love? “And whatever we may ask we receive from Him because we keep His

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commandments and **practice those things that are pleasing in His sight**” (I John 3:22).

As a minister and teacher, my focus and goal is to help each one of you to grow in the grace and the knowledge of Christ. Everything I do to serve the brethren must be based on the love of God. Jesus’ admonition to Peter is the standard for every minister and teacher of God’s Word. Here is the account in John 21: “Therefore, when they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, *son* of Jonas, do you **love** [Greek *agapao*, godly love] Me more than these?’ *And* he said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord. You know that I **love** [Greek *philo*, brotherly love] You.’ He said to him, ‘**Feed My lambs.**’ He said to him again a second time, ‘Simon, *son* of Jonas, do you **love** [Greek *agapao*, godly love] Me?’ *And* he said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord. You know that I **love** [Greek *philo*, brotherly love] You.’ He said to him, ‘**Shepherd My sheep.**’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon, *son* of Jonas, do you **love** [Greek *philo*, brotherly love] Me?’ Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, ‘Do you love Me?’ *And* he said to Him, ‘Lord, You know all things. You know that I **love** [Greek *philo*, brotherly love] You.’ Jesus said to him, ‘**Feed My sheep**’ ” (verses 15-17).

If the *love of God* is our foundation, then we will also love the brethren and will serve them as Jesus would have us do. Indeed, to love Christ first is the foundation for all ministers and teachers in feeding the flock of God. Paul gives the ultimate goal for pastors and teachers: “*And* He gave some as apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists; and some, **pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ**; until we all come into the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto *the* measure of *the* stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we no longer be children, tossed and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men in *cunning* craftiness, with a view to the systematizing of the error; but holding the truth in love, may in all things grow up into Him Who is the Head, *even* Christ” (Eph. 4:11-15).

Brethren, as a pastor and teacher, my *heart’s desire* for each of you is that by the love and grace of God you will inherit His kingdom—to live forever as sons and daughters of God in full glory with the highest reward possible.

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The Importance of the Grace and the Love of God

It is vital that we continue to grow in the grace and love of God. This is the whole purpose of our calling! We need the grace and love of God in order to have the mind of Christ. We need the grace and love of God to have true Christian fellowship. With that in mind, it is needful that we all study the sermon series on the *Grace of God* (including any literature on grace) and the series on the *Love of God* (which is part of the *Epistles of John* series). The *Grace* series has six audio messages and the *Love* series has 15 messages.

One individual commented: “I did not understand the purpose of a fellowship group until I studied the *Grace of God* series and the *Love of God* series. If you miss those sermons, you have missed everything! Now I know why we were so miserable and carnal in our former church. Please tell the brethren that it is vitally necessary for them to study these two series, especially if they are attending a local fellowship group.” This person felt so strongly about this that he even recommended that it should be *mandatory* for newcomers to a fellowship group to study those series. I have received the same reaction and recommendation from others. So if you do not have these two series—on *Grace* and *Love*—please request them right away.

A Summary of the Purpose of Fellowship

True Christian fellowship means to:

Fellowship first and foremost with God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Let Christ *in* you and *lead* you by the Holy Spirit.

Receive the comfort of the Holy Spirit, with the fruits of the Spirit.

Fellowship with each other in the *grace* and *love* of God.

Learn of God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Grow in grace and knowledge. Not just head knowledge, but *heart-changing* spiritual knowledge.

Develop the mind of Christ.

Become fully mature Christians.

Develop godly character for all eternity.

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Things not to do:

- Do not judge each other or impute motives as if you can read another person's mind.
- Do not judge others from your own selfish hurt feelings and emotions.
- Do not judge others based on appearances; judge "righteous judgment" based on truth and obvious fruits.
- Do not focus on faults and mistakes—we all have them—but love each other.
- Do not insist on your rights; rather, be willing to be wronged and quietly endure it.

Parameters for Sabbath Services

Nearly all of us have been accustomed to having Sabbath services organized accordingly: 1) three opening songs; 2) an opening prayer; 3) a sermonette; 4) announcements; 5) another hymn; 6) special music; 7) the sermon; 8) a closing hymn; and 9) a closing prayer. This pattern of organization has become so familiar that many have accepted it as divinely inspired. But that format was not divinely inspired—and other formats are just as valid.

Formats for services can vary widely. Having congregational hymns, for example, is not a requirement for every Sabbath. And it is not necessary to always have a sermonette—or special music. Many times it is good to have a discussion period before the main study. This can vary from Bible questions to world news to requests for prayer for brethren.

On many occasions, the brethren give added input during our local study. This is done by raising a hand so that I can put the recorder on pause and listen to the question or comment. Then I respond with a biblical answer to the question or add to the comment. If the question or comment fits in with what I am teaching that day, I will turn the recorder back on so that the discussion becomes part of the recorded study—so everyone will benefit from the exchange.

Women are free to ask questions; but if there are Scriptures to be read, I read them (or another man reads them) rather than the woman. Thus we do not violate the biblical instructions that forbid women to teach in the assembly. But for a woman to simply ask a question—that is not teaching. It all works very

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well, and we have no problems.

If there are enough men attending a fellowship group, it would be good to rotate the host from Sabbath to Sabbath. All the men who have the ability to host services should be given the opportunity to do so, if they desire.

Likewise with sermonettes, which can be helpful and informative if properly presented. Those who are adept at giving sermonettes should be utilized. But always pray about your topic, asking God to inspire you to bring something that will edify and build up the brethren. And always teach from the Scriptures. Sermonettes are meant to be short messages with one or two main points and only a few scriptures—and should be *no longer* than 12-15 minutes. Also, it is not necessary to have a sermonette each week. Perhaps once or twice a month would work fine. The fellowship group or congregation should openly discuss the use of sermonettes.

I would recommend that the Sabbath format be varied. Perhaps one week there might a sermonette in addition to the weekly recorded Bible study. The second week there might be a news discussion before or after services. The third week there might be a discussion after the Bible study. The fourth week there might be another sermonette. It is best that we do not get stuck in the same old routine—so look for ways to have variety.

Sabbath services are meant to be a *joy*. We attend to learn and be edified, not depressed and discouraged. Our fellowship is meant to build *peace* and enable us to *grow* in the love of God. Services are no place to nit-pick others or put on a self-serving display of vanity. We must use our Sabbath fellowship to grow in grace and knowledge—and to grow in our love for God and for each other.

Motivated by the Holy Spirit and the love of God, we can have inspiring and edifying Sabbath services and put the carnal problems of the past behind us.

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