

The Foundation and Practice of Godly Fellowship

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In the New Testament the English word “church” is translated from the Greek word ἐκκλησία, (*ekklesia*) which is a compound word, consisting of the preposition ἐκ, or ἐξ, (*ek* or *ex*) meaning from or out, and a derivative of καλέω (*kaleō*), which means to call. So the word “church” from the standpoint of the Greek from which it is translated is a calling out, hence, an assembly.

The word synagogue in the New Testament is translated from the Greek συναγωγή (*sunagoge*), a compound of συν (*sun*) and αγω (*ago*), meaning to lead or bring together, hence, also meaning an assembly.

In effect, the words “church” and “synagogue” are two words for the same thing, an assembly.

A related English word is fellowship. One definition of “fellowship” according to *Webster’s Dictionary* is, “a state of being together.” Sometimes we may speak of a particular church body as being a “fellowship,” as distinct from other church bodies which may (or may not) have similar beliefs and practices, but are separate entities from an organizational standpoint.

Another definition of fellowship is “an association of people who share common beliefs or activities” (*Wordnet*).

While the ideas of church, synagogue and fellowship are related, the word “fellowship” has certain connotations of its own. The several Greek words in the New Testament translated “fellowship” in the King James and New King James translations are mostly related to the word κοινός (*koinos*), which means common, or shared. Sometimes these words are translated into various forms of the words communion, communication, or sharing, as well as fellowship.

Let’s explore the idea of “fellowship” from the standpoint of Scripture. What does the Bible say about the proper foundation for Christian fellowship, and how may godly fellowship be practiced?

Often in the Church when people speak of “fellowship” it is thought of in terms of social activities, such as engaging in casual conversation, an activity, such as a dance, or a camp-out, or a common meal.

But the Bible use of the term is much broader, and deeper, as we will see as we proceed. In the Bible are specific instructions and examples of fellowship, how to fellowship, and how not to. The Bible also is very specific about the proper foundation for Christian fellowship.

Before I go further, however, I want to digress a bit about some of the history of the Church of God as I’ve observed it over a period of almost sixty years.

I began studying the doctrines of the Worldwide Church of God in 1962. After a couple of years, in the fall of 1964, I enrolled at the Church’s college, Ambassador College. I had already spent three and a half years in other colleges that were accredited, but Ambassador

College would not accept most of my previous course credits, and required me to enroll as a freshman. I had a single motive for entering the college. I wanted to learn more about the Bible's teachings, and based on previous study, I thought that was the best place to learn more of the truth of what the Bible teaches.

I didn't enroll in the college to engage in social activities, date girls, or become a minister. I did in fact engage in a lot of social activities, dated a lot of girls, and eventually I became a minister in the Church, but none of those things was the reason I enrolled. I wanted to go there to learn, period.

While academic learning was certainly a primary reason for the existence of the college, a lot of emphasis was placed on social activities, and in some ways it seemed the social aspects of the experience took precedence over the knowledge that could be gleaned from study. A person who was perceived as studying too much for the tastes of certain members of the faculty, was deemed "unbalanced," and it seemed being considered "unbalanced," if it meant being too studious, was something to be avoided at all costs. I frankly don't know if anyone at the college considered me "unbalanced," and in any case it wasn't something I was particularly concerned about, but I did think the concept was curious. I do know some men were placed in the ministry who were well grounded in the Bible, although they no doubt had much to learn, as we all do, but there were a number of others placed in the ministry who were not as well grounded as they might have been. How much the attitudes of some of the faculty towards serious study played a part in that, I don't know, but it may have influenced some to take study less seriously than they might have otherwise.

After I graduated from college I moved to Missouri and was attending a local church congregation, of well over a hundred people. Most, but not all, of the people involved seemed to be there because of their commitment to the doctrines being taught. There was a warmth and genuine love and concern for one another that was palpable, although there were certain marked problems with some individuals as well.

There were what some might call "fellowship" opportunities, regularly. Not only regular services and weekly Bible studies, but speech clubs, common meals, and informal gatherings, others directed by the leadership in the Church, such as dances, basketball games, etc. Some of the activities I helped organize and manage, but the activities at the time did not seem to take precedence over the spiritual instruction and emphasis in the Church. The activities were generally planned with the whole church congregation in mind, and were not limited to a certain age group, and sometimes involved the participation of a nearby congregation. But these larger activities were not weekly affairs, and occurred usually only two or three times a year.

Over the years, however, things began to change. A very influential person in the top leadership of the Church decided sometime in the 1970s that young people were not being exposed to enough "activities." So the Church developed a program called Y.O.U., abbreviation for "Youth Opportunities United." His idea was that activities were the key to keeping young people in the Church as they got older.

After a while, no longer were activities managed so much on the local level, but more on a district level, with churches in each district being involved in an endless round of youth oriented activities. The adults generally were left as spectators, if they participated at all, and the parents left with paying the bills for weekly excursions to places often many miles from home, and not uncommonly involving one or two nights in a motel. Eventually, the announcement portion of a typical weekly Sabbath service consumed forty-five minutes to an hour, and was to a large extent focused on announcements about Y.O.U. activities.

Y.O.U. also involved Bible lessons, but the emphasis was heavily weighted towards sports or other activities that had no connection with the Bible, and in my view, became detrimental to the lives of many of the participants, both parents and young people. It's as though the Church had inserted itself as a surrogate parent, displacing to a large extent the actual parents for many families, at least in certain respects. I began to view it, not so much as a help, but more of a disruption and hindrance to normal family life. I allowed my children to participate in some of the activities, but not all, because in my view they were excessive.

Eventually, in the late 1980s and into the nineties, Y.O.U. activities seemed to become the main focus of the Church at large, even as the true doctrines of the Bible were being systematically and subtly undermined by apostate leaders in the Church. When the bubble burst and the Worldwide Church of God organization collapsed in 1995, the young people who remained faithful to the truth of God's word were relatively few. It seems "activities," of the kind indicated, were not the key, after all, to remaining in the Church organization, and even less the key to remaining faithful to God.

Activities, social interaction, is not necessarily of itself wrong, of course. But if it becomes a distraction, if it leads us in the wrong direction, it can become a barrier to making progress spiritually.

Nevertheless, fellowship, of the right kind, and on the proper foundation, is essential to the vitality of the Church, and to the spiritual welfare of every member of the Church.

So let's talk about the foundation for godly fellowship.

Godly fellowship begins with one's fellowship with God. We are called, first and foremost, not into fellowship with other human beings on the earth, but into fellowship with God the Father and Jesus Christ. "God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (I Corinthians 1:9).

Fellowship among ourselves in a godly fashion is impossible if we do not mutually have the right kind of fellowship relationship with God himself.

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life -- the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that **you also may have fellowship with us**; and truly our **fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ**. And these things we write to

you that your joy may be full. This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that **God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin**" (I John 1:1-7).

Note carefully that godly fellowship with one another is predicated on our having fellowship first with God, and that in turn requires that we walk in light, that is, in the truth of God's word. If we are not striving diligently to live by the commandments of God's word, we do not have fellowship with God.

"Now **by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments.** He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. **By this we know that we are in Him** [i.e., have fellowship with him]. **He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked**" (I John 2:3-6).

Jesus lived in perfect obedience to God, and we are to strive to follow his example.

"For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (II Corinthians 5:21).

If we are to have fellowship with God, we must strive daily to put sin out of our lives, because willful sin cuts us off from God.

"For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, Nor shall evil dwell with You" (Psalms 5:4).

Our fellowship with God and with one another must be rooted in a **common belief.**

"Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3).

If we are to have godly fellowship with one another, we must properly understand and believe **the teachings of God's word.** We must walk in the light of the truth of God's word, and reject the works of darkness.

"Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma. But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know, that no fornicator, unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. **Walk as children of light** (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord. And **have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness,** but rather expose them. For it is

shameful even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret” (Ephesians 5:1-12).

We are **sanctified by the truth**, and by believing the truth (as well as by the Holy Spirit and the blood of Jesus Christ).

“But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God from the beginning chose you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and **belief in the truth**” (II Thessalonians 2:13; to more fully understand this verse, see our articles, “Are the Lost Predestined to Hell?” and “Are Many or Few Called in This Age?”).

“I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. **Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.** As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be **sanctified by the truth**. I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; 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” (John 17:11-21).

Jesus said if we are to be true disciples of his, we must abide in his word, which is the truth. “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, **‘If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.** And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31-32).

In the fellowship the early disciples in the Church enjoyed, doctrine was the focal point. “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' **doctrine** and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Paul spoke of the **fellowship of the gospel**, which is God's word (cf. Acts 8:25; Ephesians 1:13; Hebrews 4:2; I Peter 1:25). Living by God's word and supporting the work of sharing it with others is an important part of our fellowship with one another. “Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, **for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now**, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:1-6).

If we believe the truth, and live by the truth, we are one with God, and become one with one another through that faith, or belief.

To sanctify means to separate for a holy purpose. Sanctification separates us from those who reject the truth, so we cannot have spiritual fellowship with them as we may with those who believe and obey the truth.

When I applied for admission to Ambassador College, I had never attended a service of the Worldwide Church of God. I didn't attend a service until several months later, after I had received a letter of admission. A short time after I attended, before I left for college, the local pastor of the Church visited me. He gave me one piece of advice, which I found rather surprising at the time, but it was good advice. He told me, be careful with whom you associate. Unfortunately, that same minister left the Church a few years later, largely because of the people with whom he had associated himself. After that I don't know what became of him.

In the world and in the Church, we need to be careful with whom we associate, and whom we allow to influence us. We cannot be participants in the evil deeds of people in the world, nor of those ostensibly in the Church. That doesn't mean we mistreat people, or look down on them, but we must not allow ourselves to be involved with them in any way that would cause us to violate God's word.

“Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers [as with “animals of different kinds and species” – *Barnes Notes*]. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what accord has Christ with Belial? Or what part has a believer with an unbeliever? And what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said: ‘I will dwell in them And walk among them. I will be their God, And they shall be My people.’ Therefore ‘Come out from among them And be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, And I will receive you.’ ‘I will be a Father to you, And you shall be My sons and daughters, Says the Lord Almighty.’” (II Corinthians 6:14-18).

To be a friend of this world is to be an enemy to God. “Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).

“Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever” (I John 2:15-17).

Yet, we are in this world, as Jesus said, “I also have sent them into the world” (John 17:18). Thus, without embracing the world, that is, its customs and ways where they are contrary to God's ways, we must strive to live as lights to others and be at peace with them when possible (Matthew 13:13-16). We can be respectful towards others and endeavor to live at peace with them, without being drawn into sharing in their false beliefs or participating in their evil deeds. We must love others (Matthew 5:43-45), but often that means loving them from a distance, hopefully on friendly terms, but without allowing them to influence our beliefs or practices in a way that would displease God.

“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18).

The same principles apply to dealing with people in the Church. By choosing the wrong companions, or choosing the wrong person to follow, we can be led down a path of destruction.

“He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will be destroyed” (Proverbs 13:20).

Paul advised Timothy: “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth. But shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some. Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: ‘The Lord knows those who are His,’ and, ‘Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.’ But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay, some for honor and some for dishonor. Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master, prepared for every good work” (II Timothy 2:15-21).

Scripture warns repeatedly not to be caught up with those ostensibly in the Church but who subvert the truth.

“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple” (Romans 16:17-18).

“But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And **many will follow** their destructive ways, because of whom the way of truth will be blasphemed. By covetousness they will exploit you with deceptive words; for a long time their judgment has not been idle, and their destruction does not slumber” (II Peter 2:1-3). This type of apostasy has happened, not just in the 1990s, but many times in the history of the Church, dating back even to the apostolic era (Acts 20:29-30; I John 4:1; III John 1:9-10; Revelation 2:14-15, 20-22). Similar things happened in the Old Testament era as well, as many turned to various forms of idolatry, blended the worship of God with idolatrous customs and practices, and forsook God’s laws (II Kings 17:7-20; Ezekiel 20:27-31; Acts 7:42-43). It will continue to happen, right up to the end (Daniel 11:35; Matthew 24:10-12; II Thessalonians 2:3-12).

Another way that we experience Christian fellowship is by giving to others. When we give tithes and offerings we ought to think about how our gifts might affect the lives of others.

Paul wrote of the generosity of churches in Macedonia who sought to share in contributing to the relief of brethren suffering in Judea. “Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I

bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we would receive the **gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints**. And not only as we had hoped, but they **first gave themselves to the Lord**, and then to us by the will of God" (II Corinthians 8:1-5).

A big part of our fellowship as a Church is the ministry that we share in giving to others a message they desperately need, even if they don't realize it or appreciate it. You may think of our work as small and insignificant, which it is in some ways. But it may be very significant to any individual whose life is changed as a result of our collective efforts. Other gifts that we may give on occasion as a Church is also a part of our fellowship in ministering to others.

"But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Hebrews 13:12-16).

Our fellowship with God and with one another is implemented also in our mutual suffering. Did you ever consider suffering a means of fellowship? Yet, it is, or can be. "Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that **I may know Him** and the power of His resurrection, and the **fellowship of His sufferings**, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead" (Philippians 3:8-11).

The life of a Christian frequently involves suffering. Jesus promised that we would be hated by the world. "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also" (John 15:19-20).

We here may not have been persecuted much if any for our beliefs in this age, but in times past many faithful Christians have been persecuted, not infrequently by others who claimed to be Christians. Many professing Christians in various parts of the world are presently enduring persecution. The enemies of any semblance of Christianity, especially if it entails obedience to God's commandments, are becoming ever more powerful even in the United States. At some point in the future, if not now, we will as a people be subject to persecution, just as Jesus Christ was, and many others of our brethren were down through history.

Another aspect of our fellowship is assembling together on the Sabbaths and Holy Days to worship God and be taught his word. "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:23-25). Not everyone can participate in our assemblies, because of sickness or for other reasons. Many are isolated, and not capable of traveling to a location where a service is available. That's the way it's been throughout the history of the Church. But we should participate if and when we can. We have the blessing of being able to reach people

from remote locations through the Internet, so some of them can participate in our services that way. Yes, we are a small assembly, but Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

Finally, our fellowship is fulfilled in mutual affection, love, humility, and serving one another with whatever abilities and gifts we have.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And **do not be conformed to this world**, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion" (Romans 12:1-16).

Growing into the kind of fellowship we should have with God and with one another is a lifelong endeavor. But we need to keep working at it.

"Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. **Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others**" (Philippians 2:1-4).

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