



THEOLOGICAL STUDY PROJECT

THE CHURCH OF GOD

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

The Church is the spiritual body of Christ, a group of persons called out by God and impregnated with His Holy Spirit. As a spiritual body, the Church is made up of baptized, Spirit-led individuals who are scattered around the world. As a physical, external organization, the Church has meeting places in many areas worldwide where members and non-members alike, as well as children and guests, meet in harmony to worship God and learn His Way under the guidance of an ordained minister, when and where possible. The main commission of the Church is to preach the gospel as a witness to the world and to baptize and spiritually nurture those whom God has called.

Matthew 28:19-20; 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 27; Colossians 3:15

DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

While God at times dealt with particular human beings on an individual basis, He normally worked through the congregation of Israel; in New Testament times the Church became "spiritual Israel." The Greek word for "church" (*ekklesia*) is a common noun meaning "group," "crowd," or "assembly." It is used collectively to describe the group of persons God is working with through His Holy Spirit.

The New Testament Church was originated and developed through Jesus Christ and the preaching of His twelve disciples who were later called apos-

tles. The Church dates its origin from the first Pentecost following Christ's ascension as explained in Acts 2. Here Luke records Christ's disciples assembling, the outpouring of God's Holy Spirit upon them, and the consequent conversion of 3,000 people who believed in the gospel and Jesus Christ. From this point on, "the Lord added to the Church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47).

A number of metaphors or analogies are used by the Bible to clarify the organization of the Church and to explain the place of the members within it. First Corinthians 12 describes God's Church as a unified organism with the various members depicted as different parts of the body with a variety of responsibilities, administrations, and duties. Each member has an important contribution to the overall well-being of the whole body; each has his own unique part in enabling the whole body of the Church to accomplish its ultimate objectives. The Church is also referred to as a spiritual building (1 Cor. 3:9-17) and a family—the members being spiritually related one to another (Eph. 3:15). They are called the siblings of Christ (Rom. 8:29), who, as their elder brother, leads them and directs them in their way (Heb. 2:10).

The name most often used by the Bible to refer to God's Church is "the Church of God" (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:13; 1 Tim. 3:5; etc.). In accordance with this biblical example, we are named the "Church of God"—adding the description "Independent Ministries" to form our official corporate name, "Church of God, Independent Ministries" to differentiate ourselves legally from other groups who call themselves "Church of God." Our name also delineates the scope of this Church.

The Church is also pictured as Christ's bride. The members live in a state of expectation and preparation for the return of the divine bridegroom (Eph. 5:22-32; Rev. 21:9). The bride is striving to prepare herself to be acceptable for Christ by the process of spiritual growth, in order to become perfect and measure up to the full stature of the bridegroom,

Jesus Christ.

Becoming part of the Church of God is not an incidental matter. A person is first called of God (Jn. 6:44), given an invitation as it were. But, before accepting Jesus Christ, a person should “count the cost” (Lk. 14:28), because the Christian life is often difficult. When a person accepts this calling, he must repent of his past sins and go through the ordinance of baptism by immersion. This symbolizes the washing away of all past sins. Then, with the laying on of hands by the ministry, the person receives the begetting of the Holy Spirit. His covenant with God is now signed and sealed—it is the “earnest payment” for eternal life (Eph. 1:14). At this point a person becomes a full-fledged member of the Church of God, which is the body of Christ. He becomes a Christian, a “saint,” a begotten child of God reserved for the resurrection.

Members of the Church are exhorted to become a cohesive family unit. Judging each other (Rom. 14:13), making spiritual comparisons among themselves (2 Cor. 10:12), forming cliques, favoring one minister over another (1 Cor. 1:11–13), gossiping, etc. are all divisive and counterproductive to the collective goals of the work of the Church. What Christians should strive for is labouring together to further the preaching of the gospel, serving the poor, helping weak brethren, encouraging the dejected, visiting the sick, aiding the elderly, bearing each other’s burdens; these are the fundamentals of Christianity and produce a strengthened church (Phil. 2:1–4).

The Church constitutes the body of Christ, a spiritual entity (Col. 2:19). As such, “the Church” is not merely a building, or even strictly speaking a physical organization of persons who “joined” the Church by having their names placed on a computer. Instead, *it is a group of persons in whom dwells God’s Holy Spirit*. “For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13). Likewise, Romans 8:9 states that “if any man have not the spirit of Christ, he is none of His.” The world is full of people who say they are Christians and are called Christians, but not all of them are Spirit-begotten Christians (Matt. 7:21–23). Although any person in whom God’s Holy Spirit dwells is by definition a member of God’s Church, it is nevertheless erroneous to

assume any and all nominal Christians are actually part of God’s true Church. The Bible maintains, “There is one body and one Spirit, even as you are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism...” (Eph. 4:4–5).

One area where the CGI Ministries has been accused of deviating from the early New Testament Church ironically demonstrates just the reverse. The claim is sometimes made that while the early church preached the doctrine of grace through Christ, the Church of God Independent Ministries teaches the doctrine of obedience to the Law of God. Though often distorted—e.g. the Church does *not* teach salvation can be earned (as this systematic theology makes abundantly clear). However, there is an element of truth here, and a significant element at that. To understand the critical parallelism, we need to first compare the *religious environments* of first century Judaism (in which the early church began) with twentieth-century Christianity (in which the CGI Ministries began). Judaism of the first century was extremely strict by modern standards; its teachings were well-known and stressed the enormous importance of keeping not only God’s law but numerous Talmudic additions to that law as well. In this environment, it would have been ludicrous for the early apostles to emphasize the need to keep God’s Sabbath, for example (see Sabbath). They stressed what was new and revolutionary—that salvation was a free gift and could not be earned, that Christ’s death paid the penalty for sin, that forgiveness and grace was available through Christ, that Christ was resurrected, etc. Today, the religious environment is almost diametrically the reverse, necessitating a change in emphasis of doctrinal teaching in order to produce the same overall result. The prevalent Christian message for centuries has been about the person of Christ, His shed blood, grace, salvation, etc. to the exclusion of the importance of keeping God’s law, which Jesus and the apostles knew so well. Consequently, owing to opposing religious situations and circumstances, in order for the Church of God to clearly present to the world precisely the same overall concept of God’s total revelation, as did the early New Testament church, it becomes more essential that emphasis be placed on keeping God’s law. What we preach and practice today, in the final result, is as close as possible to what the apostolic church preached, taught,

and practiced. Whatever differences there may be only reflect either cultural disparities and/or shifts in stress or accent needed to generate the desired doctrinal identity.

Another demonstration of God's Church is its fidelity to the Word of God. While recognizing it has developed a certain body of traditional beliefs, interpretations, and practices, the Church of God is unique in its willingness to abandon tradition when it becomes convinced that such is out of harmony with the Bible. *The biblical teachings rather than church tradition are considered the absolute standard of right and wrong.* Churches as a rule are quite reluctant to go against established tradition and usually greatly resist any movement for change, no matter how much they may claim to follow the Bible as their ultimate authority.

The Church of God is administratively organized in accordance with general biblical guidelines and in a manner viable in modern society. The head of the Church is Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:22–23), who leads and inspires the Church and its leadership through His Holy Spirit. The ministry practices servant leadership as directed by Jesus (Matt. 20:26) and in accord with such scriptures as 1 Corinthians 12:28–30 and Ephesians 4:11–13.

Throughout biblical history, God's Church has had a relatively unified basic commission—that of carrying God's message to those who have yet to hear and accept it. Two scriptures that outline this commission are Matthew 24:14 and Matthew 28:29–30: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations.... Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them...[and] teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you..." (v. 19–20).

This message may at times be delivered through speaking, writing, by one's very life, or any combination of these and other possible mediums. But regardless of the means, to preach the gospel to the world is the express purpose, goal, commission, and very reason for the Church. Consequently, the central thrust for leadership of God's Church today is towards preaching the gospel, which is referred to both as an "announcement" and "witness and warning." The membership realizes the purpose of the Church is for the preaching of the message and not merely its own spiritual sustenance. The membership is wholeheartedly and enthusiastically behind

this effort; indeed they recognize the purpose for their personal calling is to presently help do the Work of God in addition to growing in their own Christian development.

Although the Church is described as a comparatively small group or flock (Lk. 12:32; Mt. 7:14), Christ nonetheless assigns it an awesome task to fulfil. The members are to be worthy ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor. 5:20)—i.e. effective representatives of the godly way of life—and proclaim to the world God's plan for mankind. They are required to let their manner of life reflect a worthy example of the gospel of Christ (Phil. 1:27), i.e., they should be a positive example of Christianity in presenting the gospel to the world in a good light.

The Church recognizes its local congregations are a powerful means by which the gospel may be preached both through the example set by the membership of true Christianity and through the effect the local congregation should have in the local community it serves.

The objectives of the local congregation include more than just the spiritual development of its members. Every congregation supports the work of preaching the gospel worldwide. Every congregation also serves as a nucleus for new converts. It also fosters educational programs to help all from the very young to the elderly to grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ.

But "pure religion" involves more than preaching; it is a way of life exemplified by the biblical teachings of "love of God" and "love your neighbor as yourself." The local congregations of the Church of God endeavor to bear the burdens of the needy and be a light to their communities through service and by the example of their personal lives (Jas. 1:27).

Since the first qualification for being able to help others is for the individual himself to be a living success, the Church actively seeks to develop the potential of each member through programs for its adults and its youth. These programs are designed to aid each individual in sustained, personal growth and development so that all might better reflect God's way of life to those around them.

But personal development is not satisfying unless it can be channeled in a productive and creative way. Jesus exhorted His disciples to come to the aid of those in need (Mt. 25:34–36). Such humanitarian activities are the highest expression of love for God

and one's fellow man (v. 45). Therefore, the Church of God recognizes this God-enjoined responsibility and strongly encourages each local congregation "as we therefore have opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). It is firmly believed that each member can be a powerful witness for Christ by living an exemplary life of service and growth (1 Pet. 2:9–17).

Members of the Church are encouraged through weekly Sabbath services, periodic Bible studies, and other religious and social events to learn the true qualities of Christianity expressed in love for God and for neighbor. This love for one's neighbor means a true Christian will help his fellow man both in and out of the Church in every reasonable way. A true Christian will set an example of hard work on his job, during recreation, and in all aspects of daily life. His words will encourage and speak positively of the central role that God has in our life's journey. His example of leading a godly life should influence those around him in a positive way and serve as his personal and individual witness modeling Christ. Historically, the example of the membership of God's Church in the community has had a powerful effect on those with whom they have come in contact.

Likewise, the combined membership of a local congregation—led by its minister—may, as the opportunity arises, serve its local community during disaster or time of special need. Once again, the positive Christian example of such a local congregation in the community will be a great testimony to the proper principles of God. Thus the working nucleus of the Church of God, letting its "light so shine before men" (Mt. 5:16), is applicable to the local congregation.

Members of God's Church are therefore exhorted to attend the religious activities of the Church. These are not ends in themselves but directives of God, designed to spiritually strengthen the individuals and local congregation as a whole so the light of their Christianity might burn more brightly. This policy is in accordance with the command of God that Christians should not neglect to meet together (Heb. 10:25). Actually, this scripture is a warning from Paul to Christians "not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is" (Heb. 10:25). This warning was made with the

realization that daily cares can distract us from God and His plans for us. Meeting together regularly on God's weekly Sabbath and annual holy days provides Christians with opportunity to have spiritual goals reestablished and spiritual vision renewed. One who would habitually neglect Church services, with the exception of circumstances beyond his control, is neglecting an important aspect of his spiritual life. Local Church services also provide the community, as well as the membership, with an open meeting to hear the truths of God expounded from the Bible by a minister.

As already mentioned, we believe the twenty-first century Church of God is founded on the same basic doctrines the original Church believed and taught in the first century.

Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18). Consequently, we believe God has always had, from Christ's time to this, some faithful group, which He has used to perpetuate and propagate His truth.

Although the Church of God recognizes its recent history is short, it sees many spiritual and doctrinal predecessors through the last two millennia and traces its history genealogically as well as spiritually to the New Testament Church.

God's Church is eager to evangelize with the message of Jesus and the gospel of the Kingdom of God, with hopes of encouraging new members. God is the one who calls persons to His Church by opening their minds to His gospel (Jn. 6:44; Rom. 9:15–16). Nevertheless, the result of the disciples preaching Christ, new converts—as called by God (Jn. 6:44) and in numbers God chooses (Acts 2:47)—are brought into the Church. Here they are nurtured through God's Word and helped by the ministry and each other to grow in grace and the knowledge of their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18).

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MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

The ministry of the New Testament Church is a ministry of service to God and His people. Elders (*presbuteros*) and deacons (*diakonoï*) make up the two ministerial offices defined in Scripture. Elders have the responsibility of teaching, edifying, and overseeing the congregations, and deacons assist elders by taking care of physical and logistical needs of the congregations. The Bible dictates high moral and ethical conduct for all members of the ministry.

1 Corinthians 12:28; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Timothy 3:1–13; 5:17–21; 2 Timothy 2:24–26; 1 Peter 5

DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

Throughout history God has worked through human individuals as agents and chosen servants. In the Old Testament it was the “preachers of righteousness,” the patriarchs, the priests and Levites, the prophets, and at times righteous kings such as David. In the New Testament, Jesus Christ called out and ordained twelve disciples as the first ministers of the New Testament. He entrusted these men with the responsibility of governing the Church, serving the spiritual needs of its members, and preaching the gospel to the world and other duties as explained in Mark 3:14–15 and elsewhere.

While a minister should be eager to serve his congregation in many ways, his responsibilities are primarily to minister to the spiritual needs of his people. A minister’s primary responsibility is to nurture the positive fruits of God’s Holy Spirit as expressed individually and collectively in his congregation. By so doing, he helps build a committed, dedicated group which responds with fervor to the biblical commission of preaching the gospel to the world as a witness (Mt. 24:14; 28:18–20) and which eagerly looks forward to the Kingdom of God. The minister

develops these characteristics in many ways: through preaching and teaching, giving his encouragement when a member is experiencing personal trials, by offering counsel in the areas of his professional competence, and by serving the congregation in performance of necessary religious ceremonies such as marriages and funerals.

The Church recognizes that a minister’s personal example is one of his strongest and most effective methods of cultivating spiritual growth in the local church. A man who is selfless, dedicated to, convicted by, and living within the true values of God as expressed in the Bible will be greatly admired by the congregation and hence enormously effective. The shining light of his own spiritual life will be his greatest tool for constructing God’s spiritual temple, which is the Church. Such a minister will deal in a positive, helpful, encouraging, loving manner with his congregation; he will not police their life or dictate and/or legislate their faith, but will instead be a helper of their joy. “Not that we lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy” (2 Cor. 1:24).

A minister is thus not an “intercessor” between a Christian and God but, as a New Testament minister of the “spirit” (2 Cor. 3:6), one who helps build the Christian’s own personal relationship with his Creator. Even so, occasionally, when circumstances demand, the minister must fulfill his responsibility as a true shepherd by administering spiritual discipline for the protection of his flock (cf. 1 Cor. 5).

A minister’s responsibilities are not restricted to the congregation he serves. He must be an example of the Christian way of life by striving to serve the nonbeliever as well as the believer. An effective minister will be sensitive to the needs of all humanity, but he will always save his greatest efforts and energies for his own congregation, which he has been given spiritual charge. Indeed, the two are related. The minister should look for ways to expand the effective “light” of his local congregation as a beacon of true Christian values within the community. Availing himself for community service opportunities, within reason and as time allows, is always a good idea as it is another means by which the gospel can be presented in its most fundamental way—via the works of the Spirit (Matt. 25:34–46).

The ministry is a calling. God usually calls/chooses elders indirectly, though He has hand-

picked certain ones in the past for special purposes (and can do so anytime He wants to). He does this by revealing the purpose and qualifications for elders (ministers), and authorizing human agents to appoint (ordain) them based on the information He reveals. Thus, God ordains elders through agents acting on His biblical instructions. God indicates whom He desires to become His spiritual servant by causing the person's life to express the fruits associated with ministry. Likewise, the qualifications of the ministry as outlined in 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and elsewhere are always considered. A prospective minister must be hospitable, able to teach, patient, not covetous, reputable, honest, trustworthy, and experienced in the faith. Showing forth the fruit of Christian character in his own life is fundamental to this consideration for ministry. When a man is ready for the ministry, he is ordained through the laying on of hands in accordance with the example set in Acts 13.

The actual organization of the ministry in the Church of God follows generally the principles as outlined in 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4. It was not Paul's intent in these passages to create a permanent hierarchical structure for all generations of the church. He is too vague in his description and delineations for that to have been his purpose. However, by these methods of edification we learn from these scriptures how the early church government functioned.

Another office of ordination is that of deacons and deaconesses. Qualifications for these offices are outlined in 1 Timothy 3:8–13. The basic responsibility of the deacon and deaconess is to serve the physical needs of the congregations so the ministers may attend to more pressing spiritual needs. Acts 6 is an example of ordination of certain men to this office and shows those ordained to this position should be people of faith and full of the Holy Spirit.

Service is the keynote of the ministry. Those who hold this office reflect the words Christ spoke to His disciples, "You know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority among them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister [servant]; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant [slave]: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto [not to be served], but to minister [but to serve], and to give His life for ran-

som for many" (Mt. 20:25–28).

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FELLOWSHIP OF THE BRETHREN

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

Fellowship is the religious interaction of church members among themselves and with God, a spiritual association through the Holy Spirit, which transcends normal social or business relationships. Since this fellowship comes through being part of the body of Christ, it requires that one has repented, been baptized, and consequently received God's Holy Spirit. The fellowship of the brethren builds spiritual strength into both the individual and the Church as a whole. Conversely, the Church may exercise its right to disfellowship one who, by obvious attitude or action, opposes the gospel or causes disruption among the membership.

1 Corinthians 1:9; 2 Corinthians 6:14; Ephesians 4:1–6; Philipians 2:1; Hebrews 10:24–25; 1 John 1:3, 6–7

DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

It is important that the membership of God's Church meets together for spiritual purposes in order that the fabric of the Church and the spiritual state of the individual may be strengthened. The Church also encourages social fellowship among the members. It is a well-understood principle that close camaraderie between members of a community enhances both the conviction of the individual and strength of the entire group because relationships are the adhesion of the congregation. It is one

means of practicing the qualities of love, outgoing concern, and Christian harmony among the individual members of the body of Christ.

First Corinthians 12 shows that God deals with His Church as a group in addition to dealing with the individual members separately. "For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ" (v. 12). "For the body is not one member, but many" (v. 14). Likewise, John 15 gives the analogy of Christ being the "true vine," and explains how a branch separated or taken away from the vine cannot bear fruit. Experience has shown that people who cut themselves off from the Church (which is the body of Christ) tend to lose sight of the goal and purpose of God's Way and wither spiritually. They stop producing the fruit of God's Spirit, begin to shrivel in spiritual stature, and can risk putting themselves in danger of spiritual death.

The Scriptures are filled with examples of God's faithful meeting together and fellowshiping. Jesus' own example was to spend long hours with His disciples whether in formal teaching sessions such as the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:1) or informally, as when eating a meal (Mt. 9:10–11). After Jesus' death, one finds constant reference to the disciples meeting together. Acts 1:13 describes the apostles assembled together "in an upper room." Acts 2:1 describes the believers as "all with one accord in one place" for the day of Pentecost. Other verses in Acts show Christians meeting together on the Sabbath day to hear the Word of God (Acts 13:14, 42; 16:13). Likewise, the Church is exhorted not to forsake the "assembling of ourselves together" for religious worship (Heb. 10:25). Even specific instructions are given to the members to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Rom. 16:16). This was a custom of the day and corresponds with the handshake of friendship practiced in our society.

Church fellowship is not an end in itself. The Church keeps in mind the clear supreme goal and commission that God has commanded in Matthew 28:18–20 and 24:14 of preaching the gospel to the world. To reach the whole world with the gospel of Christ requires the Church be a unified group, built with spiritually strong members, welded together in purpose, doctrine, and love. The fellowship of the

brethren helps build these qualities.

Talking together, playing together, or working together helps give single identity, common goals, and shared characteristics. That the Church should be unified cannot be doubted. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:27–28). God's Church is a true melting pot. "For He [Christ] is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility [the social and racial barriers]" (Eph. 2:14). There are many other scriptures that allude to the unity of church members. For example, Ephesians 4: "Endeavoring to keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace" (v. 3). Notice especially Psalm 133:1: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! (See also 1 Cor. 12:13; 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:13, etc.)

The key principle concerning "Church fellowship" (which is different and deeper than "social fellowship" or "friendly affiliation") is to realize such associations among the brethren are through God and His Spirit. "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and *truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ*" (1 John 1:3). Thus the reason we have fellowship with each other as members is because we first have fellowship with Christ and the Father. Fellowship with Christ and the Father takes place because we have God's Holy Spirit living within us (Rom. 8:9). Once two persons of even widely disparate backgrounds received God's Spirit and have communion and fellowship with God, they can fellowship in peace and harmony together—they now have shared characteristics between them; they have a common mental outlook through the Spirit of God and its "fruits" or qualities mentioned in Galatians 5:22. This "fellowship of the Spirit" (Phil. 2:1) is the bond that ties Christians together.

If one does not have the Spirit of God he is in the final analysis not really a Christian. "Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him" (Rom. 8:9). Formally, a member of the Church of God may be defined as a person who has received God's Spirit after repentance and baptism

as outlined by the apostle Peter in Acts 2:38.

The Bible lists many ways in which Church fellowship benefits the individual. The stronger members are expected to help those newer or weaker in the faith. “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1–2). “Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye...” (Rom. 14:1). “We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves; let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to edify him” (Rom. 15:1–2).

We are also instructed to “exhort one another every day” (if need be) as outlined in Hebrews 3:13 and other scriptures. And Christians are reminded to pray for one another during times of physical duress such as illness or whenever there is need (Jas. 5:16–20). This helps build the Church into a tight family unit with everyone helping each other.

Peter admonishes the Church to have “love of the brethren” (1 Pet. 3:8). Christians are exhorted to forbear one another and to forgive each other (Col. 3:13), putting on “love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (v. 14). Members are instructed to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (v. 16).

Brethren are also urged and enjoined to help fulfill one another’s physical needs. Indeed, “pure religion” involves sincere concern for the less fortunate such as widows and the fatherless (Jas. 1:27). We must not forget the example of sharing as outlined in Acts 2:41–47. Here we notice the brethren went to great lengths—even to the point of selling their personal possessions—to provide food and shelter for those needing help. Examine also Paul’s statements in 2 Corinthians 8 about how God’s people helped their brothers in poverty.

The fellowship of the brethren is an important topic. Social contact among members builds a unified church and serves to strengthen the members spiritually and physically, and in the process the entire Church becomes a more powerful tool in God’s hands. In practice, such fellowshiping takes the form of informal chatting before and after services, visiting in each other’s homes, attending to the sick and those who have physical needs, attend-

ing organized church socials, participating in athletics together, performing music together, etc. Baptized members of God’s Church also bring with them to Church services and social functions their children and other non-baptized persons in their family. The Church, of course, extends a warm welcome to any non-baptized person who desires to attend its services or social functions.

To accomplish these same objectives of fellowship on a larger scale uniting our individual church-es around the world, the Church of God, Independent Ministries maintains an Internet social media for its members, which aids communication between them. It also supports children, youth, and young adults through various programs. All areas of social contact, whether formal or casual, are used by the brethren to build love and camaraderie among themselves with the primary objective of bringing the truth of God to the world so others can share in the spiritual richness of God’s Church.

As stated above, in the final analysis our fellowship is through God’s Spirit. Only God can give His Holy Spirit or take it away, but continued fellowship as a member in God’s Church requires appropriate Christian conduct. God’s Church is made up of individuals who are sincerely striving toward salvation, and earnestly attempting to exhibit every possible fruit of God’s Holy Spirit in their lives. As a result, the personal lives of its members generally reflect the proper attitudes of Christianity.

But since all are human and subject to sin, each member is subject to being overtaken by wrong attitudes, thoughts, or influences needing to be overcome. The Church appreciates the opportunity to deal in a constructive, positive, and loving way with all those needing help. The ministry helps and guides the brethren in overcoming sins, no matter what the magnitude or nature of it may be, as long as the person is sincerely trying and indeed desires the help. (Such help can never be forced.) Just as Jesus taught that the shepherd will leave the ninety-nine sheep and go in search of the one that went astray (Mt. 18:12–14), so should God’s ministers make every effort to help any member who has gone astray.”

Unfortunately, for complex reasons, some individuals occasionally harden themselves to sin and continue defiantly in it. They may even influence others to follow them to act the same way, in spite

of all the efforts of the Church to guide them in a positive manner. These people sometimes become bitter and attack or malign the very ones who love them the most—those who are trying the hardest to help them, namely, other members of the Church and the ministry.

The Church at these times recognizes its responsibility to protect the congregation by withdrawing its fellowship from the dissident for the good of the congregation and ultimately for the good of the individual himself. This disfellowshipping is not to be equated with, and is totally different from, ostracism, court-martialing, legal sentencing, marking, cursing, or shunning. It is not a means of revenge or exercising a personal vendetta. It is simply a tool to protect the Church and reawaken the individual. Yet disfellowshipping is not a frivolous thing: it is done only after all else has failed, when the person is adamant in not repenting of the wrongdoing.

The Bible itself gives the Church both the example and authority to disfellowship militant dissidents and sinners. Paul makes it plain that one who absolutely refuses to repent of his sin should be removed from the congregation for the good of all (1 Cor. 5).

Anyone who intractably refuses to obey God's Church and ministry is to be warned as a brother, but is not to be looked upon as an enemy (2 Thess. 3:15). As Paul wrote "note that man, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed" (v. 14).

Other individuals may choose, for whatever reason, to voluntarily withdraw from recognized fellowship. However, they are not to be shunned so

long as their behavior appears upright. Their choice to withdraw from fellowship with the CGI doesn't necessarily mean they are no longer a part of the body of Christ, which is not confined to the boundaries of any organization. Their ultimate spiritual state can only be judged by God.

Whenever a disfellowshipped individual sincerely repents before God of his sin or wrongdoing, he needs to be forgiven and comforted by the congregation lest he be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow (2 Cor. 2:7). The Church takes great pleasure in accepting back into its fellowship any disfellowshipped person (no matter what the offense) once that person has truly changed his behavior, demeanor, and/or disposition of mind. "Repentance is toward God, not man" is a fundamental truism (Ps 51:4). It is also important to note repentance toward God will not be complete until the offender does all he or she can to make things right with those harmed (Matt 5:23–24; 6:14). The fruits of repentance—the person's attitudes and actions—must give evidence the repentance is indeed genuine. It is the Church's utmost desire that any disfellowshipment will help stir repentance in the sinner and restore the individual to love and harmony within the congregation. Such a person should be received back into the congregation with joy, making it as easy as possible for the member to return.

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