

The Newsletter of the Churches of God, UK

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Matthew 28:19-20

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A BLUEPRINT FOR UNITY

Unity is a strange animal. It is possible to have total unity - but at what price? Stalinism is an example. In the recent election Saddam Hussein claims that 100% of Iraqis voted 100% for his return to office.

The history of Christianity includes examples of this 'hundred percentism'. The medieval church with its Inquisition sought to enforce it - with the rack and fire and sword. Modern Christianity seeks by more peaceful means to unite the various denominations.

This desire for organizational unity is a cultic feature affecting much of the church of God movement - notably the Worldwide Church of God and many of its off-shoots. Unlike the first century church which was open to everyone, converts or not, such assemblies are a 'closed shop'.

The desire for internal harmony is praiseworthy. Who would not love all members to 'speak the same thing'. Wouldn't the leadership cheer that!

In the Beginning

Larger towns, in the beginnings of Christianity, hosted several congregations - as, for example, in Rome (Romans 16), just as there may be, today, a dozen Baptist or Methodist or Anglican congregations in a city. Yet, anciently, each was part of the same 'church of God', each shepherded by its own elder.

As recorded in the New Testament, even such individual assemblies generated their own challenges. Look at the church of God in Corinth - dubbed 'the church in Vanity Fair'. The apostle Paul had to urge them to

be more structured, to get a grip on their individual enthusiasms. He rebuked their squabbling and their focus on personalities as 'carnal'.

Try, however, to unite all congregations in a city or region or worldwide and organizational unity is impossible - *unless* there is suffocating draconian control exerted by a hierarchy of subservient bishops, priests, evangelists, elders *etc.*

To maintain external unity a sharp distinction had to be made between 'clerics' and 'laity' - the latter relegated to praying, paying and obeying. It wasn't long coming, and in a few decades the early church was sundered by power struggles and the forming of a hierarchy based on Roman civil government. The Spirit moved out.

The first assemblies of the New Testament church were not like that. Meeting, usually in small groups, *all* the brethren added their special spiritual gifts to the work of the assembly. It wasn't just a 'lecture'. Under the guidance of a protective shepherd all brethren equally had opportunity to interact with one another, to pray for one another's needs, to comfort and to build up one another, to present new concepts. And to freely express doubts and concerns.

The Church Today

Contrast the modern church of God movement. Within a dozen square miles there could well be several 'denominations' and independent assemblies. Different names, different structures, different leadership, different culture, different ethical stances. And all too often animosity, competitiveness, duplication of effort. Yet teachings not a thousand miles

removed from each other.

Getting the structure right is important for Biblical unity. The more we reflect in principle the apostolic model the more successful we will be. *But there's more than that to unity.*

Led by the Spirit

The visible church embraces 'wheat and tares' - a mix of the converted and hangers-on. The 'true' church is made up only of those with the Spirit of God. That means we have implanted in us the mind and attitude of God. That means we express the 'fruit of the Spirit' (Galatians 5:22). But do we? If not, *why not?*

When we are 'led by the Spirit' we are doing God's will. We are behaving as would our Father, as did Jesus. Led by the Spirit brethren walk side by side in harmony. So why the cold shoulder? Why the protective shield we erect around 'us'? Why exclusiveness?

The church of God is not a box of yellow pencils. We each bring our own personality, our own talents, our own spiritual gifts. The work of the church is enhanced when all these are used in common purpose. But all of us are to have the same mind - the mind that was in Christ. That means we suppress all those negatives that hinder togetherness. The Bible word for it is *love*. Proper expression of love - the light of Christ shining in me - is my witness to the change being wrought in me 'since Jesus came into my heart'.

Family, neighbours, friends, colleagues have to see that light in us. What if they learn they would not be welcome at your assemblies - because 'not converted'? That you are at war with your brother or sister? That you cross the street when they approach? That your chief difference is that they use a different hymnal, promote - or prohibit - the use of a different Bible text, prefer a morning service? That a brother from another church is excluded because of a minor doctrinal difference? When God's Spirit dwells in them?

It's time to embrace one another. Time to accept one another. Time to work in harmony with one another, while accepting honest differences and different programmes, different emphases. Time to demonstrate our conversion through our love for one another.

Fail on these points and it's not unlikely that the returning Christ will say 'Leave me; I never knew you'.

Do you really love our Father and our Saviour when you are failing to express their love to a brother or sister (I John 4:20)? 

www.cgom.org

Be sure to visit the *Outreach Ministries* web-site. It has recently been updated by Richard Gawith with new articles and publications for you to read or download. Back issues of our various publications will be added soon. *New Horizons* is there in readable .pdf format

www.churchofgodsa.com

Also well worth a visit. It's the web-site of the *San Antonio Church of God*. Lots of material, and many free offers

EXPAND YOUR HORIZONS!

The *Churches of God, UK* offer a range of free literature addressing a variety of Bible topics. You are invited to request our *Publications Catalogue*

For those receiving **OUTREACH** via the Internet, the *Catalogue* follows as an e-mail

Pure Doctrine

Wouldn't it be great if every Christian believed exactly the same teachings? To attain that, several churches of God have a strict membership code. You must be 'vetted' before attending service. You may be baptized only if you are doctrinally 'pure'. Express a dissident view and you are *out*. - disfellowshipped.

The implication, obviously, is that 'we' are the 'one true church'. We will defend our teachings from the fortified ramparts of our doctrinal castle.

Yet is such unity a healthy thing? Not one of us is an infallible Bible scholar. Besides, the Bible isn't crystal clear on a number of issues - though the important teachings stand out in three dimensions, as does gross error. Paul addresses some of the issues in Romans 14. And John, in Revelation at the end of the first century, paints a far from rosy picture of what he - and Jesus! - still see as *the churches of God*.

To have a 'closed shop church' simply generates an attitude of self-righteous complacency. Perhaps we need to redefine heresy.

DONATIONS

Many thanks to those of you who generously donated with a view to putting our finances into credit. Your support is greatly appreciated. We are now 'in the black' and plan to remain so!

As new funds permit we will expand our outreach as God leads. Initially, *New Horizons* - previously curtailed - will be placed on a more regular schedule, especially for overseas readers who have suffered most.