

NEWS WATCH FOR *the* CHURCH OF GOD

News in the world and church — to give warning and help for God's people — by Ron Weinland

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TRUE FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD – Pt. 2

(This issue concludes this two-part article on true fellowship.)

Forsaking Fellowship?

Part of the purpose for this article being written has been with the hope of helping people clearly see there are times when we may have to make the difficult decision to sever our fellowship with others, as difficult as that decision may be. The current example of what is happening in UCG-Big Sandy has been used, in Part 1, to help illustrate that point. Most of us have already been confronted, at least once, with having to make the difficult decision to sever fellowship with long time friends and in many cases, even with relatives (on a spiritual plane).

As false teaching and the watering down of God's word continues to grow, we find ourselves facing the reality of even smaller fellowship. Smaller scattered groups are becoming easy prey as this push behind false doctrine continues to gain in power and popularity. The following year is going to prove even more devastating for the Church as these forces find their way into larger organizations as well. That has already been happening and is definitely gaining stronger momentum.

You may have to face what an increasing number of brethren have had to address. What if this continuing process leads to your having to make a decision to sever fellowship to the point of being alone? Sadly, too many brethren who have come to this point have become so discouraged that they simply withdraw. They cease to fight for this way of life that God gave to us. Don't let that happen to you! Focus on scriptures like the following ones quoted from Roman. Ask God to give you the strength and determination to live faithfully by such words.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:35-39).

Brethren who have become discouraged, to the point of surrender, have felt defeated, especially when considering the verse in Hebrews 10 that many believe to be a condemnation for severing fellowship. Believing they are not to forsake fellowship, some have become deeply frustrated and disillusioned by things like doctrinal error, unrighteous stewardship, or harsh leadership in their fellowship, and they see no way out. They feel like they are in a catch-22 scenario.

No one should feel guilty for obeying God and His instruction regarding true fellowship that we have partially examined in this two-part article. The way of escape is always contained in obedience to God. It should be obvious that it is not only right before God, but required by Him that we sever any fellowship that unrepentantly turns away from Him. We are to continue to move toward God. We are to continue our fight to conquer and overcome. We are to hold onto the foundational truths God delivered to us from the beginning, and we are to constantly be growing spiritually by building upon those truths.

God promises that if we will continue to follow His instruction and seek to apply His ways in our life, He will bless us spiritually, even in the very worst of times. He will always provide what we need. He promises never to forsake us. Do you believe Him? If you do, you will do as He says.

We live in some of the worst of times in all of the Church's history. We have been living in the prophesied time of a great falling away within the Church, and as that apostasy continues, there isn't much left! But, the remnant that does hold fast can live in the worst times of spiritual drought and still be fed spiritually, like an oasis in the midst of a desert. Scriptures like the following ones found in Isaiah 58 should give us strong direction, focus, and encouraging hope, if only we will seek to live by those words.

"Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh? Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily: and thy righteousness shall go before thee; the glory of the LORD shall be thy rereward. Then shalt thou call, and the LORD shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity; And if thou draw out thy soul to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noonday: And the LORD shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in

drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in" (Isaiah 58:6-12, MKJV).

God will see us through these troubled times if we will humble ourselves and seek to obey Him in all matters of our life. Such obedience may even mean being by ourselves in order to have true fellowship with God. Some people end up in the position of being by themselves for the wrong reasons. If you end up facing such a decision, seek to be sure it is for the right reasons. If it is, God will see you through and perhaps even reverse the course for you by providing others with whom you may fellowship locally. This has been happening for many within the Body of Christ. But obedience must always come first in our relationship with God.

Forsaking the Assembling

Let's return to answer what is meant by this verse that says we are "not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together." This is not first and foremost about fellowship. It certainly involves fellowship, but that is not the focus of this instruction.

When do God's people have the greatest opportunity for things like fellowship or receiving instruction and guidance from our Father? We know that this is on the Sabbath. Can God's people fellowship on other occasions, rather than the Sabbath? Certainly! But this verse is very specific. The focus is not on meeting together for the sake of fellowship. It is about, "not forsaking the assembling together." There is a big difference here as to whether you are focusing on fellowship or on the weekly Sabbath and what the Sabbath is designed to help accomplish in our lives.

This instruction does not say we should not forsake or sever fellowship together with others. We have clearly seen there are times when we must forsake certain fellowship if we are to obey God and hope to remain in fellowship with Him. Certainly, if others who are near us are having a true fellowship with God, we should not forsake having fellowship with them. Such matters should be simple to understand.

This instruction is first and foremost in direct reference to God's command concerning the Sabbath day and its purpose in our lives. That purpose does involve fellowship, but we must understand how it does.

To better understand this verse, we should go back and review a command concerning the Sabbath.

"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, Concerning the feasts of the LORD, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are my feasts" (Leviticus 23:1-2, KJV).

God begins here by instructing Israel about "appointed times" which He has set aside for them for the purpose of assembling as His people. The word for "feast" in verse two is not a literal translation. The word for feast is not found until verse six where it speaks of the "feast of unleavened bread," which does literally mean a feast or festival. The word for feast in verse two is a word that literally means "appointed," and it is almost always referring to a "time" or "place." Leviticus 23 is about "appointed times."

Next is the word for convocations. This is a proper translation because the word does mean a convocation, a calling together, or assembly. Most brethren have correctly understood that a "holy convocation" is a "commanded sacred assembly" of God's people.

Let's read these verses again with the meaning of these words inserted behind them. *"And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children*

of Israel, and say unto them, Concerning the feasts [Heb.- appointed times] of the LORD, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations [Heb.- assemblies or calling together], even these are my feasts [Heb.- appointed times]."

Let's continue by doing the same thing to the next two verses. *"Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is the sabbath of rest, an holy convocation [Heb.- assembly, calling together]; ye shall do no work therein: it is the sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings. These are the feasts [Heb.- appointed times] of the LORD, even holy convocations [Heb.- assemblies], which ye shall proclaim in their seasons [Heb.- appointed times]."*

There has been some minor confusion from these verses regarding the Sabbath, as some have believed that God called the Sabbath a feast or festival. It is not referred to as such anywhere in scripture. It is referred to here as an "appointed time" established by God, when His people are to come together and assemble before Him.

What is the purpose of assembling on God's Sabbath? It is a time, above all other time - holy time - in which we are to receive, from God, any instruction, direction, inspiration, correction, focus, encouragement, or any other needful thing that He determines for us. It is on the Sabbath that the ways of God can be more deeply received into our lives - more so than during any other time of the week. The Sabbath is exceedingly special within the seven-day week and is set aside as holy time for God to direct and lead His people.

We are never to forsake His command to assemble before Him on that day. This is not only a physical function; it is a spiritual one. We are to assemble on a specific day of the week. We are to strive to do so with reverence and proper preparedness. The Sabbath provides a unique opportunity for spiritual fellowship as we enter into the worship of God. If we

are physically able, we are to seek to be together with others in such worship.

There are times when God's people have been unable to be with others in worship on the Sabbath. Age and poor health have been factors in some cases. But even in those situations, we are to assemble before God in the best way we are able. Brethren must judge those circumstances, in the best way they can, in their relationships with God.

In today's world we have some advantage when we find ourselves in remote areas or simply too far to travel to be with other brethren on the Sabbath. If we find ourselves in such an undesirable state, hopefully we have access to audio tapes, video tapes, or even telephone hook-ups to sermons. We know that sermons are a vital part of our Sabbath assembly with God.

We should desire and work toward being together with other brethren on the Sabbath. Today, because of the apostasy within the Church, we know that the conditions we live under are not normal. And because of the downsizing we have been experiencing, most brethren probably treasure fellowship more than ever.

Mr. Herbert W. Armstrong and his wife, Loma, found themselves assembling alone for several years. They did so in order to obey God's instruction. They followed the same command regarding the annual Holy Days. It would have been wonderful if others would have assembled with them, but that didn't happen for a long time.

Obedience to God comes first. The more that others obey God and assemble before Him as commanded, the greater our prospects grow for fellowship with others who are doing the same.

True Fellowship

Our fellowship begins first and foremost with God the Father and Jesus Christ. By being in a right relationship and fellowship with them, we automatically have the prospect of fellowship with others who do the

same. That added opportunity of fellowship with others depends on God's calling and where other brethren are located.

Let's notice again the verse that was quoted at the very beginning of this article. *"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, KJV). From the very beginning, our fellowship with others has first depended upon our having true fellowship with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ.

Anyone who severs themselves from a relationship with God, due to unrepentant sin, also severs themselves from a relationship and fellowship with others in the Body of Christ. That is why those who begin to preach or follow false doctrine are severed spiritually from God. If such were in fellowship with us, we would then have to make a decision whether we want to remain in fellowship with them, in disobedience to God. Or we must decide if we will remain true to a right fellowship with God and sever our fellowship with anyone who turns from Him.

That is why the following verses in 1 John are so important to understand. *"If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do [practice] not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin"* (1 Jn. 1:6-7).

Walking contrary to God and what He has revealed to us severs us from fellowship with Him. All unrepentant sin separates us from fellowship with God. Only by having true fellowship with God are we able to have hope for true fellowship with others in the Church, the Body of Christ.

"For ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light: (For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and

righteousness and truth;) *Proving what is acceptable unto the Lord. And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them"* (Ephesians 5:8-11, KJV). Walking as children of light, in the ways that God has revealed to us, involves doing what these verses show. Proving the ways of God involve practicing them - putting them to work in our lives - walking in them as a way of life.

We are not only to forsake wrong works and have no fellowship in them, but we are to "reprove" those wrong works. If we love others in our fellowship, we will want to do this even more so. To reprove means to refute, convict or expose. We should want to refute, reprove and expose wrong works within our midst, with the hope repentance. We should seek to expose those, unrepentant, wrong ways so that others will not stumble at them and be hurt. We should want to expose wrong ways as part of practicing right works that will help insure continued oneness and unity of spirit in a true fellowship with God and one another. (Remember that this is all in the context of this article which is addressing unrepentant public sin.)

"If there be therefore any consolation [encouragement] in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind" (Phil. 2:1-2).

Drawing closer together in fellowship, through God's spirit, produces real joy in the lives of those who experience greater oneness of mind with God and one another. Being of one accord, with a true unity of mind, can only come through the power of God working fully in our lives to accomplish it. Hence, a true fellowship with God is vital to true fellowship with others.

These verses we have been examining, with regard to true fellowship, reflect the same kind of spiritual admonition that is contained in

Hebrew 10. If we can understand the focus of these verses, we will be able to better understand the focus of the following verses.

"Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries" (Hebrews 10:22-27, KJV).

These verses begin by reminding us of a unique relationship we have now been given with God, through Jesus Christ. We are to have confidence in God's calling and hold fast to those true things He has given us to believe. As we remain faithful to our calling, we are also to remember one another and seek to help other brethren where ever and when ever we can.

The faith of some had already begun to waver and they were not obeying the most basic command, which was to assemble themselves on the Sabbath. If we love one another, we will provoke [Gk.- to stir up] and exhort [Gk.-encourage] one another to remain true to God and hold fast to what He has given us. There is no sacrifice for unrepentant sin. If we begin to practice sin willfully and will not seek repentance, the outcome is a fiery indignation that proceeds from the judgment of God.

Hebrews 10:25 is not about instruction that forbids us to sever fellowship with others. Instead, it is an admonition to hold fast to the way of

life God has revealed to us. That includes not losing faith in God's instruction to assemble as His people on the Sabbath.

Rough statistics of two years ago reveal that right at half of the brethren in our fellowship only a few years ago no longer assemble on the Sabbath. They have given up on our unique calling. The admonition of these verses is needed now more than ever because brethren are continuing to waver in faith and fall by the way side.

Conclusion

What are the lessons contained in this article? We have seen that there are times when we must sever fellowship with others if we are to remain true to God and be obedient to Him. Our fellowship with God must first be true if we are to have true fellowship with others in the Body of Christ.

These are not normal times for the Church as we live in a period that is rapidly approaching the end of 6,000 years for mankind. Paralleling this period of time, we in the Church find ourselves in the last times for the Church, just before the return of Jesus Christ. Conditions in this world are drawing closer to the prophetic time of eruption into the worst physical tribulation mankind has ever experienced.

Conditions in the Church have already erupted into the worst times of our Church history. We have experienced the prophetic time of a great apostasy that is continuing to take its toll upon the Church. We have been experiencing the time of great spiritual tribulation. The overwhelming majority of those who were once in our fellowship have not escaped this time of trouble. Only a remnant will escape.

Due to continuing conditions that are at work to leave the Church in total desolation, and the refusal of so many to repent of pride, brethren are experiencing an ongoing scattering that has not yet ended. As we seek to be in harmony and unity of mind with God,

there are brethren who will be confronted with the difficult task of severing fellowship with others. We obviously wish it would not be this way, but the realities of today paint a different kind of picture.

The remnant of God's people is becoming smaller. That will be part of our trial. We are to endure such trials faithfully. If you are blessed to be with a larger fellowship, thank God continually and pray that it might remain faithful. If you know of others who are scattered and alone, don't condemn them for their difficult choices, but embrace them as they remain true to God.

Today, God's people need each other more than ever. We should encourage one another to hold fast and be faithful to our calling. When was the last time you picked up the phone, especially on the Sabbath, to encourage one of your scattered brethren who is not able to be with a larger fellowship? Perhaps you don't know of such people, but they are growing in numbers. Our hearts should go out to each other in these times of trouble. If you know of others who have had to make difficult decisions that have downsized their fellowship, send them an e-mail, write a letter, or pick up the phone and call them. We do need fellowship with others, but always remember that we must first be in true fellowship with God and then seek true fellowship with one another.

Our ability to remain spiritually sharp, so that we can be alert to false doctrines and alert to what truly comes from God and what does not, has a great deal to do with how well we follow the admonition contained in the verses we have just reviewed in Hebrews 10:22-27.

Are you determined to hold fast and remain faithful to those things that God has miraculously placed in your mind? Are you fearful to move away from those mysteries that have been spiritually revealed to you - truth that others in this world cannot understand? **(1 Corinthians 2:7-14, See Below).**

Do you love your brother and seek to encourage one another to hold fast and remain faithful? And are you willing, if the need arises, to sever any fellowship that threatens true fellowship with God?

These are not easy times, but they are times that lend themselves to greater development of spiritual character. God is molding His ways within us. He is preparing us for incredible opportunities of future

service, if only we will remain faithful to this process and seek to hold fast to what He has delivered to us from the beginning.

"Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I

make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not" (Malachi 3:16-18, KJV). NW

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" 7 But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory: 8 Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 9 But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. 10 But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God. 11 For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. 13 Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. 14 But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (KJV).

Do you grasp the depth of these verses? It seems that too many lose sight of the special calling God the Father gives to those in His Church. Today this seems especially true as people delve into so many different doctrinal ideas that conflict with those foundational things we believed to be true in the beginning.

From early in our calling, we have been blessed by being given understanding of such basic truths as the seventh day Sabbath, the annual Holy Days, tithing, the identity of Israel, as well as other foundational truths. We have been given more than just knowledge, but the spiritual discernment of what is true and what is false about such knowledge. That perception and "absolute believing" of what is true is only made possible by the Spirit of God. Why do so many seem to think they can now change those truths by believing they have come to see some "new truth?"

If people only understood what God's calling involves, they would want to do as so many scriptures admonish us - to hold fast to those truths once delivered. Trunk of the tree, foundational truths never change. We can only build upon them. As the verses above should teach us, human intellect or the human ability to study God's word is not what determines what is true.

Only through the miraculous intervention of God in our lives are we called and given ability to come to Jesus Christ. A part of that process includes God's direct intervention through His spiritual revelation, into our very minds, of truth that can only be received on a spiritual plane. Human intellect does not reveal truth! It is revealed by God through the power of His spirit. Foundational truth about the Sabbath, Holy Days, or tithing do not change, however we do go through a process of spiritual growth that continues to build upon spiritual knowledge. But by doing this, we do not change the foundation.

There may be many ideas and teachings about what people believe concerning matters like tithing. But only one teaching is true. Only one can be doctrinally correct. Was it that which the Church has believed and taught for years, or is it some "new truth" that people have newly discovered by their studies?

It is indeed wise to hold fast and remain faithful to those things God miraculously placed in our minds, through the power of His spirit, from the very beginning.