

# KOINONIA

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*and the Allelous Principle*



## **Supplemental**

*Those who believed were of one heart and of one soul: . . .  
They had all things common. - Acts 4:32*

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# KOINONIA: SUPPLEMENTAL

John H. King

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The following list of English translations might help to identify the limited use of them in this work. [<https://solarmythology.com/translations/bibles.htm>]

- AMP Amplified Bible 2015
- AMPC Amplified Bible Classic Edition 1965
- ASV American Standard Version 1901
- BBE Bible in Basic English 1965
- CEB Common English Bible, 2011
- CEV Contemporary English Version 1995 (NT - 1991)
- CSB Christian Standard Bible 2016
- CWB Clear Word Bible 1992
- ERV Easy to Read 2015
- ESV English Standard Version 2003
- ICB NCV International Children's Bible, New Century Version 1986 (NT - 1978)
- JPB J.B. Phillips New Testament in Modern English 1958 (Revised 1972)
- KJ21 Twenty-First Century King James Version 1994 (NT - 1992)
- KJV AV King James Version (also known as Authorized Version) 1611
- MLB NBV Modern Language Bible also known as New Berkley Version 1959 (NT - 1945; NT revised 1969)
- NASB New American Standard Bible (NASB) 1971 (NT - 1963; Revised 1996)
- NET New English Translation 2005
- NIrV New International Reader's Version (NIrV) 1996
- NIV New International Version 1978 (NT - 1973)
- NKJV New King James Version 1982
- NLT New Living Translation 1996
- NRSV New Revised Standard Version 1990
- TEV Good News Bible also known as Today's English Version 1974 (NT - 1966; Revised 1993)
- YLT Young's Literal Translation 1862 (Revised 1887, 1898)
- WIL Williams New Testament in the Language of the People 1937; Reprinted 2000 as Millennium edition.

... to the church in thy house - Philemon 2

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## Preface

My hope in writing this is to support a theory that the early church needed no cultural accouterments, no further development, no human discovery or inventiveness, to perfect it. The historical changes—many which came because persecution had ended [not begun] by a Roman emperor whose interest was his government [not God's] were not providential but rather more like Israel of old who asked Samuel to “make us a king to judge us like all the nations.” [1 Samuel 8:5]. First and foremost, even Christians, are religious beings who favor concrete and visible forms of worship; so, not without reason, some form of ritual was understandable even within the Christian church, like the sacrificial “types” Moses received on Sinai that represent Christ and His death.

But, notwithstanding, Jesus said “The hour will come, when you shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father ...The true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeks such to worship him.” [John 4:21, 23]. Perhaps, this is why there is no religious “form” recommended in the New Testament, no ritual, no prescribed order of service, nothing to give credence to the Spirit's presence and movement other than a heart after God that sensed Him.

This present work supplements *Koinonia and the Allelous Principle*, which the reader is encouraged to read to understand more fully where we are coming from in these pages. The Institutional Church is not under assault here. Rather, the Biblical model practiced in smaller circles, “house-churches” [as they are called] was designed, we believe by God to revive it!

## The Church

In the 1970's and 80's Evangelical Churches were experiencing a renewal that saw, in some cases, ballooning numerical growth. Perhaps, on the heels of that burst of "spiritual" enthusiasm, which we may credit to God, Christian Colleges and Universities along with growing ministries utilized social science, such as demographic studies and cultural identifiers, to encourage numeric growth by making attenders feel more welcome. Church sermons also became less demanding in tone regarding repentance, less accusatory regarding sin. The idea took off when social media became available.

OpenAI wrote, "The internet really accelerated megachurch growth by providing unprecedented access to global audiences, enabling remote streaming, data analytics, and demographic targeting on a scale never seen before."

Donald McGavran, missionary to India and a famous missiologist [the study of effectively planting mission churches in foreign countries], is widely regarded as the founder of the modern Church Growth Movement. He emphasized empirical observation [science], demographics [people studies: age, class status, etc.], and sociological analysis in mission strategy. His work shaped an entire generation of missiologists promoting several McGavran-like assumptions: attention to the cultural to comply where possible, the use of statistical data to find what people care about, emphasis on church planting strategies, and measurable results, charts that prove numerical and financial increase. As scientific as this sounds, in effect, the old idea that the "Gospel transcends culture [it does not compromise with it]" was never consulted.

In joining the staff at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, he brought his ideas to home missions. Together with the popularity of Rick Warren's book, "The Purpose Driven Life," the Western world was ready to try

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something new and exciting. Warren was out of San Jose, California. How strangely co-incidental that the mega-church movement could be traced back to California!

Churches were encouraged to become seeker-friendly. They would add or subtract, from a weekly service, elements that, in the first case, supported, and in the latter, hindered, numerical church growth. Organs were replaced with synthesizers and guitars. The song book was replaced with modern choruses because these were easier to play—and were increasingly popular because of CCLI companies [Christian Copyright Licensing International] such as: Hillsong, Bethel Music and Elevation Worship.

Anything added was more likely to be culturally supportable. Chairs replaced pews, overhead flat screens replaced hand held Bibles while lights were dimmed, accordingly. Some, sadly, argued that a church experience began to feel more like a concert.

The culture was more prepared than we may realize. Old hymns which promoted Christian theology, which put the Creed to music, like the Psalms of old, and which were honored through choir voices, were no longer sung. Such changes seemed appropriate for the changing times, but some are rethinking the value of those hymns now missed.

The minimalist trend in music, that is, simple praise choruses, some of questionable Biblical value, were now coupled with a general interest in “dumbing down” as far as biblical teaching went. Sermons became light and airy instead of theologically heavy requiring serious thought. Wearing apparel became more relaxed, from flip-flops to shorts and yes, they did, in some places, meet in a barn.

Sermons became less critical of moral misbehavior by not broaching the subject. They become more sympathetic to cultural norms, like divorce among Christian ministers—not just couples in general [not to speak of abortion, homosexuality, and gender identity concerns]. More and more congregants approved cultural moral and ethical standards as they evolved, irrespective of any Biblical study. J. Vernon McGee preached a

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radio sermon in 1967 "Why the Gospel is Not Preached Today" [BibleBusDepot.com].

Pastors who were uneasy in all this, perhaps because they needed time to adjust or perhaps because they objected (maybe, on Biblical grounds) were viewed as men of no vision or simply incompetent.

To maintain church growth relationships were encouraged through "cell" group participation which replaced the midweek Bible study. Support groups for addictions, struggling marriages, men and women separately, and the like, were provided, which didn't always incorporate biblical teaching. The Biblical view was often seen as "old" culture. Discipleship training was provided in support of denominational distinctiveness.

Cell groups were organized in support of the Sunday morning "mega" gathering because they fostered friendships among parishioners, something recognized as a key factor in social stability and maintaining church attendance.

By some sources we are now led to believe this approach has "run its course" and for both public and private reasons in the Western world many are now exiting. Christians are not only leaving the mega churches but far smaller congregations, as well, which suggests that something significant [sine-quo-non] within Christendom broke and social science could not fix it! Maybe, it's time to get back to the Bible, instead!

The Biblical model begins with small non-specific groups whose focus was on Christ. These groups were home churches [mini-churches] in Scripture which gathered together as one large congregation on Sundays in the Temple Court for prayer. The larger service was there to support the smaller home ministries not vice versa. A Sunday morning gathering provided a blessed time of praise for those who through the week have been ministering unto one another. Relational needs were met in the smaller group—not the general assembly. This brought together believers who had been ministering to one another to

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drink in the sermon and celebrate the goodness of God together by just being there.

Seasoned cooks add salt to food in the cooking process and not after the food is cooked. In home churches the believers ministered to one another throughout the week and only on Sundays did they gather to receive what the collective ministry provided, which has always been substantial. This pattern is even visible in macrocosm: The blessings of this life, according to Jesus' Mountain sermon, are a consequence of spiritual poverty, mourning, showing mercy, living a holy life, living in harmony with each other, and enduring ridicule and other forms of persecution. Someday we will join that innumerable gathering around the Throne.

For the sake of the pottage of numerical growth, the modern church sold its birthright to serve and minister to one another across cultures, classes, genders, races, and—yes—doctrinal differences. We have restricted our opportunities to serve others by relegating such service to professionals, by imposing requirements on service that disqualifies the very persons God is calling.

I recall a Princeton graduate, then, in his 70's. and having set aside his grammar books and commentaries to simply enjoy watching the youth ministering to one another in prayer, evangelism, and the like. He told the story of a young convert who wanted to profess the message of His Savior on the town hall steps—unmindful of regulations and admin approval. His pastor advised against his going when this former Princeton scholar—true to form—spoke up, "Out of your inner most being will flow rivers of living water; Brother, Let the river flow!!"

### **Home Ministry**

What did home churches in the Bible represent? Were they nothing more than a humble beginning? When Church leadership saw them only in an historical light, they no longer represented a divine architectural design. Homes became only a necessary meeting place since there were no church buildings. It

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appeared more like a chaotic beginning motivated by the excitement of a miraculous event. History did not see God in the use of home churches.

The earliest use of a building exclusively for worship dates back to 232 AD in the city of Dura-Europos, located along the banks of the Euphrates River in eastern Syria. Ingeniously, someone envisioned a meeting room where the living room was and they converted, what might have been a bedroom in a modern home, into a baptistry. It was a simple design architecturally, but a dynamic one spiritually.

Houses today are converted into dentist offices, real estate agencies and attorney businesses, etc. Before the third century, there is no clear archaeological evidence of dedicated church buildings, as Christians met discreetly in homes amid periodic persecution. Large public basilicas only became common after the persecution ended in the 4th century and Christianity became a state religion. [Maybe that was the problem!]

The writer to the Hebrews in this regard [Hebrews 3:6] said something profound worth mentioning: “Christ is ... over his own house; whose house are we...” The physical building is unimportant though mistakenly we may have put far more value in it than is biblically warranted. The value is in *us*, the believers. Home churches without knowing it supported this proper emphasis, first, by meeting the only place they could out of necessity [no buildings were yet built for this purpose] and, more importantly, the people ministered to one another [what I call the Biblical principle of “one another”]. They were not simply observers but faithful participants in what God was doing among them.

### **What If**

Whereas Paul said God chose the foolish [in man’s eyes] to confound the wise [in their own eyes], man’s idea is to choose educated and qualified persons to control the ignorant. To allow a congregation of only a couple hundred to meet in smaller groups of no more than 20 during the week to dialog over the

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Word and share testimonies, possibly over a meal with communion [just 10 groups, if the math is correct] still seems risky to those in authority who have the building, its upkeep and mortgage, with which to concern themselves.

What if the responsibility of maintaining property didn't exist. What if the edifice on which were spent 6 or 7 figures to build was not ours, and what if, in the Biblical pattern, collections were made for the poor, and as needed in natural disasters [like the famines mentioned in the Bible]. What if support for missions, home and abroad, could include today's "pastor" full time visiting the "home" groups on a, kind of, circuit, more than one a week because the groups meet on different days through the week. What if the church didn't need government approval for tax purposes because no one cared about tax breaks. What if monthly group leaders, which we may call, elders, met to compare notes and pray for the work. The elders also might meet for further biblical training offered by the pastor.

And here is a crazy idea: The "home" church, we can call it, could meet today in a hotel conference room, a house, an empty office or building. ... or a barn! We do this now for startup ministries. Let's just not outgrow our humble beginning. One building large enough to accommodate everyone could be designated, if necessary, by more than one local ministry, pastorate, whereby their respective congregations could meet monthly on a Saturday or Sunday or some other day—sharing the space. Some smaller church groups do this now in the larger churches.

### **Revealing Sin**

In Matthew 18 Jesus seems to deal with a number of issues: greed, offenses, sinning, discipline, and ultimately, forgiveness—all of which can be and should be addressed in body ministry. We know this because Jesus concludes with a general promise: if you gather "in my name" I'll join you' I'll be there to show you the way thorough [Matthew 18:20].

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This is the serious side of spiritual support. Support would not be needed if matters of this sort never existed. But what about the many issues that God's Word does not address: gender dysphoria, same sex marriage, abortions, gambling, over-eating, smoking, and more. In fact, man is capable of inventing many ingenious ways of doing things that God would disapprove of. Was not that the issue at the Tower of Babel? What's wrong with building a tower? Maybe nothing! But God's concern went deeper: "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. ... this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do." [Genesis 6:5; 11:6]. If we start defining right from wrong in a creed or codify it in law, we will be writing forever and running the risk of bias and contradiction.

Conviction replaces guilt when the Spirit speaks to the heart the Word of God. We inflict guilt when we judge one another; so, Jesus urged us not to! [Matthew 7:1]. Paul reminded us that the object of our words is not judging but restoring [Galatians 6:1], and we do it in the most gentle way possible because we could be next!

### **Addressing Sin**

There is more than one reason why in the "home" church sin needs to be addressed. First, "home" ministry is built on transparency. We can hide from one another in the dark during a Sunday Morning concert but not when eye to eye during the week when the conversation in the Biblical text we are discussing turns to the very issue we have been hiding. Christians who prefer remaining out of sight simply will not attend, which in itself exposes the inner conflict they struggle with because they would otherwise crave spiritual support. The truth is that believers under conviction do not want to hide but past judgment, accusation and guilt make the risk too great that fellow believers may not understand. Since we are all members of one and the same family of God, we fail one another when we do not recognize the value of that relationship and how to protect and appreciate it.

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Secondly, there is a shame we all feel when tempted even though we do not yield. That shame, in itself, defines the sin that made the temptation so alluring. This is sometimes difficult to discuss in a group setting and not feel impure just by talking about it. Some have painful memories attached to some subjects and it is only proper to discuss them when God's Word holds our hands as we walk through the text. When Paul began his letter to the saints at Rome, he outlined the details of an apostasy that guaranteed judgment to those involved [Romans 1:18-32]. I often wondered why raise such a subject until I realized that we cannot talk about holiness without discovering sin.

Third, and probably the least upsetting, is simply having a grasp of what sin means scripturally. Religions by their very nature invent rules and regulations they call sin that are not in the Bible. When Jesus walked through a wheat field hungry with His disciples gleaning a handful of grain, the religious leaders accused them of breaking Torah law. But they didn't. The idea of washing one's hands before eating was something the Rabbis added later!

Sin, what disrupts our peace and strains our relationship with the Lord and one another, is not a simple matter. Our brains prefer examples and not abstraction but the Biblical virtues are relational and they often are defined by and in that relationship. And since our fellowship with our Lord is hinged on our fellowship with one another, every opportunity to get to know one another, get closer to Christ with each other's encouraging support, sharpens our focus on righteousness and gives us a clearer understanding of what evil is too.

Fourth, in a spiritual conflict there is strength in numbers in prayer. James invited us to prayer for [and with] one another to live victorious over sin. This is not necessarily a vague or general prayer for "deliverance from evil" [Matthew 6:13]. At times we need extended council with the Lord in prayer with Him reasoning with us [Isaiah 1:18] wrestling with a conscience that disagrees with our carnal side, rationalizing our innocence when we know we are trying unsuccessfully to deceive

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ourselves, convince ourselves we are right when we know we are wrong. The breakthrough eventually comes when we agree with God [confess] and He washes us clean of it. Often, the Spirit's counseling happens in a "home" gathering in a quiet awakening in the soul. Sometimes some follow James wise counsel to bring one other into confidence and prayer.

Seldom will this dynamic play out in a Sunday Morning Service. This service is generally not structured for the Spirit to engage in such heart to heart encounters.

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Paul's Letters to the Corinthians has been called, Francis Godet informed us, "a fragment of ecclesiastical history like no other." He then observed, "It might be concluded that they [Paul's letters to Corinth] belong to a past which no more concerns us and consequently has no longer for us a present religious value." This reveals a tendency on the part of more modern scholarship to make the truth contained in them the subject of an intellectual study rather than a work of conscience or of heart acceptance. Godet then cautioned against interpreting the Corinthian text as mere rhetorical discourse rather than a vigorous call to holiness—something our modern world, in error, shares with the Greek people.

Godet continued, "He [Paul] established himself with the believers, Jews, and proselytes, in a neighboring house belonging to one of his Jewish converts, and from that time he preached, especially to Gentiles, not clothing the salvation of Christ, either with the charms of eloquence, or with the attraction of human wisdom, so that if his preaching exercised, a powerful influence, it was solely through the divine working, which accompanied it, and, as the apostle says, by the demonstration of Spirit and of power." [Godet, 10].

"Paul's writings and Acts mention several specific homes or households linked to the Corinthian believers, including those of Aquila and Priscilla (1 Corinthians 16:19), Gaius (who hosted "the whole church," Romans 16:23), Stephanas, Crispus, and others like Chloe's people (1

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Corinthians 1:11). The church functioned as a network of these domestic assemblies that sometimes gathered as a larger group.” [Grok]

A 2020 Bara Group Study found that 6% of American Christians roughly 5,000,000 people regularly attend house churches. This is double of just a decade earlier. The Harvard Institute for Research tracks House Church growth and estimates there are between 300,000 and 400,000 active house church gatherings in America as of 2024. [according to Christian Faith Archive on YouTube].

In an age of social media, information could be skewed or even contrived to support a given narrative or it might be unreliable because a statistical sampling was not representative of the country, but there is still reason to believe that house churches show increasing interest among Millennials and Generation ‘Z’ believers. A fellow pastor related to me a friend of his who pastors multiple home churches that meet as 1 group monthly.

In reporting this, we are not suggesting house churches should replace—what is now called—the “institutional” church. Any reform must be the Spirit’s work.

### **The Spirit**

Christians should never minimize the importance of the Spirit’s work within and among a group of believers gathered to pray or discuss the Scripture. We may miss this truth in 1 Corinthians 12-14 while we focus on the theological or doctrinal ideas we glean from Paul’s letter.

It is with this in mind that we interpret Paul’s admonishment to the church at Corinth, “If therefore the *whole* church be come together into one place, ... if *all* prophesy, and there come in one ... unlearned [a private person unfamiliar with how the Spirit works] he is convinced [convicted] of *all*, he is judged [scrutinized] of *all*: ... thus are *the secrets of his heart made manifest*; [1 Corinthians 14:23-25].

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There is in these few verses a dynamic principle often overlooked that the real work done in any believer's life is not the result of human effort or scholarly advice or even in the testimonies of other believers. It is what the Spirit may do with any of these. He, alone, is the expert. He alone is the teacher or guide, according to John 16:23, into *all* truth. This is why pride in ourselves or our own ability or training is so destructive within the group when we are seeking God's solutions from God's Word.

And this is why no one believer, alone, can be looked to for answers, even a pastor. The Spirit decides whom He will choose to "prophesy." "*All* prophesy" suggests everyone may prophesy or speak when directed by the Spirit. Prophecy is defined by 3 characteristics: *conviction* [God's reasoning and discussion] followed by *examination* [KJV: judged] or by self-examination followed by the *manifestation* of sins hidden or denied—an unveiling of the heart—in repentant submission to the Spirit of God.

"He is convinced [convicted] of all" means the Spirit is persuasive; God's grace has not been resisted. Conviction is not guilt, it is at last freedom from guilt.

"He is judged of all." This word "judged" is not primarily a judicial term or a counseling technique. The word "judged" [in the King James Version] is an investigation: a search to find or learn something. The unlearned and unbelieving are suddenly exposed to the bright light of self-examination from which no hidden motives or secret sins can hid. He senses how vulnerable he has become through self-introspection, self-awareness, because of something that was said. No one knows at this moment what he is feeling and perceiving; how memories wash over him in tidal waves of conviction; but he knows, and until he shares it in his testimony, they do not need to know how the Spirit of God is conversing with him and bringing him to an inner altar of repentance and submission.

"The secrets of his heart made manifest." Oh the joy of no more secrets! Of discarding the weight or the sin that so easily

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besets [Hebrews 12:1] and now turning to Jesus who now authors his faith and will be faithful. {Hebrews 12:2}.

### Testimonies

We little realize the dynamic energy at work among us in small groups praying, studying the Word and testifying of God's faithfulness.

"Now, brethren, if I come unto you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you, except I shall speak to you either by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine?" [1 Corinthians 14:6].

Godet tells us, "[Paul] was resolved not to have recourse to the modes of action generally used in public conferences, brilliance of oratorical art, dialectic skill, profound speculation. There remained to him only one force – and his grandest act of faith was to wish no other – the simple testimony rendered to Christ and his Cross." [Godet, on Corinthians, 9].

It isn't what we know but whom we know, whose love we have experienced, that forms our witness. According to Hebrews 3:5 Moses' witness was "a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after." Moses had the honor of overseeing the Tabernacle and the sacrificial system within its walls that spoke of Jesus' coming death and our salvation. The pattern shown him in the mount like our lives are parables of God's redemptive love. We can share nothing more to explain Him to our world and we ought not say less.

Every testimony, every sermon, every group dialog, ought to be in these 4 forms, like the lifecycle of the butterfly: egg, larva (caterpillar), pupa (chrysalis), and adult. God presents His truth in 4 stages: by revelation, or by knowledge, or by prophesying, or by doctrine.

Everything God says is *revelation* and nothing ever said by anyone else is revelation except God. God changes the heart, opens the heart, writes His law upon it, and explains Truth to us. Revelation is the egg, the beginning of all true divine knowledge and where spiritual life begins.

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It becomes *knowledge*—knowledge based on experience, heart-felt, faith-filled, lived knowledge, true spiritual knowledge, “according as his divine power hath given unto us all things that *pertain* unto life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue.” [2 Peter 1:3].

Knowledge now takes on the form of a prophecy fulfilled. We spoke of prophecy performing 3 tasks: convicting, examining, and finally revealing or manifesting Truth. This here is what God’s truth does by the Spirit as we live it. It develops within us strong convictions, fully persuaded of God’s promises revealed to us. It strengthens faith, and emboldens commitment to Christ. We might say that the knowledge God revealed to us now dons the prophetic mantle of witness.

Prophecy is the form God’s revealed knowledge takes. It is God’s Word at work forming us into the image of Christ [1 John 3:2] “from glory to glory even as by the Spirit of the Lord” [2 Corinthians 3:18]. For this we enter the chrysalis of suffering with Christ [Hebrews 5:8]. This is what the Greeks called “*pathei mathos*” or learning through suffering.

Finally, *doctrine* is teaching. Doctrine lived becomes testimony and a witness. As doctrine it is limited to Truth that is revelatory and not based on human logic or thought. Dare we add that true Christian doctrine is always and only a part of the testimony of all believers of the saving grace of God. Whatever is taught that does not originate in the new heart of all believers but comes from the head—no matter how reasonable sounding—is not doctrine that originated in a divine revelation nor does it develop into a Christlikeness within.

Testimonies of this quality should comprise true “Home” group ministry and fellowship. We cannot overstate the importance of reminding every participant in Christian fellowship that: If you haven’t experienced or lived what you want to give witness to, don’t. What you do not own in your heart as a part of you is not yours to share. Our testimonies should always magnify the greatness of our Lord in our lives.

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## **Listening**

But believers are capable of and ought to always empathize with others whose experiences in Christ are being shared. True fellowship in a group setting is mostly listening because it is group sharing and group participation. We do not value the ministering of a listening ear as, perhaps we ought, because someone else's testimony, understandably, reminds us of ours which we are excited about sharing as well. We interrupt one another with such regularity that we all end up giving but never receiving. To allow another's contribution to pass us by because we were not listening—our minds were working on what next we wished to say—robs us of the benefit of fellowship and later an opportunity to remember them in prayer.

It seems minor, perhaps, but learning to listen as if we were preparing for a college final on another's testimony is what professional counselors [professional listeners] do. Advice out of thin air is the trade of someone frustrated or not genuinely concerned about others. When later we remember and still later at another gathering we ask for any update, they will be blessed to know we cared.

But the larger concern for a home group is allowing the Spirit to direct the course of our study and discussion as well as what we say, in general, to each other. And the Spirit can only be said to lead when we follow. And to follow means to learn to listen to the Spirit within—listen to our hearts as God impresses on us what to say and when to say nothing.

Pastors know how important it is in preparing sermons and homilies to keep their hearts tuned to God's, to listen to their own hearts in which the Spirit resides [John 14:17]. Young believers may still need to learn to identify the Shepherd's voice within but no better place is there for this to happen than in a home gathering magnifying Christ.

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## **Prayer**

Listening leads to prayer, a vital aspect of fellowship. “Weep with those who weep.” [Romans 12:15]. But prayer is much more. At times it is just an opportunity to wait in God’s presence or joining another in support as they voice their needs to the Lord.

As John explained “truly our fellowship *is* with the Father” [1 John 1:3]. This is why we celebrate communion [the Eucharist] together—not in a rushed or mechanical way as if the ritual mattered more than meditating on what our heavenly Father and Jesus did for us. There is no reason not to slow down, sing songs, have more than one prayer or person praying, read the Scriptures and spend time in our Lord’s presence with thankful hearts for our salvation, for healing, for protection, for provisions, etc.. This is less likely to happen in the General Service on a Sunday when the schedule is more strictly followed, rushed at times, and, in some churches, followed by another service.

## Jethro's Counsel

Exodus 18:19-22 records in Scripture what we might call “The Jethro model.” Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, on a visit in the wilderness found his son-in-law overburdened with complaints from the Children of Israel. Israel was famous for its murmuring; so, when Moses organized his administration [Numbers 12:7] he mediated their disputes by himself “from the morning unto the evening,” [Exodus 18:13] which gave Jethro serious concern about Moses’ health, diagnosing this “too heavy “ [Exodus 18:18]. So, Jethro advised the following:

“Hearken now unto my voice,” Jethro probably spoke in a stern but understanding way, “I will give you counsel [here’s what you must do], and may God be with you: Be to the people God’s representative [if you must], that you bring their causes unto God. But [here’s how] teach them [others] ordinances and laws, and show them the way wherein they must walk [how to go about administrating justice], and the work that [what] they must do. Out of all the people identify able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place *such* over them, *to be* rulers of thousands, *and* rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens: And let them judge the people at all seasons: and it shall be, *that* every great matter they shall bring unto you, but every small matter they shall judge: so shall it be easier for you, and they shall bear *the burden* with you.” [Exodus 18:19-22].

Jethro advised dividing the work among as many judges as might assign no more than 10 cases to any one judge—including Moses. Understandably, this would require a number of judges; hopefully, not everyone is litigious. Such a number of cases would require thousands of judges for a nation around a million men and women, according to the census in Numbers 1:46 & Numbers 26:51. But if this sounds unwieldy for many, how about for just Moses! The point is: Jethro—we can believe

## Jethro's Counsel

with Divine approval—suggested that many hands make the work lighter.

When Eldad and Medad (your dad and my dad) were prophesying, Joshua wanted them to stop, but Moses, offered this gentle reprimand, “Are you jealous for me? Would God that all the LORD’S people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit upon them” [Numbers 11:29]. This was God’s plan! “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy” [Joel 2:28].

### **Corporate Churches**

Jethro’s model for leadership can be superimposed on the Church in a general sense: many hands make light work. There is a limit to how many people any one pastor can care for spiritually before burning out; so, larger churches tend to assign ministry to designated deacons and elders or provide special ministry for various spiritual and social needs. But all this is centralized under the administration and supervision of a board elected—not by God, per se, but—by what Francis Schaefer in his 1970 book *The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century* spoke of as, “a dictatorship of 51 percent.”

It is unfortunate, in a way, that the Church has followed the corporate model of investing large amounts of the work of God into the hands of a few. The corporate model has proven risky: corporate wheat farms, bee farms, cattle farms, and the like. Disease can wipe out an entire industry. A financial crisis or moral indiscretion in a mega church impacts an entire Christian community.

Persecution in Acts 8 scattered the Christians, often thought to be used by God [Romans 8:28] causing the work to not only survive but thrive during the Church’s infancy. James recognized them as “brethren” [James 1:2]. Peter called them the elect “kept by the power of God through faith” [1 Peter 1:5]. This was as Jesus prophesied “You will be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” [Acts 1:8]. This, no doubt, meant the

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multiplication of house churches. Saul's persecution explicitly targeted these by "entering house after house" [Acts 8:3].

Commentators describe this as the church shifting from a "come and see" model (centered in Jerusalem's temple) to a "go and tell" model through everyday believers in homes [www.preceptaustin.org]. Although, meeting in "homes" cannot be argued as essential to the propagation of the Gospel or church growth, it can be argued that the smaller group model is a more spiritually robust approach to ministry sustaining a healthier witness especially during persecution. The smaller groups are more decentralized—not in terms of fellowship, because they can still gather together in larger groups—in terms of *leadership*. There is a sense in which a scattered work is more in the hands of God instead of a few select persons. And since it is God's Church, this sounds more Biblical.

The institutional church by its sheer size has become a corporate "church" work, to paraphrase C. M. Ward from the old A of G Revival-time broadcast, "too much administrated, not enough led." Institutional church work requires a level of professionalism, training, and education to handle corporate issues: financial, legal, logistical. None of this burdens the "house" work freeing its members to focus on the Bible and prayer as well as charity. And unlike the corporate church, "house" churches are in many more hands; many more people contribute or participate in actual Bible-based ministry. If being scattered has an advantage, especially during times of persecution, the smaller groups are already prepared.

### **Small Churches**

There are, no doubt, a number of churches whose attendance or membership is low—perhaps, a few dozen people or less. These works should consider the House-church model to revive the work. Small groups from necessity could be organized for Bible study, prayer, and fellowship. If around a meal, it might include communion.

The difficulty here is relegating the traditional church format or ritual to a lesser importance. Reverend Vincent J.

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Donovan, Missionary to the Masai of Tanzania, in his book "Christianity Rediscovered" spoke of rediscovering the Christian message when the Masai refused the traditional Mass as it is celebrated in the western world for a ritual more culturally significant for them. Donovan conceded, page 92, "It was not scripture or theology, which prevented them [the Masai] from doing what they thought they had a right to do, but simply the history of a church embedded in a single culture, with its own ideas, coming from that culture, as to what number of years of seminary training were needed to lead a community in the simple act of celebrating the Lord's supper, as he told us to do. Any command of his [God's] to undergo academic training before attempting to break bread together is strikingly missing in scripture."

Just for my amusement I asked Grok [what I knew already], "What church ritual or form must a service take according to the New Testament?" Grok read, "Acts 2:42 (the earliest summary): The believers 'devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.' This is the closest thing to a basic pattern."

"Because a missionary comes from another already existing church," wrote Donovan, "that is the image of church he will have in mind, and if his job is to establish a church, that is the church he will establish. I think, rather, a missionaries's job is to preach, not the church, but Christ. If he preaches Christ and the message of Christianity, the church may well result, may well appear, but it might not be the church he had in mind."

### **A Computer Search**

Grok added [we know this to be true already] The New Testament prioritizes: Apostolic teaching/Scripture-centered instruction, fellowship and mutual encouragement, prayer, singing praise to God, The Lord's Supper as a regular remembrance, and orderly, edifying conduct led by qualified elders (1 Timothy 3, Titus 1).

What it did *not* require was: A specific order of service (e.g., no mandated "liturgy"), ... vestments, set prayers, ... or

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architectural requirements. Nor did it require a particular day or frequency beyond regular gathering (though the first day of the week is associated with breaking bread). No clericalism or elaborate ceremony is mentioned. "*Early meetings were often in homes.*" Grok read.

There is a danger associated with a weekend ritual the represents holiness replacing that holiness, itself, in our hearts.

### Religion

Religion [not the legal definition but historical one] at its root is a pious discipline that seeks to define a holiness that, hopefully, in the eyes of God will be viewed as true worship [John 4:20-23]. To give this concrete form, rituals were instituted in order to celebrate that holy quest as well as give it expression.

But holiness is an abstract term in a sinful world. We may celebrate it but how do we find it! How do we experience it? How do we define it this side of heaven? This is the true quest, the real process, which the supplicant or acolyte seeks: "as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct," [1 Peter 1:15 NKJV]. So, to understand holiness, the religious mind has first to identify sin. But what is sin—or, evil?

Augustine taught that evil is *privatio boni* [the privation of good]. In his *Confessions*, Book VII, chapters 11–13 Augustine maintained "corruption presupposes an underlying good that it diminishes." In his *Enchiridion* he wrote, "What, after all, is anything we call evil except the privation of good?"

How can we identify what sin is, if it is the absence of "holiness"—and we don't know what "holiness" means! This is truly a catch 22 scenario. Augustine recognized holiness as the restored state of the soul, not static moral perfection but dynamic participation in God's life, made possible by Christ's mediation and the Spirit's work.

Agreed!

All we are saying, however, is that light has no fellowship with darkness [2 Corinthians 6:14] but we have not defined either the light nor that darkness. Augustine is right in

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saying, define “light” because darkness is in its absence. One identifies sin by contrasting it with the ordered good revealed in Christ and Scripture.

### **The Danger**

That is the Spirit’s burden and ministry within Christianity [John 16:8-10]. And He teaches holiness not as a process but as a *following* [John 16:13] after Christ [Luke 9:23]. Sin as the absence of Holiness, does not define that holiness, following Christ *does*.

But the danger is the religious mind , even in an honest effort to understand, may, and does, filter through human logic the Spirit’s teachings or what is written in the Word. And then we, possibly, relegate too much importance to the ritual. This was exactly the mistake proselytes to Christianity from Judaism made according to the Epistle to the Hebrews. Their sacrificial system or ceremonial law was “a shadow of the good things “ [Hebrews 10:1] not the good things themselves, not holiness itself. Augustine, also, explicitly connects true worship to holiness rather than mere external ritual. In his work, *City of God* [Book 10], he describes the "true sacrifice" as “every work that unites us to God in holy fellowship.”

It seems more logical and easier to understand, if we simplify holiness in terms of living a good, moral, respectable life. Add to this regular church attendance and we develop an assurance of heaven. But it could be false hope because it stems not from a love for the Savior and a recognition by faith of what He provided on Calvary, but from a definition of religion.

The task of defining holiness in terms of following Christ is missionary work—not only foreign but also home. It is here where the small group ministry, the house church, has the greatest value because it provides a commitment without the ceremonial embellishments and gives true value to the weekend rituals that the larger christian gathering is formed around.

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### **Purge Old Leaven**

“Purge out therefore the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, as you are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us: [1 Corinthians 5:7]. “And every man that hath this hope in him purifies himself, even as he [Jesus] is pure” [1 John 3:3].

Since we are now familiar with some concept of “sin” holiness might be defined as a virtue absent “the sin which doth so easily beset” [Hebrews 12:1]. James wrote, “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this [among other things], To ... keep himself unspotted from the world.” [James 1:27].

All theology claims to map this journey. Some doctrine begins with a declaration of righteousness followed by a progressive sanctification. Others, in a more detailed theology, require acts of penance which may need time after death to complete the task of purification [purgatory: though Catholicism concurs that this is not a biblical idea].

The short of it is: Any teaching that does not recognize this process of confession and cleansing [1 John 1:9] has capitulated to basic human drives erasing both terms, “sin” and “holiness,” from their minds. They no longer believe in God! Or if they do, they do so for no reason! Christ Jesus’ crucifixion carries for them no significance or meaning. The whole purpose behind our witness is not to reveal how loving God is but how dangerous it is to live in sin and for which reason, He died!

### **Missionary Work**

Perhaps, in the western world, missionary work and small group “house” church work are thought as different things, but they are not! Every ministry begins “small.” And every person when first accepting the Gospel message is only inside the entrance to “this grace wherein we stand” [Romans 5:2].

To learn a given denominational form of worship is a separate education. This makes the liturgy problematic in itself

## Jethro's Counsel

because it requires training in, and learning of, the symbolism and meaning. And many astute minds might ask, "Why?"

Many believers raised on the intimacy and sense of belonging and friendship that is created in small groups may never want anything else. So, when they learn there was never any instruction in the Bible beyond this, they may be hard to convince of the value in what is now offered within the institutional church!

Perhaps for this reason churches prefer to close and sell off property to investors that transform sanctuaries into classrooms and offices, and parking lots. But if the building is paid for and the denomination has the equity to reinvest, they might want to open their door—and I dare say, their hearts—to small group ministries. Even if it seems to be counterintuitive, it is still *God!* I know, the problem is: We don't know what God is going to do with it [He cannot be trusted to revive our ministerial interests, our denominational form of worship]. It is still *our* property!

### Gen 'z'

Many churches are holding on until the few remaining, who are elderly, are no longer alive. Meanwhile the Millennials and General Z'ers have left. For some of us, old folk, within the next decade or so we may not be in attendance either. Would it not be better to turn the ministry over to them? Many persons in old age have accumulated a certain amount of wealth, a legacy of sorts, which they kept for the next generation. Why not the church! I love my grandchildren enough to give them my savings, but not my God?

If they don't see value in the ritual, maybe there is not enough there *to* see. If they want a greater sense of fellowship, a greater meaning to their faith, are they wrong? Someday, we'll be in heaven; and the last time I researched it out, heaven is the place of spirit-filled *fellowship*, reunion, *family!* Do we really imagine our particular form of worship will survive this life unchanged!

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No one here is trying to convince anyone that they need to change. That would be presumptuous and arrogant. But if you find yourself at home in a "home" ministry, loving the love, longing to belong, a parched soul drinking from the "Well" of water that springs up unto eternal life and you are inclined to want to stay in this house church even though so much is different, a bit strange, and, in a way, you know you'll miss if you leave.

Well, don't!

Don't leave!

## The Challenge

Well, there is only one challenge in a house ministry. A small group regardless of where they meet will have problems only with each other. If we are united, there is no problem. If there are “issues,” they will be interpersonal or relational.

As believers in Christ, we are family and families often disagree. We should never be naive enough to think this will never happen when it is guaranteed to happen. In the larger church assembly, we may hid from people we don’t favor or we may choose to go elsewhere but these options are not as handy when we attend a small group that has played a vital part in our Christian growth and we have a sense of family with all the members in the group except that one person that we don’t like.

Tensions between members of the smaller group are guaranteed for another more immediate reason: The accuser of the brethren. Revelation 12:10 uses a word the emphasizes Satan’s craft as public slander, and lies [Genesis 3:1]. Satan’s moniker “the devil” means “accuser,” also in the sense that he is highly persuasive in controlling the minds and thoughts of others against someone. We get our word “diabolic” from the Greek.

This is why when Satan is putting brother against brother or sister against sister [Philippians 4:2 ] God gave us “forgiveness” as the antidote: “Lest Satan should get an advantage of us: for we are not ignorant of his devices” or the way he thinks [2 Corinthians 2:11]. These are thoughts that put one against another and “exalts itself against the knowledge of God” [2 Corinthians 10:5]. As believers—and especially within a spiritually significant fellowship—we need to stay alert to that shadowy figure behind the curtain of our conversations!

Peter said “Be sober, be vigilant” [1 Peter 5:8]—words that speak to our being on the alert to the devil’s movements like a crouching lion: Genesis 4:7 [NLT] says, “Sin is crouching at the door.” There are 3 words for being “alert” and the one which

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simply means “a wakeful state or no sleep in you” is not used here because we *do* get sleepy when it comes to the accuser! He waits for the moment we let down our guard to pounce, according to Peter, “seeking whom he may devour.” “Vigilance” here means to arouse ourselves—do what we must to wake up! And then be “sober” or stay awake—lots of spiritual coffee! It is difficult to train oneself to remain alert but Satan is waiting his opportunity. When our thoughts, what we dwell on, are on sinful things he stirs up trouble between us, as believers. Being aware of him goes a long way in defeating him!

This brief work is not intended as a course on pastoral counseling or eldership training. The message that God wanted to share with us, He already has, having inscribed it on our hearts—Christian love. If we listen to our own hearts, to the Spirit of God within us, and the voice of the Shepherd, we will discover that the knowledge necessary to be in fellowship with other believers is already part of us. This chapter is only intended to point out how necessary our new heart is for that fellowship to occur!

### **Somebody Said the Wrong Thing**

In Matthew 5:11 Jesus defines His use of the word *reproach* or *revilement* as “all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.” It is the employment of abusive and insulting language not against the believer but against their message: Jesus said, “for my sake.”

But there may be harsher words spoken than these where “words” are directed not at what is said but the person, themselves. Jesus heals a blind man and *the blind man*, is in trouble with the authorities! It was not what happened to him that bothered the religious leaders; the man was the problem. “You are his disciple.” [John 9:28]. It was not something he said but something he became, a witness for Christ, that brought on their ire. There is a saying, “People are not problems, people have problems.” Regardless of the wisdom this statement

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projects, We don't always see this difference in the heat of an argument.

Some persons may "mock" the message, finding it, perhaps comedic, and ridiculously absurd. This was Paul's experience on Mar's Hill in Acts 17:32 when he mentioned the resurrection from the dead. Many philosopher types dismissed his words as unworthy of further discussion. At a conference early in my pastoring I asked a question which the leader ignored. After a brief pause, he entertained another one. My young bride and I were somewhat offended by it, but it shows how an insensitive moment may disrupt the flow of what God's Spirit is doing.

To assume everything we say will always be well received or that others will understand the intent behind them or how our mind works—even among believers—is, at least, a bit presumptuous. God might be giving us something to share with others who initially repel the thought. The reasons are not important here because it isn't the Greeks in conversation with Paul or the Pharisees with the healed blind man that we are concerned about. It is Paul's reaction, the blind man's response, and how we answer "when men shall revile, and persecute [relentlessly], and shall say all manner of evil" or they simply misinterpret our kindness.

We went down this road to point out that how we interpret other believers is increasingly relevant when they become a part of our Christian experience. This is way listening is so important. This is guaranteed to happen in small groups where dialog is encouraged, more so, than in the larger assembly once a week while we sit in silence.

### **I Don't Like Them**

So what if someone is in the fellowship you regret is there or wish they were not? The trend is always to rationalize reasons why our feelings are legitimate; so, we reason we will do the "honorable" thing and let the Lord work it all out. But all this is intending to legitimize feelings toward another brother or sister in Christ which we should not endorse. We need to harness our

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feelings, not let them control. I have a simple rule, “Any friend of Jesus is a friend of mine!”

The Corinthians found out that Satan loves to join us at play in the sandbox when we start throwing sand! [A memory from kindergarten, 1949]. The Corinthians were divided over who they wanted to follow: Peter or Paul or Apollos [1 Corinthians 1:12]. This could have meant 3 different house ministries at the time or endless arguments over doctrine within the same group.

What do we do when someone there is divisive? [never us!] What do we do when we just don’t like them and we can’t say how or why? Maybe their personality, maybe their doctrine, maybe the way they talk [we don’t mean slow or fast or with a speech impediment] but the words they use either make no sense or they seem to be too negative all the time or they speak poorly of someone, we highly regard. And on and on it goes....

“Any friend of Jesus is a friend of mine!” We must learn “acceptance” which we spoke about in “*Koinonia*.”

### **My Feelings are More than Friendship**

Transference [the redirection to a substitute, usually a therapist, of emotions that were originally felt in childhood] is a real thing. Also, hormones and neurotransmitters that in the brain define emotions, especially pleasure. We are all “more or less” human when it comes to feelings and how those feelings rely on underlying memories and generally how we perceive our relationships. We may love all Christians but not in the way or expressed as we do toward a spouse or children. But when feelings get tangled or confused, we must engage our Christian conscience and will to immediately untangle them.

Donna was a student of mine who signed up for every class I taught in this little Bible school in Western PA. She was uncommonly playful outside class around me and even toasted some english muffins for me to begin the school day when I arrived each morning. And when I needed to pick up extra cash because—no doubt many of us on staff were underpaid at the

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time—she alone signed up to assist me in painting the school president's house.

Now, before you go somewhere no man has gone before, I knew this was emotionally and spiritually unhealthy and took steps to redirect her interests from me. Was it tempting for me to enjoy so much needless attention? Of course, that's the human part. But many saw and many misinterpreted what they saw because—again, we are all human and we know what it means to be human.

Donna was probably just being Donna but I had to take steps to prevent transferring my affection off my wife unto her—a common temptation and mistake—again, because we are human. God blessed us with endorphins and dopamine transmitters in our brains that provide feelings of pleasure and can leave us wanting more. Only the Spirit of God in cooperative effort with our own wills can bring stray emotions back in line. My wife and I are soon to begin our 59<sup>th</sup> year married and still in love—more so!

It would be hard for me to believe this scenario isn't repeated over and over again in small groups—sometimes with hurtful results. When, in one church I pastored, the Sunday School director and the teen class teacher took the kids on a weekend outing [a common practice] unfortunately for 2 marriages, they returned “in love.” No amount of counsel seemed to be able to stop it. It had a tragic ending. I share this to encourage all believers to be on their guard as Peter already warned us.

We all need protection from this. The Youtube video world is lit up with account after account of ministerial indiscretion and the devil is having a field day out of it. And what about our witness to the world? What about the work God wants to accomplish within the group?

I am sure this scene plays out over and over again because it is the easiest one for Satan to work with. “But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.” [James 1:14]. And we must know that small group ministries, which we have called “house” or “home” ministries

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or church, has to be Satan's number 1 interest because spiritually it is the most dangerous for him. A study in the book of Acts can be seen as a record of his attempts at destroying the church in its infancy.

### **They Are not the Leader**

Some people like to lead even if God has never chosen them to. Gaius was the elder leading his home ministry [3 John 1]. Diotrophes was trying to usurp a position there he was never called of God to be in [3 John 9].

Perhaps, this challenge is not as evident within the smaller group as it might be in the church as a whole, but remaining humble even after being elected to lead is not easy for some persons in authority in the church. When someone believes they are responsible for how the money is spent or to approve pastoral vision or, even, protect denominational doctrine, they become cautiously less likely to allow the pastor freedom of ministry and a conflict may result. I knew a teacher in college, who, as a pastor, like to represent the opposite of his own interest in a matter, knowing the board would disapprove—and conversely approve the very thing he *did* want.

Most tensions within church leadership are unknown to parishioners. After I was dismissed from one ministry, I spoke with the church's organist at the wedding of our eldest son. She was perplexed over why we left.

There may be from time to time one or more persons who seems too outspoken, too pushy, too demanding, too sure of themselves, to humbly allow the group to share. The rams are ready to butt heads to see who gets to speak. The Corinthians church, little doubt, had to contend with this problem.

"Are all apostles? are all prophets? are all teachers?" [1 Corinthians 12:26].

No!

"Even so, forasmuch as you are zealous of things pertaining to the spiritual, seek that you may excel to the *edifying* of the church. ... How is it then, brethren? when you come

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together, *every one* has a psalm, has a doctrine [teaching], has a tongue [is inspired to speak], has a revelation [*mine* is from God!], has an interpretation [I know what this verse means]? Let all things be done unto edifying." [1 Corinthians 14:12, 26].

Unfortunately, because of glossolalia and pentecostal denominations, we have lost the real context here, failing to see that in Corinth everyone was pushing and shoving to be heard! I recall after the Charismatic Conference in 1979 held at Duquesne University at a group photo one of the speakers anticipating the shutter snap of the camera wormed his way from the back row until he was front and center when the picture was taken.

### **I Am Jealous**

Jealousy and zeal are the same word in both Greek and Hebrew which means we have an interesting feeling that we need to interpret within us. And this is true of all our feelings. It is not playing at being a therapist to examine ourselves. "Examine [test] yourselves, whether you are in the faith; prove [approve] your own selves. Do you not know [have you not experienced] your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except you be reprobates [disapproved]?"

I was reading in Exodus 20 one day and told gramma that the Bible said God was jealous [Exodus 20:5]. Gramma scolded me, telling me to never say such a thing again because jealousy is a sin. Had I read the scripture: "I the LORD thy God am a zealous God," gramma would have been Okay with hearing that: "He shall stir up His *zeal* like a man of war." [Isaiah 42:13 NKJV].

Passion is best controlled by the person exhibiting it. When others try to muffle someone's enthusiasm, this possibly could be an unintentional attempt at silencing their joy. But some of us are louder than others. Someone's delight in the Lord [Psalm 37:4] should never be hidden; it is part of their testimony; their heart is doing the talking.

There is a negative side to all this if one is really sensing jealousy or envy about another's achievement or significance.

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### **They Think They are Always Right**

Doctrinal issues will never go away. If we choose only to fellowship with believers who totally agree with our interpretation of scripture, we will be alone. A denominational leader once sympathetically urged me to leave the church I was pastoring to look for one closer in agreement with my teaching. He saw nothing wrong with my knowledge of scripture but elders in the church were not comfortable. Some thought I was too psychological and should teach more theology; others were afraid that the doctrine of glossolalia would surface eventually and I might be opposite their position. We had entered a new age in the life of the church when HIV infections were killing young people. The church was alive with social issues surrounding new comers and those new to the faith, all hinting at changes that older folk found difficult to accept—and this was their church.

All these issues need to find a scriptural basis for acceptance or rejection. Everything in the institutional church is ultimately doctrinal in scope. When the national leaders within the denomination issue a theological position on these matters, all is well with the world; but some ministries are autonomous. Many home churches or small group gatherings are independent because they represent believers from multiple theological backgrounds. How do they unite over doctrine?

The answer is keeping the focus where Paul kept it, where the Spirit wants it, on Jesus. It helps, again, to learn to listen; be accepting of one another, and extend our Christian love to embrace a few others who might not think as we do. And just maybe they might be wiser than us in some cases!

### **They Smell**

Sometimes people betray cultural identifiers: by the foods they eat, by the places they work, by their personal habits including hygiene. I have had to sit next to garlic eaters or certain fragrances of woman's perfumes on the train going to work. I

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mention these, obviously, because they made me very uncomfortable. Turns out: I had to keep breathing!

Old people in assisted living as well as some persons who do not bath daily [and maybe should] may not be the most pleasing osmically to be around. Then there is the mechanic whose day spend in grease and oil follows him to the gathering. Halitosis, head colds, cigarette and cigar odors, are a whole category in itself of the conditions that seem to make some persons less attractive to us.

We were kids in the fifth grade in the school yard lining up to go into class when I noticed a chalk line on the asphalt that circled around pointing to our class. These words were written along it: "Follow this track to stink attack." Turns out, Leonard had a body odor that wouldn't quit. I found this out when we doubled up to see a video and I shared a desk seat with Leonard. Breathing was difficult for me in this circumstance. Full disclosure, in our high school days, Leonard would show up at football games with a convertible full of pretty girls. He was no longer the grammar school Leonard I knew in fifth grade!

The only advice I can give is try not to stand out from the crowd because you smell. But, just as important, don't stay away either! If God accepts you as you are, God's people should also! Maybe there is a compromise to be had. I also know that the Love of God in our hearts is capable of hugging a few persons we, otherwise, would never even be around. We may need more of that kind of love.

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Following Christ is all about the “Cross” we are to carry [Luke 9:23]. “House” ministry was made for this! A weekend church service may provide some encouragement but it does not underscore in our hearts that we are never alone while experiencing trials. The fellowship in the smaller gathering will because it naturally focuses on the life of each believer in the group.

Jesus always sent His disciples out by two or more—never alone. Paul was part of a missionary contingent. Even in prison, he was not alone. Silas was with him in the Philippian jail in Acts 16. In Rome under house arrest “Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him.” [Acts 28:30]. His companions included Luke and at times Timothy. Aristarchus [Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2], Mark [2 Timothy 4:11], and Epaphras [Philemon 23] were familiar fellow workers with him.

Paul was not idle during this time. He received many visitors. He was not forbidden to teach those who came to see him. He likely composed several epistles. “Indeed, it was a fruitful time for Paul.” [CCEL.org].

We need fellowship with others of faith that identify with us as co-workers in Christ. In the closing to his letter to the Romans Paul sends greetings to persons who accompanied him at times in his journeys or and in prayer. His love to them reads like an honor roll of saints much like Hebrews 11 only these are helping him carry a cross of ministry. “Salute Andronicus and Junia, my *kinsmen*, and my *fellow prisoners*, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.” [Romans 16:7]. Adronicus was called an apostle in the same way Barnabas was, through association with Paul [Acts 14:14]. These are the names of some of the fellow laborers who had worked exhaustively beside Paul in the kingdom. It can’t be easy to divide up titles and make one an apostle but not another when

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their ministries overlap in evangelism and prayer. More than one wore the epithet, "My beloved." A very special family for Paul according to Romans 16:13 he addressed as: "Rufus chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine." Rufus, tradition says, was the son of Simon of Cyrene [Mark 15:21] who bore the cross for the Savior. [Lightfoot on Philipians. Page 174].

In the smaller gathering, conversation naturally turns to the challenges we share in serving Christ. In the larger gathering, we might depend on the sermon to speak to our situation and it may not happen. Many pastors prepare expository sermons that follow a text making it less likely they will be speaking to a particular trial we are going through. But our trials become part of our testimony and the smaller group is assembled for that very purpose, to share our lives with one another and how Christ is leading each.

### **Lost & Found**

Jesus must have shocked the sensibilities of His disciples when He taught, "He that doesn't take up his cross, and follow me, is not worthy of me. He that finds his life shall lose it: and he that loses his life for my sake shall find it." [Matthew 10:38-39].

This very statement from the Master requires dialog. Young believers need examples, testimonies, from the lives of persons they know, and have come to respect for their witness, in order to get a kind of "intellectual" feel and heartfelt understanding for how this interprets in their own life and experience. No sermon alone can say what needs to be said. Twelve men and a few ladies would inevitably know what it meant as they traversed Canaan following the Savior, observing His life and listening to His responses to opposition.

Paul enlightened us as to how this works, "Be followers of me, even as I also am of Christ" [1 Corinthians 11:1]. This is not an invitation to a weekend church service but a living example of how to live for Christ. And we need an ongoing

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connection with someone like a “Paul” to be able to learn this truth. This is what small group ministry is all about!

It is in the smaller circles that subjects as this may be—must be—discussed. Material blessings are immaterial. Someone said of Isaiah 43:2, He leads us out into the deep knowing Satan can’t swim! When the disciples were caught in the middle of the Lake [Matthew 14:24] this was the safest place in which to detain them since the crowd earlier sought to crown Jesus their king! [John 6:15].

Peter, on one occasion, no doubt mindful of this unforgettable teaching, spoke up, “We’ve given up everything to follow you. What will we get?” [Matthew 19:27]. And Jesus replied, “I assure you that when the world is made new [in the New Jerusalem] and the Son of Man sits upon his glorious throne, you who have been my followers will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life.” [Matthew 19:28-29]. Jesus followed up with a parable on grace which shows that Peter had much to understand yet. He finally would learn that it was not about rewards but “receiving the end of your faith, even the salvation of your souls.” [1 Peter 1:9].

### **Hermeneutics**

Bible studies are a study in hermeneutics—the Greek word for interpretation—because the story of God in the Scripture needs to not only be translated into English but interpreted as to its meaning and emphasis. The overarching message is the story of “The Cross.” We should be able to see Calvary and the Story of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Savior in every narrative and in every promise. This is what small groups are all about—not a debate over doctrinal differences.

A Bible study is a study in the Atonement, in the need for and provision of an eternal salvation, of what sin is and a victory over it, of holiness and ultimately following Christ. The story of Scripture unfolds starting with Eden and the

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introduction of an evil only God can and will eradicate [Isaiah 43:25]. The Cross is the story within the story, the message in the narrative, which we see only by revelation from God [Matthew 16:17]. This affirms our salvation [Romans 10:9-10]. When, for example, the Lord instructed Abraham to take Isaac to Mount Moriah, it was God's Son on His own mind that was the center of this story, not Isaac. How do we know? It was a "test" for Abraham [Genesis 22:1], a test to confirm the Patriarch's faithfulness. But this alone does not give the account Biblical significance. It was not about Abraham's "only son" ] [Genesis 22:2]; for, Abraham had another son, Ishmael. The story, in a "parable" way, was about *God's!*

## **Epilogue**

There is probably much more to add in support of the “house church” model in the New Testament and its relevance to today’s Christian church. Persecution may be, like then, the die in the contrast that highlights the difference between living for Christ and not living for Him. If it is in God’s interest to emphasize a value to “house ministries” He will. I have written enough.