

Built Together a Habitation of God

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"Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:19-22).

"Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5).

These scriptures along with many others declare that God is presently building a dwelling place for Himself. Jesus is building His church and He will not fail. This building forms the framework in which God is working today. As members of Christ, we are all being fitted into this building by the ongoing work of the Spirit of God. In addition, according to the calling and grace of God that He gives to every member, we also are to labor in this building. This is a wonderful privilege and a grave responsibility at the same time.

It is very important for each of us to see God's plan for this building, in order to move in union with God. There are many gatherings today that name the name of Jesus, but that does not necessarily mean they are being built by God on the foundation of Christ. There is only one God, and He is only building one church. If we do not see the plan clearly, there is a danger that we will build according to our own plan. If we do, in the end our labor will be wasted, and we may hinder others who are building according to the plan. God has made full provision so that we may see clearly, if we are willing to be led by Him.

Our goal here is to look at what it means to be built together according to the plan of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In doing so, we must come before God in deep humility, acknowledging that unless He opens the eyes of our hearts and reveals His plan to us, we will not see clearly. God does not hide from us, but He resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. As the revelation of God's plan breaks afresh on our hearts, the Holy Spirit will be faithful to give us places to respond to God. We will begin to move in perfect harmony with God, together with our brothers and sisters, to see His habitation being built in our locality.

A Spiritual House

The first thing we should note is that God is building a spiritual house. *"God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth"* (John 4:24). This takes us into a realm entirely different from anything else we are familiar with. When Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus (John 3), He made it very plain that in order to see and enter into what God is doing, a man must be "born from above." This is the beginning of our life in God. When we are born of the Spirit, we are made alive unto God. We become, in the words of Peter, "living stones" who can now be built into God's building.

We will not expand here on what it means to be born again, but let us just mention that this must be more than a mental belief or an emotional experience. To be born again into the family of God is a divine act of God on the basis of repentance and believing in Jesus. It is God coming to abide within by

the Spirit. *"On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' But this He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified"* (John 7:37-39).

In the plan of God, everything is based on the fact that a person has been baptized into the body of Christ by the Spirit and has been made to drink of the one Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13). So often the reason that individuals and gatherings do not experience the richness of fellowship in the family of God is that they have not entered in through the narrow door to experience the oneness that comes when all have partaken of the one Spirit. The door was opened by Christ on the cross, but we must enter in and continue on by the hearing of faith (Galatians 3:1-9). Only God can give us the confidence that we have entered in, and the fruit of an abiding relationship in Christ is not hidden. Let each of us be sure that we are "living stones," fit material for the house of God.

It is much easier to move naturally than spiritually, but our natural senses do not help us in the spiritual realm. *"But as it is written: 'Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.' But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God"* (1 Corinthians 2:9-12).

To lay aside our natural reasoning and allow God to lead us by His Spirit is not a small thing. We naturally want to offer God something: our ability, the work of our hands, what we can do for Him. But God does not accept what we can do by our own ability. He only accepts what He can do in and through us. This is easy to say, but another thing to experience. God does not force our will, but bids us choose. If we choose to come under the authority of Christ, then He will work within, both to will and do His good pleasure. If we choose to reject His authority, we will find ourselves outside His grace and outside the building of God. Let us not bypass this area quickly, for again, what God is doing is based on *what He can do*, not on what we can do.

The household of God is spiritual. The implications of this truth are vast--some obvious, some not so obvious. For example, if God does not dwell in buildings made by hands, then we have no reason to build structures for God to dwell in. We do not go to "the house of God" to worship, for God is not worshipped in special places (John 4:21-24). Some of these things should be obvious to us, but other things may not be so obvious because concepts are acquired over many years of religious activity. We may think things are spiritual when they really have to do only with the mind or emotions. God will reveal these things for what they are if we allow Him to, but let us be firmly convinced of this one thing: *"God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."*

A Habitation of God

When men begin to plan a building, the first thing they consider is the purpose of the building. The purpose will determine the design. Peter tells us that God is building the church for His dwelling place. In Ephesians, Paul says the church is the "house of God" as well as the "household of God."

In the Old Testament, God commanded Moses to build a tabernacle for Him to dwell in. After it was completed, the glory of God filled the tabernacle. A cloud by day and fire by night indicated His presence. Glorious as it was, all of this was but a foretaste of things to come, since the price of sin had

not been paid. Everything pointed to Christ and looked forward to a better day. When Christ died on the cross, the veil in the temple was torn from top to bottom. God's presence departed, and the old order was done away. As Christ bore the sin of the whole world in His body, God himself removed all barriers. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came in fullness to fill a new temple. Because of the work of Christ, the way into the presence of God is now open to any man. This had always been in God's heart, for man was made in the image of God to have fellowship with God.

We are now the temple of God, but how are we being built together "a dwelling place of God in the Spirit"? The old King James expression is "habitation of God." A "habitation" indicates a permanent dwelling place where the family functions and expresses its life together. Within it there is provision for the family's needs. As the members interact, they experience community life. The character of the family is expressed to the greater community around.

What do these things mean in the spiritual? Certainly God has no needs, for He is complete in Himself. But is not the essential truth here that God desires to show who He is to the world, that all who will may come to dwell in the riches of His love? The Holy Spirit expresses who God is through a company of people who are allowing Him to have His way in their lives together. If Christ is Lord by the Spirit in every life, the full character of God will be expressed through the family of God. His love, His goodness, His righteousness and all that He is will be demonstrated as the family of God dwells together in unity.

This was not so true in the Old Testament. While certain attributes of God were seen by types and symbolism, these fell very far short of expressing the true nature of God. Christ took on himself the form of man, and in a human body He was the full expression of God in the flesh. His earthly ministry culminated at the cross, where the love of God was fully expressed. But God has not ceased expressing who He is to the world. His life is now expressed in the house of God, the household of God, and the body of Christ. These are one and the same, but the different ways of expressing the reality of our position in Christ emphasize different aspects of our relationship with God and with one another. Taken together, the Holy Spirit uses them to expand our revelation of the working of God.

Probably the most important truth common to all of these is "togetherness." Sin brought division into the world. The tower of Babel was a pivotal point in the expression of sin. When God judged sin there, He divided the families by giving them separate languages. They could no longer cooperate in their vain efforts. Each man (family) turned to his own, separating from the others. But when we come into Christ Jesus, this wall of division is broken down and love brings us back together. There is no longer "Jew" and "Gentile." This is a miracle of God and His grace, and probably the most important aspect of our witness to the world of the reality of God. *"By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:35).

The habitation of God--God dwelling in the midst of a company of people--is a real, visible expression of the character of God (which is love) to the community in which we dwell. It is not a theoretical unity based only on doctrinal agreement, but a real expression of God's life. As the love of God fills our lives, together we will be able to comprehend the vastness of God, being filled with *"the fullness of God"* (Ephesians 3:14-20). As we allow God to build us together, we become a habitation of God in the Spirit, and we will interact and dwell together as the household of God. This is the very purpose of God in our time.

Jesus Christ the Foundation

The first step in any building is the foundation. In the building of God, Peter tells us that Jesus Christ himself is the "chief cornerstone" of the foundation. This implies that everything in God's building depends on who Christ is, what He has done, and who He is in us. This truth has vast implications, and is a key factor in determining whether a gathering of people is in fact a "household of God."

If we consider the working of God in the Old Testament, I believe we see that everything pointed to the coming of Christ and the work He would do. When Christ completed the work of redemption, God rested from His labor. Our access into the presence of God is based solely on the work of God in Christ. We cannot add to or remove anything from what Christ has accomplished. In fact, if we try to add to what God has done, we move off the foundation of Christ. This is what happened to the Galatians. They tried to add something to what Christ had done, to make themselves more secure before God. Instead of making their standing more secure, they removed themselves from the foundation. Paul said they had *"fallen from grace"* and been *"severed from Christ"* (Galatians 5:1-6).

While we may wonder how the Galatians could be so blind, we need to realize that adding circumcision is not the only way we can move off the foundation of Christ. Other things may be more subtle and more likely to deceive us. We may try to add an ordinance (such as baptism or the Lord's table) as a requirement. These have their place in God's plan, but practicing these things does not secure our relationship with God. Some may add a certain standard of dress or diet. Others may add diligent effort in soul winning or some kind of service (such as ministry to the poor). God may (and will) lead us in these things, but doing them to make ourselves more acceptable to God can never be our motivation. We stand secure before God on one thing only: faith in Christ and His finished work on Calvary.

When we speak of faith, we are not defining it as simple intellectual belief. Faith is authored in our hearts by the word of God and results in fruit to the glory of God. The foundation of God is Christ and what He has done, and faith brings the benefit of His work into every member of the household. Christ's work opened the door for us to receive and live in the very life of God. Our access by Christ into the presence of God and the continual supply of His Spirit are realized as we walk by faith (Galatians 3:1-9). True faith causes "rivers of living water" to flow out of our hearts.

We may think about the foundation of Christ in two ways. One is the message that is held before the assembly. The other is whether the message has taken hold in the members so that they are secure on the foundation. Both are necessary if the house is to have a foundation on which to be built. A faulty message will be void of the anointing and blessing of God, and without these, there can be no building. Members who have not believed God and the word He has spoken to them will not be stable and grounded in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. They will not be secure on the foundation of Christ. Truth (Christ) must prevail in every member as a foundation and basis for building, before there can be progress in God's building.

Being Built Together on the Foundation

Peter tells us that we are "being built up a spiritual house." Paul speaks about "being fitted together." From these statements we must conclude that the building process is continually taking place. What is this building? What is actually happening?

Perhaps the following example can help us. Suppose a group of believers comes together for the first time and introduces themselves to each other. Let us assume that each one has a real relationship with

God. They have been baptized into the body of Christ by the Spirit; thus, they are one with each other because they have partaken of God's life. There is a perfectly open relationship between each member as they meet each other and begin to get acquainted.

The question we pose is this: At this time, is this group of believers "built together"? In other words, do they function as one under the authority of Christ? I think most would agree that the potential is there, but realistically, the requirements Christ could put upon them as a body of believers is minimal. They hardly know each other! They have not yet established spiritual relationships with each other. This will take time. Not only must they get to know each other, they must go through things together. Their relationships in Christ need to be established and proven.

Now suppose we visit this same group of believers 20 years later. In those 20 years, they have gone through many things together. There have been trials and testing as they have faced the demands of life. Children have grown up. Some members may have died. There have been many opportunities to bear each other's burdens, caring for their brothers and sisters. Some may have turned aside from the faith. New ones have been added as they reached out to a needy world. There have been misunderstandings that had to be cleared. There may have been wrongs committed that had to be forgiven. As they lived through these and many other things, close relationships have been established. In the words of Paul, they have been "fitted together."

What meaning does all of this have to God? In this later place of greater maturity as a body of believers, God can now direct them to move as "one man" under the authority of Christ for a fuller manifestation of His life. He can put greater demands upon them as a body because they have been cemented together in the love of God and have grown up a "spiritual household." The members know each other according to the Spirit. There is a level of trust built that allows them to be available to God and to each other in a way they were not in the beginning. Even though they were willing in the beginning, they were not yet built together as a habitation of God in the Spirit.

Can we see from this simple example that this building together which must take place is very real? Not only is it real, it is very important to God because it takes a many-membered body to express the life of God. The very nature of God (love) is expressed by a body, not by a single member. The love of God may be in the heart of every member, but the thought behind the "household" is that love must be demonstrated to be seen. The function of the household or the body in a given locality is to express the character and nature of God as He directs.

If we consider these things in light of our human experience, we must acknowledge that these things are not simple. To interact with fellow believers and allow God to build spiritual relationships takes the grace of God. These things take time and spiritual effort. Apart from Christ, people choose a few friends to develop relationships with, and they do so on the basis of natural affinities. God does not allow us to pick and choose, but requires us to develop relationships with all who are in Christ. All natural ties must be purposely laid aside. Our relationships are solely because we are in Christ. When we dwell closely with others, character flaws and weaknesses are soon revealed, and God must be allowed to deal with them. This is all part of God's plan for our growing up into Christ.

In light of these things, consider Paul's instruction to the Ephesians. *"Therefore, putting away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,' for we are members of one another. 'Be angry, and do not sin': do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil. Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of*

God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:25-32).

God's Order In Building

How then does the building take place? Is it automatic? How is man involved? The answers to these and related questions lead us into the order of God for His working today. If God were doing the work separate from man, we would just watch from the sidelines. But I think we know this is not the case. God has chosen for us to be intimately involved in the building process. Not only are we living stones being built into the house of God, but we are also laborers in the building according to the grace and calling of God.

In Ephesians 4:1-15, Paul gives us an outline of God's order in this building. He tells us that grace is given to each one in some measure to contribute to the building. He goes on to emphasize what is commonly known as the "five-fold ministry" of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. The purpose of the ministry is that we may all grow up into Christ, no longer unstable "*but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ--from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love*" (Ephesians 4:15-16).

The order Paul presents here is one of a very close working together. The head (or authority) is Christ. He is the one who is working all things. He has given gifts (men under His control) to the body to minister (serve), so that the whole body may be built up (to a place of maturity). In this process, every member is a living stone, a supply of the grace of God according to the measure of Christ's gift. If love prevails, not only will each member serve Christ to the body, but also each member will receive from Christ through other members. For the one who gives, the source of supply is from Christ, and the one who receives, receives a supply of Christ. What is seen in the process is the character and nature of Christ. The glory goes to God, for He is the one who gives the grace and is working all things to His end purpose: that we may be one as He is one (John 17).

Ministry itself is a vast subject we cannot explore here. But we can all be encouraged in God's order, to know what we are looking for and to pray diligently for God to raise up ministers in our midst who see clearly and can be used by God as a supply of Christ. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he gave some clear instruction concerning those who labor in the house of God and build on the foundation. Let us all take his admonition carefully and let the Holy Spirit apply it to our situation.

"Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each one's work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be

saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are" (1 Corinthians 3:5-17).

Before going on, let us note that all of God's provision is necessary for the building to be built properly to the glory of God. We cannot ignore any provision of God without loss. The pastors (elders) do not take the place of teachers, and the gifts of men do not take the place of the gifts of the Spirit. All of the ministries are essential, but also, ministry cannot do what the body must do. Every function in the body is designed by God for a purpose. We should know what the purpose is and believe God to raise up ministries to meet the needs of the body as He has designed.

Fitted Together

The term "fitted together" certainly gives us a picture of a very tight relationship. Stones fitted together by a skillful builder are chosen and placed in such a way that they form a single wall that is beautiful to behold. No stone stands out and no stone is unimportant. Note that the stones are not free to choose their own place in the wall, but that their position is selected according to the wisdom and skill of the craftsman.

Is this not also God's way? In Paul's teaching on the functioning of the body of Christ in 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, he makes it clear that God sets each one in the body according to His divine wisdom. When each member accepts his own position under the authority of Christ and moves in the grace that God has given, the whole body moves as one to do the will of God and express the life of God. No member is complete apart from the other members, and each has an important function according to God's design.

For this to function in reality, there must be a proper relationship between all the members. Each must know his own place, not thinking he is more important than the others, nor thinking that he is unimportant. The whole body is to function in the order of God as the Spirit directs. I think we know from experience that such a close functioning is not a simple matter. For this to happen, the body must be "fitted together" by God.

To be fitted together in the manner described by Paul takes the divine work of God, but it also means that each member is alive to God and responding to God. This cannot be just a theory or a wonderful ideal. Each member must be holding fast to the Head in a living relationship with God. In the words of Jesus in John 15, each one must be abiding (living) in the vine. If this is not true, it will be absolutely impossible to work out the functioning that Paul speaks about.

A result of being in submission to Christ's authority will be a submission one to another. *"Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Peter 5:5).* This is in keeping with the truth John speaks (in 1 John): that it is impossible for someone to love God and not love his brother. Paul tells us that this is a fruit of *"being filled"* with the Spirit of God (Ephesians 5:17-21).

An attitude of submission toward every other member of the household puts me in a right relationship to be able to serve and receive. Both are always "unto the Lord" for He is the Head. There is no "hierarchy" in the household, but there are different measures of grace. The grace and callings are according to the wisdom of God, and as we maintain this humble and submissive attitude toward every member, we open ourselves up to the supply of God's grace under the direction of the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps another way we can look at this "fitting together" is to remember that love "adjusts" to fit in with others. This does not mean we compromise truth or overlook sin. We are speaking about being sensitive to other members and adjusting our communication and relationship to "fit together" in harmony as we do the will of God together. The closest natural example is the marriage relationship, but fitting together in the Spirit is even more demanding because we are dealing with spiritual matters and there are many more people involved.

To be able to fit together, we must allow God to change us. Yet is this not what He is doing? *"But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord"* (2 Corinthians 3:18). The key is *"beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord."* We do not behold each other. We must behold the Lord. As we behold the Lord, He will change us *"from glory to glory."* Change is usually not easy, but when we experience the grace of the Lord and begin to see as He sees, it is a glorious working, filled with the presence of God. Each change is glorious, but there is always more. As God changes us into His likeness, we will be able to fit together in greater and greater harmony. The changes are real. God is changing how we think, how we speak, and what we do. We really are being changed into His glorious likeness, to be a true expression of His life together.

Belonging to the Household

It should be apparent at this point that in order to be fitted into the household of God, we must belong. How are we made a part? How do we belong? It is obvious in a natural household who belongs and who does not. Is the spiritual household different? If so, what are the differences? These questions are not simple, but they do have answers. If we want to be part of what God is doing, we must take these questions honestly before God. If we are lovers of truth, God will answer our questions so that we can move in faith before Him in all things.

We said in the beginning that we must be born into the family of God. This is a divine transaction that establishes our relationship as children of God and forms the basis for our relationship with other members of the household. By the Spirit we are born into one family; thus we call each other "brother" and "sister." If we have experienced this new birth, we are part of the family of God. This heavenly transaction between the individual and God makes us *"fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."*

The question before us then is this: How is this family expressed here on earth? All of God's children in the whole world cannot gather in one place to function as one. Certainly this will be possible in eternity, but we are not there yet. How can we work out the truth of "one body" and "one family" now?

Here is a foundational truth that can help us if we see it clearly. The family of God (the church) is universal in scope but local in expression. There is only one body, and that one body is expressed in the locality in which we live. Each gathering is under the authority of Christ. Since God is one, every expression of His body will be in harmony with every other expression. God will not lead one church in one way and another in an opposite direction. The love of God is the same in every culture and in every period of time. The nature of God transcends all cultural barriers.

This does not mean that everybody will wear the same kind of clothes and live in the same kind of house. Natural outward things may be different from place to place. But we can be sure that wherever children of God are dwelling together in the household of God under the authority of Christ, the expression of God's life will be the same, for God is one. Remember, the household of God is spiritual.

If we clearly see the plan and order of God, then each member is responsible before God to move in faith and express this one body in the locality in which they live. The Holy Spirit will lead them into contact with other members in the same locality, and the love of God moving in their hearts will compel them to come together as an expression of the household of God. It is not that they are "required" to come together, but that love gives them the desire to do so for the glory of God. We do not *have* to do the will of God. We *want* to do the will of God because His desire has become our desire.

Perhaps a brief look at the negative side can help to accent this truth. Suppose two people married and then moved into separate houses, just visiting each other once in a while. What would we think? We would think something was very wrong with the love relationship. We would question whether they were really married. Is it any different in the spiritual? If two members say they are of Christ but they cannot dwell together as the household of God and give expression to His life, what kind of love relationship do they have? Is the local expression of the household of God real or not? If we love God and His love fills our hearts, how does this love work out between His children?

This brings us to another foundational truth. There are only two things that should separate the children of God: distance and time. We cannot dwell together with the early disciples, because they have gone on to be with the Lord. We cannot dwell together with believers in another country because of the distance. But if we say that we love God, we must dwell together with other believers in the locality in which we live. Jesus said that our love for Him would be expressed by keeping His commandments. His commandment was to love one another as He loved us and laid down His life for us. The primary place this love is expressed is among brothers and sisters in the household of God in our locality.

Let us give one note of caution. We must let the Holy Spirit define this locality. Some have tried to define locality by political boundaries or some other means, and it produced a legal and divisive spirit. Surely the Holy Spirit can give us wisdom in these matters. We cannot impose our definitions, for there may be many things to consider. Are we in touch with God? Is God's love the controlling factor? We can never have the spirit of being "the only ones." As we keep ourselves in the love of God, the Holy Spirit will be always reaching out to others, but never compromising with sin. Sin must divide, for God is holy and will not dwell with sin. May the Holy Spirit teach us more of these things, so that the glory of God may be expressed in our locality.

There is one more area to mention at this point, and that is commitment. The household cannot function together if the members are not fully committed. As we have already said, the foundation is our union with Christ by the Spirit. If we are not in Christ, we are not living stones and fit material. But after a believer is brought into Christ, he must move on in faith to be involved with a local expression of the church. His love commitment to Christ will lead him into wholehearted involvement with working out the life of God in the body of Christ.

As we give ourselves to God in a local expression of the body, there are some important points to consider before God. First, we must be convinced that the gathering is on the proper foundation. We should see for ourselves that Christ is the foundation, the life, and the head. These are the essential elements of any expression of the church. Secondly, to be properly involved in a local gathering, we must be convinced that God has placed us in this body. To benefit fully as God has designed, and for God to use us as a channel of His life to others, we cannot just visit once in a while. The household of God is for those who belong. We must know that God has made us a part, so that we can bear our responsibility as a member of His household.

Bearing Responsibility in the Household

"These things I write to you, though I hope to come to you shortly; but if I am delayed, I write so that you may know how you ought to conduct yourself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:14-15). In a household, every member bears a measure of responsibility according to his maturity and the order of the house. Even small children are trained to help with the work of the house just as soon as they are able. There are good reasons for this in a natural household, and there are reasons just as good (if not better) for this in the spiritual household. Let us consider some of these.

In a natural household, one of the main purposes for the order in the house is to bring children up to maturity. This is also true in the spiritual household, and the order of God's household is perfectly designed to accomplish this. The plan and order of God are perfect, for God himself is perfect. When we consider how God builds in the life of one member, we see that He builds in relationships (with Himself and with others), in character, and in a growing maturity of expression of the life of God. Another important part of His building is learning to bear responsibility, for this is how we put into practice what we are being taught.

Basically, we all learn by doing. There are many things that lead up to the doing--example, instruction, supervision and so on--but we do not actually learn until we act upon what we have been taught. It is in this place of "doing" that we actually grow in maturity. As we grow, we are able to bear new levels of responsibility and prepare ourselves to receive instruction for the next step. This "growing up" in the household of God is a continual process that never comes to an end while we are here on earth. There is always more: more of God to be experienced, more to see of His purpose, more of His love to take expression through us, and more responsibility according to the grace and calling of the Lord.

For what are we responsible? First, we are responsible to live in the household alive unto God. That may seem like a simple thing at first, but to maintain a love relationship which results in loving obedience to our Lord is not simple. Love is something we act upon, even unto "our Calvary." Where is love most tested? Is it not with those who are close to us every day? Loving at a distance is easy, but loving our brothers and sisters day in and day out is demanding. However, it is here that we grow in patience, forgiving one another and caring for one another. As we do this, always under the direction of the Holy Spirit, we are changed into His likeness.

Another area of responsibility is to know how God has placed us in the body and to move in faith before God in that grace, that we may be a supply of life to our brothers and sisters. We can make the mistake of either thinking we are "nothing" in God's eyes and come with no sense of responsibility, or we can think we are "somebody" and in fleshly zeal move outside of our grace to try to do the work of God. Both are equally wrong.

Here is what Paul wrote to the Romans: *"For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness" (Romans 12:3-8).*

Notice Paul says that *"God has dealt to each one a measure of faith."* We cannot hide in the household of God. We are accountable to function in our place. As we have said, functioning not only feeds others but also causes us to grow. But if I do not accept my place of responsibility, I will not grow in grace and the knowledge of Christ, and my brothers and sisters will also lack. The lacks will be real. The responsibility to function is real.

Another thing we are responsible for is the testimony of God. A well-known example is the man caught in sin in the Corinthian assembly. Paul instructed the church in what they needed to do, but then they had to do it. The church as a whole had to exercise discipline. This was not easy. It is always easier to walk away, but Paul told them to bear their responsibility, and with love controlling them, remove the man caught in sin from their midst that he might repent and be saved. As they did this, they grew in understanding and the testimony of God was purified.

It is one thing to be responsible for my own testimony as an individual, but it is another thing to be responsible for the testimony of the household. This affects each member's life, touching every last trace of individuality so that only Christ is expressed through the body. Often we do not even realize the natural thinking and expressions that remain. Seeking to move together with my brothers and sisters as one under the authority of Christ is often used by God to reveal and deal with expressions of self. Trying as it may be at times, it is a very important part of bearing responsibility in the household of God.

A Beginning Place

If you are in a church that is building on the right foundation, you can rejoice in God's provision. Your responsibility is to give yourself wholeheartedly to the building under the direction of the Spirit, in whatever measure of grace you have received from God. Unfortunately many find themselves in gatherings that are not on the right foundation. They may realize that the foundation is not correct and that there is no real building taking place. They may even see clearly that they can no longer be a part of it, and move to separate themselves. But then what? What if there is no true expression of the household of God in our locality? How do we start? What can we do?

If we move from one church to another, we must be very sure we are moving for the right reasons. If we believe the gathering we are presently part of is an expression of the body of Christ, why would we consider leaving? Are we unhappy with the leadership? Are we having difficulties with another member? These in themselves are not grounds for leaving a gathering. God wants to work in these situations, and more often than not, the working needs to take place in me. It is always much easier to see the working that needs to take place in others. But if we are leaving one true expression of the church to be part of another expression, I believe God will give a unified witness in our heart and to the leadership of both gatherings. Remember, God is one.

Probably a more common occurrence is that we believe God is leading us out of a gathering that is not on the proper foundation. This may be true, but before taking this action, may I encourage such a one to make sure they have taken the matter before the Lord in a very serious way? Have I let God deal with me? Are my motives pure? Have I asked for a witness from other spiritual members? Have I given time for God to work? Have I made every effort to have fellowship with leadership in areas of foundational truth? Am I sure that God has spoken to me? For such an action to benefit me and the testimony of God, it must be done in faith with confidence before God. Only God can give the confidence and clear seeing that is necessary. To divide where God does not divide is a very serious matter before God (see 1 Corinthians 3:16,17).

Another common occurrence is for members to separate themselves from a gathering for various reasons, but then not function in any gathering. They look around and cannot find any gathering that they believe is on the right foundation. Because of this, they settle into a place of "just me and God." This may be necessary in the beginning, but it is a very dangerous place to stay. In this place, they are not benefiting from the provision God has made in the household. All of the above areas regarding being built together are not taking place. They may visit other believers from time to time, encouraging each other in some measure. But if we stop short of allowing God to build us together with other members of the body of Christ, we will find ourselves missing out on more than we can imagine. Outside of God's provision in the body, we are vulnerable to many wiles of the enemy. The supply of God's grace coming to us through others is very limited. The structure that God designed for us to serve others within is not present. God's plan is for us to be a part of a local expression of the church.

There may be many more circumstances, but we could mention just one more. After searching for a local gathering and not finding one that meets the requirements we see in God, we may choose the "best available option" and begin to gather there. There are some very important questions to ask at this point. Do I believe this is an expression of the body of Christ? Is Christ the head? If so, what is my reservation about it? There may be areas of weakness that God is working on, but if we wait for the "perfect gathering" by our own definition, we may never find it. There are always imperfect members (like us!) being added, and much of the working in the body is to bring each believer to maturity in Christ. But this will not happen if the foundation is faulty and truth (Christ) is being ignored.

If we properly understand that all truth relates to the person of Christ, we can never set aside any area of truth and expect the blessing of God. If a gathering does not have the presence and blessing of Christ in open fellowship with Him, how can we make spiritual progress in God there? Any reservations toward God or toward walking in the light of truth will have serious consequences. To realize God's purpose in the church, we must be able to give ourselves in faith without reservation.

If we do not find a true expression of the body of Christ in our locality, what should we do? Of course we cannot answer every situation for every member. Only the Holy Spirit can give us the wisdom and direction we need for our specific situation. But I believe we can give some general encouragement for members that find themselves in this situation. God's purpose is that there will be an expression in every locality. Christ died for the whole world, and God is not willing that any should perish, but that all would come to repentance. Knowing this, we can be sure that God desires a testimony in every locality.

First of all, do we see the plan of God in some measure? If not, then the first step should be to go before God asking Him to open our eyes, that we may see the plan of God in Christ. We cannot see everything all at once, but if we ask, God will be faithful to show us a beginning revelation of His plan. We must ask in all humility, utterly dependent on His eye salve to help us see. If we do not see in some degree, we will not be able to move in faith. Many today do not see the body of Christ. Paul said it is a mystery, but that the mystery has now been made known. Paul labored for all to see this mystery. It takes a miracle of revelation from God to allow us to see as He sees. Just studying the Bible or reading good books is not enough. We must deal with God. Read 1 Corinthians 2 in this light. God has given the Holy Spirit that we may know the things of God.

When we begin to see, if God's love is moving in our hearts, we will start to give ourselves in prayer. Let us not pass over this place of intercession lightly. Even though Paul said he was a master builder, we find him prostrate before God in prayer, praying that God would open the eyes of men to see the plan and provision of God (Ephesians 2:14-21). If we are concerned about the testimony of God in our

locality, the first place this burden will work out is in intercession before the throne of God. There is no natural explanation for this. This is God's way. There may be months of time spent before the Lord in this matter. We cannot predict the timing, but we see that every work of God is born in prayer and continues in the same way. The church is born out of intercession before God because the work must be of God, not of man.

As we wait before God in this place of prayer, we can expect God to speak to us and direct us in reaching out to others. It is impossible that God will not answer believing prayer. Only God can show us how to reach out, and He *will* show us. God works in impossible situations according to His divine power. He will lead us to those who are hungry for more of Jesus. If we are moving under His authority and directed by the Spirit, a fragrance of Christ will be coming through our lives. When those who are hungry touch Jesus in us, the love of God will draw us together. The binding power between believers is the life of God expressed in love. The driving force that brings us together is our love for Jesus expressed in obedience, concern for the testimony of God, and a desire to see Christ lifted up in our locality, that He may draw men to Himself. It is a miracle of God's grace expressed through men.

What about the gifts of God? Do we need them all before we are a church? Are we a church if we don't have elders? What if we are only two or three members to begin with? Should we expect God to provide all the gifts in every assembly? These and many other questions may fill our minds as we begin. They are important questions, but the only answer I can give is this: Is God really God? Can the church be built with natural energy, or does it take a supernatural work of God? No situation is too hard for God. He knows how to meet with two or three, and He knows how to meet with two or three hundred. If a gathering grows too large, He knows when it should separate into two gatherings in different localities to expand the witness and allow a proper functioning. He knows what each gathering needs, and He knows how to meet those needs. We cannot reason these things out in our natural minds and come up with rules. We need to know God and believe He can do what He said He would do.

Jesus said He would build His church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it. Can Jesus do what He said He would do? He said He would send the Holy Spirit to lead us into all truth. Did He do that? Is the Holy Spirit still present to reveal the things of Christ and make them real in us? Amen and amen!

A Glorious Church Without Spot or Wrinkle

Jesus reveals the heart of God's purpose and how He is going to accomplish it in His high priestly prayer: *"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me"* (John 17:20-23).

Jesus said that He has given us His glory that we may be one as God is one. This is the heart of what God is doing, and also the resource for doing it! As God comes to abide in His household, His glory fills the house. His glory is so commanding and overwhelming that nothing else is seen. No flesh, no works of man, and no glory of man can stand in His presence. Only God is seen. As His glory fills the house, we are united as one, even as God is one. It was true on the day of Pentecost, and it is true in every household of God where Christ is head. Surely as God is all in all, there is "no spot or wrinkle."

All is pure because all is of God.

What God is doing is glorious. It began in glory on the day of Pentecost and it will end in glory in His presence when we are face to face with Jesus. It is glorious because it is God who is doing the work. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul speaks about this glory. He refers back to the glory that the children of Israel saw on the face of Moses. When Moses came down from the presence of God on the mountain, his face shone so much that he put a veil over his face. We wonder at that, perhaps even wishing we had been there to see the glory. But Paul goes on to say that this glory, as wonderful as it was in that time, holds no comparison to the glory that is ours in the Spirit.

Moses did not know the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He went up on the mountain and saw the form of God from the backside, but he could not look on the face of God and live. We behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit moved upon holy men of old at certain times to perform the works of God, but on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came to abide in His temple and He has not departed. He is still dwelling in His temple, and wherever that temple is found, there the glory is found also. The presence of God brings the glory, and it causes men to fall on their faces and worship God who alone is worthy. The working of God is glorious!

"Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech--unlike Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Corinthians 3:12-17).

There is the victory, brothers and sisters. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty to be all that God has called us to be. There is no lack, because all is of God. Every step is glorious and every place is glorious, filled with the presence of God. As we experien