

THE CHURCH STRUCTURE

Many people have become disillusioned with the churches that they are affiliated with for various reasons. This is understandable and one can understand why some wish to distance themselves from corrupt clergy that can take over a church. However, we need to remember that God has an established church on this earth. Some individuals and groups advocate that God's church never congregated in buildings nor was organized in any manner. The Messiah of God set out from the very beginning of his ministry in establishing the Father's new covenant church, for Jesus said ***"and upon this rock [referring to himself] I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*** Matthew 16:18b.

As Christians, when we speak, we need to guard against our own ideas or thoughts which may not line up with God's Will and could even lead others away from the truth. ***"Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock [ie. The church] over the which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he [Jesus] hath purchased with his own blood. For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."*** Acts 20:28 to 30. Just from the couple of passages presented thus far, we can start to see that the children of God were never told to not assemble themselves in fellowship with the brothers and sisters in the faith.

So where did this notion of non-fellowship and non-organization originate? It is not known who or when this idea originated, however, it would appear that it existed since the time of the early church. This type of ideology of man can detour us from the scriptures, for when we gather together and discuss the Bible, that is when we learn and acquire the truth. When we discuss and debate the meaning of scriptural passages, that is when we are more likely to gain understanding, not when we keep ourselves in isolation and never discuss the Bible with anyone. When people suggest that we do not need to assemble with one another, that is actually encouraging the disbanding of the church. The instructions we receive from scripture is the assembling of Christians in fellowship in a unity of faith especially as the day draws closer to our Lord's coming: ***"And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread and in prayers."*** Acts 2:42.

Any doctrine that is not scriptural has more than likely sprouted from the spirit of Satan, because Christians know in these last days, the adversary of God is roaming to and fro, consuming the minds of whom he can. ***"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."*** 1 Peter 5:8. ***"Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die. And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die."*** Genesis 3:1 to 4. Those of us who study the Scriptures know the result of disobeying God – eternal death. When we follow instructions not of Godly origin, we are risking our salvation.

If we are sincere Christians searching for truth, there may be times in our life that we may need to separate ourselves from a church that we see is not on that same journey of seeking to obtain and share truth but is more preoccupied with putting people in the pews for selfish monetary gain. In such cases, we may have no choice but to separate and join or form a new group of believers after the faith of Jesus. This process of being "called out" has occurred in the past and will continue until the coming of our Lord Jesus. However, as Christ-followers we should never advocate for the forsaking of assembling with people seeking truth. Given Satan knows he has but a short time before his ultimate destruction, his main focus will be on trying to destroy God's church. ***"Therefore rejoice, ye heavens, and ye that dwell in them. Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and of the sea! for the devil is come down unto you, having great wrath, because he knoweth that he has but a short time."*** Revelation 12:12.

Are we suggesting that all persons who advocate for not assembling together in Christian fellowship are evil men and women? The answer is no. As mentioned previously, some people have simply become disillusioned with the churches they affiliate with, and may have become weak in their faith. But instead of discouraging others from congregating just because they have witnessed corruption amongst church clergy or other evils, they should pray for guidance and then proceed to search the scriptures diligently. Has not improper behavior been occurring in the church since its foundation? Had it not begun with Judas at the time of Jesus' last Passover supper? ***"When Jesus had thus said, he was troubled in spirit, and testified, and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me...Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon."*** John 13:21, 26. And did not even Peter deny the Christ and later regretted what he had done? ***"Simon Peter said unto him, Lord, whither goest thou? Jesus answered him, Whither I go, thou canst not follow me now: but thou shalt follow me afterwards. Peter said unto him, Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake. Jesus answered him, Wilt thou lay down thy life for my sake? Verily, verily, I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied me thrice."*** John 13:36 to 38. ***"And Peter remembered the word of Jesus, which said unto him, Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice. And he went out, and wept bitterly."*** Matthew

26:75. Lastly, were not six of the seven churches of God in Asia found with fault in the book of Revelations? Only the church of Philadelphia was not found with fault. Read all of chapters two and three in Revelation to find out where the churches fell short.

We need to remind ourselves that all members of the Church have faults, and many of its members are 'babes', growing in the faith. *"And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk, and not with meat; for hitherto ye were not able to bear it neither yet now are ye able. For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?... For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, ye are God's building."* I Corinthians 3:1 to 3, 9; *"Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings. As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby: If so be ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious."* I Peter 2:1 to 3. If all who came into the church were righteous before entering, then no one would have to grow on the 'milk'. But that is not the reality; sinners come into the church, desiring the word of God and the changeover does not occur overnight. The sinner has to be nourished slowly which is the reason for the expression **"as new born babes, I have fed you with milk"**. So expect to find the worldly in the church. As Paul said, "neither yet now are ye able" referring to them who were not yet able to bear the 'meat' (ie. the deeper understanding of scriptures).

The very ministers who preach and the teachers who instruct and the deacons who serve upon the temple (body) have in many cases been deluded by Satan and represent their congregations in an un-Christian manner. *"Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?"* Matthew 7:15, 16. Does this mean because there are false teachers in the church that we should preach for the abolishment of the assembling of the children of God at local meeting houses or other locations? God forbid. The children of God know that there is none that is perfect until that day they are made anew. *"And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments."* Matthew 19:17. Read also I John 1:8. All of us who walk this earth carry the body of sin, *"O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin"* Romans 7:24, 25. Read also Matthew 26:41. Then knowing this, we continue to strive towards the goal of righteousness, for our reward is eternal life when this body shall be changed. Those who are not acquainted with the Bible may not realize that the first to be judged after Jesus' returns shall be the Church of God. *"For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? And if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?"* I Peter 4:17, 18. From these verses, we learn two things: first, God is not a respecter of persons which is why judgment begins with the church; and secondly, corruption in churches has existed from the start, however, it will always survive, regardless of how many of its members are deluded and run after false teachings. *"But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. And many shall follow their pernicious ways; by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of."* II Peter 2:1, 2. Even though corruption always exists, God's church will survive and even overcome this world. *"And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter ['a stone'] and upon this Rock [Jesus himself] I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."* Matthew. 16:18. As a side note, it is often suggested that Peter is the 'Rock' of God's church. In reality, 'Peter' in Greek is 'Petros', the meaning of which is a stone or a piece of rock. We refer you to Strong's Greek Dictionary as follows: "No. 4074; Petros- a prime word; a (piece of) rock as a name, Petros, an apostle." The word for rock in Greek is "petra- a (mass of) rock (lit. or fig.): a rock."

We should ask ourselves from where did the Church of God originate? Was it started by a carnal man or the Anointed One of God? Who is the head over the Church? *"And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church."* Ephesians 1:22; *"...even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ..."* Ephesians 5:23b, 24a; *"And he [Jesus] is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead: that in all things he might have the preeminence."* Colossians 1:18. From these texts, we know mankind is supposed to be subject unto Jesus the teacher, but mankind in this day and age is not attentive to the Word of God's Christ. He (man) follows his own non-scriptural doctrines and not the teachings of Jesus. Despite this, Jesus of Nazareth is the head of the church and the only begotten of God, both by the resurrection and the Holy Spirit with power. *"God hath fulfilled the same unto us their children in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second Psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee."* Acts 13:33; *"For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?"* Hebrews 1:5.

When Jesus began his ministry, he then began the structuring of the New Testament church. As already mentioned, Jesus told Peter that the church was to be built upon himself, thus, Jesus is the Rock of the church. *"And did all drink the same drink: for they drank of that Spiritual Rock that followed them: and that Rock was Christ."* I Corinthians 10:4. *"...and upon this rock [Jesus] I will build my church..."* Matthew 16:18. That Rock (Jesus) we read in the following texts is the foundational cornerstone of that new covenant church. *"And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone."* Ephesians 2:20; *"Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious:*

and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded." I Peter 2:6; "Therefore thus saith the LORD God, Behold I lay in Zion for a foundation a stone, a tried stone, a precious corner stone, a sure foundation: he that believeth shall not make haste." Isaiah 28:16.

As Jesus began his ministry, he picked twelve disciples who accompanied him as he went about doing his evangelizing to the general population. The twelve were constantly learning about the kingdom of God from their teacher as they witnessed his preaching, and inquired of him regularly about the many things he spoke about during his missionary journeys. Twelve disciples were likely picked in recognition of the twelve tribes of Israel, of which they would become the foundation stones of the New Testament church. ***"And [the saints of the Church of God] are built upon the foundation of the apostles..."*** Ephesians 2:20a; ***"And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and in them the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb."*** Revelation 21:14. Note that Judas who had betrayed Jesus was replaced by Matthias. ***"And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said....Men and brethren, this scripture must needs have been fulfilled which the Holy Ghost by the mouth of David spoke before concerning Judas, [see Psalm 41:9] which was guide to them that took Jesus. [Luke 22:47] For he was numbered with us, and had obtained part of the ministry....For it is written in the book of Psalms [109:8], Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein: and his bishopric let another take."*** Acts 1:15a, 16, 17, 20. As Peter pointed out, Matthias was prophesied to fill the office of Judas. It should be pointed out that there is no evidence for a succession line of the twelve, as the names of the original twelve disciples are to be written into the twelve foundations of the city.

Besides the twelve disciples, the Lord also appointed seventy to go out two by two to preach the kingdom of God. ***"After these things the Lord appointed other seventy also, and sent them two and two before his face into every city and place, whither he himself would come...And the seventy returned again with joy, saying, Lord even the devils are subject unto us through thy name."*** Luke 10:1, 17. It is likely that Jesus sent the seventy out by twos as the roads in those times were infested by thieves, therefore it was not safe for anyone to travel the roads alone. A road that had a notorious reputation for thieves and bandits was the 20 mile long stretch between Jerusalem and Jericho. There are a few places in the New Testament where it mentions of journeys being made by more than two persons, nevertheless, two was common for traveling. Note that Luke points out how the seventy were given a job to perform, and that was to be messengers to enter towns and cities where he would visit at a later date. It was because of the work of the seventy that there were always crowds in the locations that Jesus visited. This shows that Jesus had assigned roles to those who followed his teachings.

After the ascension of Jesus after his resurrection, seven men were chosen to take care of the business of the church's widows and poor. ***"And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples unto them, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost, and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business."*** Acts 6:1 to 3.

As time passed and the church grew, church roles expanded to include other business. We learn of Paul, Barnabas and Titus appointing elders in all the churches. ***"And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they believed."*** Acts 14:23; ***"For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee."*** Titus 1:5. We can be sure as the church grew, many more were chosen and ordained as elders and overseers in the church.

By now, there should be little doubt that as the church of God took root during Jesus' ministry and continued to take form under the guidance of the apostles that there was a structured approach to delivering God's Word and carrying out His Will. As roles developed, we even find required qualifications and rules for the behavioral conduct of bishops (overseers), elders and deacons. Read I Timothy 3:1 to 13 and Titus 1:3 to 9 for the qualifications of these offices. If the established qualifications for elders or other offices of God's church are not met by a candidate being considered for the role, it is the Christian duty of the church council to reject the applicant. If we are followers of the Christ, we must not be a respecter of persons.

Jesus says there shall be no end to his church. The true Church of God is built upon the living Word, the Rock of our salvation, ***"I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen, and have the keys of hell and of death."*** Revelation 1:18. The word "church" does not refer to the building that the saints congregate in, but defines those called out ones who come together representing the body of Christ. We are assured death cannot hold the church members captive, through the promise of their resurrection in Christ to life everlasting. ***"Verify, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life."*** John 5:24. ***"So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory."*** I Corinthians 15:54.

Further evidence that the early church was organized was the fact that early churches had a polity to follow and it was distributed to every church for them to observe. ***"And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in numbers daily."*** Acts 16:4, 5.

After reading what we have from the scriptures, how can any person make the claim that church organization is a product solely of man and not of God? Every creative work of God was made to co-exist in an orderly process, from the rhythmic function of the anatomy to the orderly rotations of the planets. Jesus began the Church of God when he first called out the twelve disciples which was the beginning of an organized body of believers whose responsibility was to deliver the message of Hope to the world masses. In other words, the church is an assembly of people united in a relationship with a common interest and purpose. The church should demonstrate an orderly disposition and not one of disarray in order to efficiently and effectively accomplish its mission. Due to this fact, we are frequently instructed in scripture to fellowship with other like-minded people, learning also how to conduct ourselves in an orderly and disciplined manner. In the following verses, we see that Christians fellowshiped regularly together in brother and sisterhood as they were so instructed to come together. ***"And when he had found him, he brought him unto Antioch. And it came to pass, that a whole year they assembled themselves with the church..."*** Acts 11:26a; ***"For first of all, when ye come together in the church..."*** I Corinthians 11:18a; ***"For if there come unto your assembly..."*** James 2:2a. There are many verses throughout the New Testament speaking about the assembling together with other believers. In contrast, there is not even one verse in the scriptures with instruction to forsake the assembling together with other believers.

We have already discussed why some people propagate the disassociation with churches but we must be careful to not let our will override God's Will. When people become discouraged by the failings of others, even of those in churches we may attend, we need to try and draw strength from the Word of God. ***"That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man."*** Ephesians 3:16; ***"Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me; that by me the preaching might be known, and that the Gentiles might hear; and I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion. And the Lord shall deliver me from every evil work and will preserve me unto his heavenly kingdom: to whom be glory for ever and ever."*** II Timothy 4:17, 18. It is unfortunate to say, but Christians must be prepared to face more hardships as Jesus' return gets closer, which is all the more reason to gather together and draw strength from one another. ***"Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more as ye see the day approaching."*** Hebrews 10:25.

Given that all people are flawed, we don't recommend abandoning the congregating with a church simply because you see imperfect people or meet people that are off-putting. However, if you find yourself in a church that is too corrupt for comfort or is teaching doctrines contrary to what Jesus taught, then you are justified in abandoning such a church. In such a situation, we recommend that you seek a church whose leader is Jesus the Christ and demonstrates that they seek to live in his footsteps. ***"And when he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers."*** John 10:4, 5. These verses tell us to not stay with or follow those who promote false teachings but remain loyal to the teachings of Jesus and follow him, and him only.

With respect to rules of conduct for a church of God, scriptures tell us how to deal with those church members who commit wrong, whether against us or others. If we attempt to address wrongs committed by fellow members but our appeals go unheard by the offender, then we are instructed to bring the matter to the church in the presence of witnesses. In the case of an elder or deacon of the church, we receive the following instructions on how to deal with the problem: ***"Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witness."*** I Timothy 5:19. For other church members: ***"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established"*** Matthew 18:15, 16. Always remember when seeing others doing wrong, be careful in how you handle the situation, for does not sin also lie at our door? Be as respectful as possible, for we would want to be treated with respect if someone confronted us about an offence they claim we have committed and we may not even realize it. Jesus himself stated that no one is perfect, including himself. ***"If I justify myself, mine own mouth shall condemn me: if I say, I am perfect, it shall also prove me perverse."*** Job 9:20; ***"And he [Jesus] said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God..."*** Matthew 19:17a. These verses may appear to be contradictory in light of the scores of verses that speak of perfect, righteous and good persons. However, such references to 'perfect' or 'righteous' people are made of those who work and live at being righteous, perfect and good. Such persons know the truth which is that they cannot obtain pure righteousness, perfection or goodness in this present, sinful world. Only at the return of the Christ will all things be made anew for the children of God: ***"For this corruptible must put on incorruption..."*** I Corinthians 15:53.

The Christ was sent to save sinners and what better way of learning the message of salvation than by the assembling of ourselves in fellowship, studying his words. The brother and sisterhood of the Church of God know that judgment begins with them as we learned earlier in this writing. Those souls who believe that the Christ did not establish a church are believing a lie, for Jesus said his church would prevail. Faith by itself in a solitary state becomes weak and will not endure. The word that was

given to us, was given to be shared with others. *"Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone..."* James 2:17. But we, in the assembling of ourselves together and diligently studying the scriptures with a dedicated teacher in truth, will have the Holy Spirit there among us, guiding us.

In closing, the Bible is full of verses demonstrating that the Churches of God were advised to assemble in fellowship and all the more as we see the last days approaching. In these turbulent times, let us not forsake the assembling together but unite with one another in worship in the Spirit that proceeds from the Father.