

Building Bridges

Audio

Just over a year ago in December 2009, I gave a sermon entitled, “Islands and Offenses.” It was also published in article form in the November 2009 issue of the “Forerunner” Magazine.

In that sermon and article, I likened the various islands along our beautiful British Columbia coastline to the various branch organizations of God’s true church; and the smaller sea-bound rocks to individual members or families worshipping God in tiny living room groups or as “independent Christians.”

Since that time, I have been thinking a lot about those spiritual islands – those Church of God groups and individuals. Many fellow church members with whom we once had wonderful fellowship when we were together, we have lost contact with over the years.

I have also been thinking a lot about the exclusivism of some – or perhaps many – of the Church of God groups. Perhaps I have been guilty of some of this exclusivism myself. Perhaps some of you have been too. But in most cases, it appears that many of the grass-roots church members have little or no problem having at least some fellowship with members of other Church of God groups than their own. It appears to be the church leaders – or at least some of them – who have a problem with “their” members attending Sabbath services or Feasts with Church of God groups other than “their” own. I enclose the word “their” in quotation marks here because even though certain church members attend a certain church group, the sheep actually belong to Jesus Christ (John 10:14); not to any man or human organization. Please consider any further uses of this word in the same context throughout this article also to be enclosed in quotation marks.

Some church leaders merely discourage their members from attending another group’s Sabbath or Feast services by claiming that their own brand of preaching is the best. Some other leaders out-and-out forbid their members to attend anywhere else – on pain of disfellowshipment. Some even forbid their members to associate at all with people outside of their own groups – in some bizarre cases, even with members of their own families!

Not Divided?

The favourite hymn of our oldest granddaughter is the well-known “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Some church members take exception to that rousing hymn – or more accurately to a few of its lines, which read:

We are not divided.

All one Body we.

One in hope and doctrine.

One in charity.

The people who oppose our singing of this hymn feel that God’s people should not sing these words because they believe that the Church of God *is* divided; that we are *not* one Body; and that we are *not* unified in hope, doctrine and charity!

But please consider this: The spiritual Body of Jesus Christ *cannot* be divided. Division of the spiritual Body of Christ is a total impossibility! And especially not by men; not by physical means; not by human corporate means. Impossible!

Yes, the Church of God *is* scattered organizationally; and it is becoming *more* scattered as time goes on. But there is a difference between scattering and division, as we shall see as we continue.

Witness the recent sad problems in the United Church of God (UCG). Many or most of those who recently parted company with that organization have gone over to the newly-formed Church of God - a Worldwide Association. (CoG-WA). But I have no doubt that there are other members who have recently left UCG, and did *not* go to CoG-WA; but who perhaps moved to one of the other existing church groups; e.g. Living Church of God (LCG), Church of God International (CGI), or one of the many others. Maybe – even probably – other smaller Church of God groups were initiated from this recent split.

I am also just as sure that there are yet other members who have said, resulting from this turmoil, “That’s it! I’ve had enough! I’ll never again follow another man! From now on I’ll worship God on my own!” and more living room groups and “independent Christians” were the result.

Does this fragmenting of God’s church mean that the Body of Christ is divided? I believe that the answer is “No.” May I repeat that I truly believe that Christ’s Body is undividable.

Some of the Church of God leaders might agree with me that Christ’s Body is undividable; but erroneously conclude that *their* group is *the* Church of God – the only one that truly represents Christ’s Body, the only one that is doing God’s work on earth; and that all the others do not and are not. To such claims, I say, with all due respect, of course, “Nonsense!”

May I offer two personal analogies of the scattered church? My first analogy is that of God’s true church being represented by a china plate. At some point this plate’s owner purposely dropped it on a hard, tiled kitchen floor and it smashed into hundreds of pieces of various sizes. Many of those pieces then immediately began to proclaim, “I am the plate!” Do such claims make sense? Of course not!

My second analogy, which likens the various Church of God groups to tribes or sub-tribes of ancient Israel, is actually not my own idea. It is God’s. It was He who inspired the apostle Paul in Galatians 6:16 to refer to God’s church as “the Israel of God” and, conversely, it was He that inspired Stephen in Acts 7:38 to refer to ancient physical Israel as “the church in the wilderness.”

Did any of the twelve tribes of physical Israel claim that they were Israel – the only tribe of Israel? Of course not! Even the Jews of today, although they call their territory “the State of Israel,” know very well that the modern descendants of the other “lost tribes” are out there somewhere.

The Scattering

Another question: Who was it that scattered the church? Some say that it was the post-1986 Worldwide Church of God (WCG) leadership. Some say that it was Satan and his demons. Although all of these certainly *were* used as pawns, I truly believe that it was the great God who scattered His church; and for similar reasons as He scattered *physical* Israel – as a punishment for idolatry, Sabbath-breaking and other major sins.

Right from the beginning, He warned Israel that He would do so. Let us consider some of the relevant scriptures and, as you read these verses, please apply them in your mind to spiritual Israel – to the church.

But if you will not hearken unto me, and will not do all these commandments; and if you shall despise my statutes, or if your soul abhor my judgments, so that you will not do all my commandments, but that you break my covenant... And if you will not be reformed by me by these things, but will walk contrary unto me... And if you will not for all this hearken unto me, but walk contrary unto me... *I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste.* (Leviticus 26:14-15, 23, 27, 33)

After the relatively peaceful reign of Solomon, Israel was split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Despite God's warnings, idolatry, Sabbath-breaking and many other sins prevailed within both kingdoms. As a result, the people of the Northern Kingdom were taken into captivity by the Assyrians; and after their subsequent scattering, God called His prophet Jeremiah to repeat His same warnings to the leaders and peoples of the Southern House of Judah:

Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel : “Behold, I will feed them, this people, with wormwood, and give them water of gall to drink. *I will scatter them* also among the heathen, whom neither they nor their fathers have known: and I will send a sword after them, till I have consumed them.” (Jeremiah 9:15-16)

Therefore will *I scatter them* as the stubble that passes away by the wind of the wilderness. (Jeremiah 13:24)

Please notice *who* would scatter them. God says that it is He that would do so. But, again, *why* did He scatter them?

For the LORD shall smite Israel, as a reed is shaken in the water, and He shall root up Israel out of this good land, which He gave to their fathers, and shall scatter them beyond the river, because they have made their groves, provoking the LORD to anger. (I Kings 14:15)

For one thing, because their use of idolatrous groves provoked God to anger. Anything else?

Remember, I beseech you, the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, "If you transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations." (Nehemiah 1:8)

Because of transgression – general law-breaking – sin. Here, after Judah's return from their seventy-year captivity in Babylon, God, through Nehemiah, is advising the Jews to learn the lesson of their exile which had just concluded. Nehemiah repeats God's warnings – virtually the same ones that He gave Israel through Moses – the same warnings that we read back in Leviticus 26. But has the definition of sin somehow changed in what we call the New Testament era? Not according to God's Word, as clearly given through one of His apostles in I John 3:4.

Here is another question: What responsibility does the ministry have in all of this? Let's go back to Jeremiah for the answer:

For the pastors are become brutish, and have not sought the LORD: therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered. (Jeremiah 10:21)

The ministry has a grave responsibility to set the proper example of earnestly seeking the LORD, and of not being brutish (the Hebrew word "ba'ar" can also mean "burnt out" or "wasted"). By failing to do so, God's people will be scattered even more.

We have seen that God scatters His people for His own good reasons. In His work of scattering, does He need any help? Does He ask for help in doing it? And is He pleased when, uninvited, the ministry scatters His people? Again from Jeremiah:

Therefore thus says the LORD God of Israel against the pastors that feed my people; “You have scattered my flock, and driven them away, and have not visited them: behold, I will visit upon you the evil of your doings,” says the LORD. (Jeremiah 23:2)

He is certainly *not* pleased if and when the ministers presumptuously involve themselves in the scattering, for which God alone maintains the right, responsibility and authority to perform.

Is God’s scattering of His peoples a permanent punishment?

“For I am with you,” says the LORD, “to save you: though I make a full end of all nations where I have scattered you, yet will I not make a full end of you: but I will correct you in measure, and will not leave you altogether unpunished.” (Jeremiah 30:11)

No, His punishment on physical and spiritual Israel is *not* a permanent punishment. He promises to forgive the repentant, and, in His own good time, to bring about a regathering, both of physical and spiritual Israel. This regathering is what His people cry out for and what is alluded to by David in Psalm 60:

O God, You have cast us off; You have broken us down; You have been displeased; Oh, restore us again! You have made the earth tremble; You have broken it; heal its breaches, for it is shaking. You have shown Your people hard things; You have made us drink the wine of confusion. You have given a banner to those who fear You, that it may be displayed because of the truth. That Your beloved may be delivered, save with Your right hand, and hear me. God has spoken in His holiness: "I will rejoice; I will divide Shechem And measure out the Valley of Succoth"... Is it not You, O God, who cast us off? And You, O God, who did not go out with our armies? Give us help from trouble, for the help of man is useless. (Psalm 60:1-6; 10-11)

In the same way as God reserves the right and responsibility to scatter His peoples, please notice who has the right and authority to *regather* His peoples:

Hear the word of the LORD, O you nations, and declare it in the isles afar off, and say, “He that scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd does his flock.” (Jeremiah 31:10)

Therefore say, “Thus says the Lord GOD; ‘I will even gather you from the people, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel.’” (Ezekiel 11:17)

Thus says the Lord GOD; “When I shall have gathered the house of Israel from the people among whom they are scattered, and shall be sanctified in them in the sight of the heathen, then shall they dwell in their land that I have given to my servant Jacob.” (Ezekiel 28:25)

Clearly, God maintains the right and responsibility both to scatter and to regather His people according to His perfect will and timing. Regarding the “lost” tribes of physical Israel who have been scattered across the face of the globe, it is obvious that no human being has the power or the ability to even *find* them, let alone reunite them. And do we think that the reunification of *spiritual* Israel would be any easier than the reunification of *physical* Israel? God’s Word is clear. No human being has any authority to try to reunite physical or spiritual Israel – not even to make an attempt at it.

After the scattering of physical Israel, even after they lost their identity, did they somehow stop becoming Israel? For example, did the peoples of Ephraim and Manasseh gradually cease to be the peoples of Ephraim and Manasseh – just because they were scattered and no longer knew who they were? Of course not! Likewise spiritual Israel – the New Testament Israel of God.

If the various Church of God groups are the tribes or sub-tribes of the scattered Israel of God, what then are we to do? Are we to try to reunite those tribes and sub-tribes?

No! We have already seen that God retains the authority and responsibility to do this. So what *are* we to do? How are we to look upon our fellow-members in the various spiritual tribes and sub-tribes of spiritual Israel? How are we to treat each other?

The answer is that we should be treating each other with respectful recognition as God’s called-out peoples, and with true, sincere love – yes, “agape” love, of course; but also with “phileo” love, because we are all spiritual brothers and sisters.

Back to the Islands

At this point, let us go back to the spiritual islands! In obedience to II Thessalonians 3:6-15 and other scriptural admonitions from God, some of us have found it necessary to separate ourselves from our former Church of God groups. Since those separations, what have we been asking God for? Many of us have asked Him for a new spiritual home – for another Church of God group with which to attend and to fellowship – one that is acceptable to ourselves, yes – but more importantly, acceptable to God, according to His perfect will.

Since our own recent separation, some church friends have said that they have been expecting my wife and me to join this, that or the other Church of God group. Yet others have apparently expected us to initiate yet another church group of “our own” – yet another splinter group. We have resisted the temptation to do this.

Even though we are not a separate church group, we have initiated a new web-site. But a web-site is not the same thing as a church group. Also, we have been holding occasional Sabbath service conference calls, the purpose of which has been to bring some isolated members together electronically, rather than being totally isolated.

What does the future hold?

Is this conference call the manner in which we mean to continue? And more importantly, is this the manner in which *God wants* us to continue? I am not sure that it is.

Recently, as I was praying, a few major suggestions came to my mind. Whether or not God put these suggestions there, even partially, I do not know.

For some time, I have been groaning in my prayers over our children and grandchildren being so cut off from Sabbath fellowship with young people and children of their own ages, and praying that God might either bring some young families to us, or that He might lead us to a church group with young families already in them.

But then, thinking about this with regard to our children and grandchildren who live here on central Vancouver Island, I considered the existing Church of God groups in our area, at least those that I am aware of: The United Church of God (UCG), Church of God International (CGI), and the Living Church of God (LCG). Another possibility might be the new Church of God – a Worldwide Association (CoG-WA) which might possibly make a local appearance soon. I questioned myself as to whether or not we would want to permanently commit to any of these four for the purposes of Sabbath fellowship.

In addition, as I was recently doing some work on our new web-site, I was questioning some of the statements that I had initially written in it. I wanted to change the wording in order to stress to any visitors to the site that, as previously mentioned, we are not another Church of God splinter group. Not that I necessarily want, in a vain way, our group (if I may even call it that) to be somehow different to or better than all of the existing Church of God groups. Again, another Church of God group is *not* what I want! And I do not think that God wants it either. I do not believe that He wants or needs yet another church group right now. Are there not more than enough of them already?

So what DOES God want?

I do not brag when I write here that Trish and I have been happily busy in God's church – WCG, UCG and CGG – for the best part of forty years. Admittedly, we are no longer spring chickens! I have just turned sixty-two years old. How the time has flown! How it continues to fly!. So what do we want to be doing with the remaining years of our lives? And again, more importantly, what does *God* want us to do with the remaining years of our lives?

Does He want us to seek out yet another existing Church of God group, hang our hats there, and continue doing exactly the same things with that group as we have been doing in our former Church of God groups for the past umpteen years? Does He want us to dedicate ourselves to a single Church of God group and give our undivided loyalties to it – so cloistering ourselves and shutting out all others? Does He want us to support the status-quo of separation between His children – our spiritual brothers and sisters?

Or rather, does He perhaps want us to make some efforts to build bridges between His children in the different groups? These are the thoughts that led me to the recent “Building Bridges” accent in our new web site.

The train of my recent thoughts and prayers continued along these lines: “The building of bridges is fine. But a bridge is *useless* unless people *use* it – unless people walk or drive across it.” And, of course, I have no power or authority to force other people – in this case, God’s people – to cross the little bridges that, hopefully, God has used us to set up via the links on our humble web-site. They must *want* to do so.

But this led to some more big questions: What am *I* doing, personally, in this regard? And, as I am in the middle of reading Charles Sheldon’s “In His Steps” right now, it prompted me to ask myself the key question from that book, “What would Jesus do?”

When Trish and I were visiting our daughter and her family in southern Washington State a few weekends ago, we noticed a thought-provoking sign-board at a gas station, which read, “A good example says much more than a lot of good advice.”

“So,” I asked myself, “What is *my* example? Am *I* crossing these same bridges?” Not just web-surfing to the Internet sites of the various Church of God groups. That is too easy, takes little effort, and does nothing really constructive for anyone. No. There must be more to it than that. Am I actively extending the hand of fellowship to my spiritual brothers and sisters – the scattered and lonely ones as well as those in various Church of God groups? Am I doing so now? And have I been doing so in the past?

OK, every so often Trish and I get together for coffee, lunch or dinner with one or two old friends who are with UCG or David Hulme’s group. And OK, when on vacation in the UK, Trish and I have made some efforts to attend Sabbath services with other Church of God groups – usually LCG or David Hulme’s group. These visits worked out fine; but on our return home to Canada, what did we do? We fell right back into our usual habit of exclusive participation with our own group; and our communications with the wonderful brethren in those other groups were swept under the carpet until our next visit. A good example of bridge-building? Not really. Quite abysmal actually!

So what am I suggesting here? Am I suggesting that we extend great efforts to try to reunite the scattered branches of the Church of God? No. Not at all! Especially as it is true, as we have seen, that it was God who did the scattering, and that it is He who retains the authority to do the regathering and reunification! In this regard, please consider this very well-known scripture:

**What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.
(Mark 10:9)**

Now please give me the liberty to temporarily change the order of the words of this verse – just a little; and just to make a point:

What therefore God has put asunder, let not man join together....

Or attempt to join together! Some well-meaning brethren *have* made brave attempts to do this by trying to reunite two Church of God groups into one. What was the result? Three groups! Or more! It is obvious that this is *not* what God wants us to be doing right now. Allow me to repeat that, in a similar way as it is God’s responsibility to reunite *physical* Israel in His own good time, it is also His responsibility to reunite *spiritual* Israel in His good time. And perhaps “His good time” will not be until He causes His two witnesses to begin their work (Revelation 11).

What then *is* our responsibility – specifically in regard to our brothers and sisters, both the scattered, lonely ones as well as those in other Church of God groups? I believe that our responsibility is:

1. **To extend the hand of sincere Christian fellowship to them – as many of them as will welcome it, of course. We cannot push our way in where we are not wanted.**
2. **To establish or re-establish friendships with as many of our brethren in as many other Church of God groups as is feasible,**
3. **To attend their Sabbath services – yes, again, with as many Church of God groups as is feasible,**
4. **To attend their Feast sites.**

You might rightly be thinking thoughts such as, “But all the churches are so imperfect! They all have so many problems!”

Perhaps true. Probably true! But do such imperfections make them any less tribes or sub-tribes of spiritual Israel? Do such problems make them any less groups of children of the living God – our brothers and sisters?

Also, let us ask ourselves, “What would Jesus do?” No. Actually not “What would Jesus do?” but “What *did* Jesus do?”

So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. (Luke 4:16)

The time setting of this verse is immediately following His temptation by Satan – right at the beginning of Jesus’ earthly ministry. So what did He do at the beginning of His ministry? Did He immediately initiate a new “Christian synagogue”? Did He start a new church? No. That came later on the Feast of Pentecost in the same year as His death, resurrection and ascension. And even then, when He did set it up, He raised it up as a kind of outcrop or outgrowth of His people, Israel (Romans 11).

Please notice that it was Jesus' custom to keep at least part of each and every Sabbath Day – *His* Sabbath Day (Matthew 12:8) – in the synagogue. Here is more proof of Him doing so:

And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. (Matthew 4:23)

Then Jesus went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every sickness and every disease among the people. (Matthew 9:35)

Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. (Matthew 12:9)

And when He had come to His own country, He taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this Man get this wisdom and these mighty works? (Matthew 13:54)

Please notice the terms, “*their* synagogue” and “*their* synagogues” in these verses. Eight scriptures in the gospel accounts refer to the synagogues of the Jews as “*their* synagogues.” It is almost as if Jesus recognized the Jews' places of worship, but did not take full ownership of them.

We all know about the shortcomings of the Jewish Pharisees and Sadducees. We all know how far these sects had strayed from God's pure truth and way of life. We all know how often Jesus – equipped with His perfect spiritual knowledge – disagreed with them; and vice-versa. But still, His custom was to attend their imperfect Sabbath services in their imperfect synagogues every week.

What about Jesus' apostles? What were their customs in this regard? Let us use the apostle Paul as our example. We know that he strove to emulate Jesus Christ in everything. He wrote:

Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ. (I Corinthians 11:1)

But did Paul imitate Christ in his weekly Sabbath-keeping practices? Was his Sabbath custom the same as that of Jesus?

Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures. (Acts 17:1-2)

There are many other scriptures in the book of Acts that prove that Paul was true to his word – that it was his regular custom, whenever possible, to keep God’s holy Sabbath Day in the synagogues of the Jews.

So what then? Should we be attending Sabbath services in our local Jewish synagogues? Some Sabbath-keeping Christians have gone that route and have become what might be considered pseudo-Jews. In our day and age, however, if we tried to keep the Sabbath in the Jewish synagogues without agreeing to convert totally to their religion, their leaders would probably have us thrown out.

Once, back in the 1980’s, when I was president of our local Spokesman Club branch, I tried to arrange a Friday evening visit to Victoria’s lovely old synagogue (having been built in 1859, is one of the oldest religious buildings in British Columbia and the oldest synagogue on the whole west coast of North America). But when I tried to set up the visit, even explaining that our group consisted of Sabbath-keeping Christians, the synagogue authorities were very cool to our request; so we dropped the idea.

What I’m trying to get at here is that, just as Jesus and Paul were quite willing to keep their Sabbath services in the imperfect synagogues with the imperfect Jews, we can be confident that God would not be averse to us attending with bona-fide Sabbath-keeping Church of God groups that also might not be perfect in every aspect. And let’s face it; there is *no* Church of God group on this earth that is perfect in every way. Yes, there might be some that we might prefer over others, and that, of course, is fine. But if we continue searching for the perfect Church of God group, I can guarantee that we will be terribly disappointed. And if we keep on with that search, expecting to be hanging our hats “permanently” with any one group – then, once we become disillusioned with that group and we try one group after another, it is likely that we will get so frustrated and discouraged that we will drop out of the search, again with the cry, “That’s it! I’ve had enough! I’ll never follow another man!” And we will join the ranks of the “independent Christians” – the *lonely*, independent Christians!

No Man is an Island

Do you want to be a lonely, independent Christian? It is said that “No Man is an Island.” This common saying is one famous line from a lovely poem called “Meditation XVII” which was written by the English poet John Donne (1572-1631). Here is the whole of that short but intriguing poem. Remembering that John Donne was an Englishman, please consider carefully its thought-provoking words:

**No man is an island,
Entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.
If a clod be washed away by the sea,
Europe is the less,
As well as if a promontory were,
As well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were.
Any man’s death diminishes me,
Because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls;
It tolls for thee.**

My point here is not the ominous “For whom the bell tolls” lesson; but rather the lesson that, as John Donne felt himself inextricably one with all of mankind, we members of God’s true church must feel – no, not *feel* – we must actively *be* – inextricably one with all of our fellow Church of God members. Not artificially, of course. Not just by *saying* – not just by *claiming* – that we have unity. But by actually *practicing* unity in whatever ways we are able!

Is this a priority? Yes, it is. How can we know that it is a priority? Because it was one of the last things that Jesus discussed with His Father before His arrest:

Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are... 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: (John 17:11, 21-22)

Have you been putting this pursuit of unity on the back-burner for way too long? I know that I have!

Bridges Between Islands

It is true that some people – like most of us here on Vancouver Island – prefer the relatively peaceful island life. Bridges connecting Vancouver Island with the British Columbia mainland have been proposed over the years since as far back as 1872; but have been rejected for various reasons. Please bear with me as I mention two other examples of bridge-building from islands – one in Canada and one in Europe:

My first example is that of Prince Edward Island (PEI), which many of our brethren might be familiar with from the “Anne of Green Gables” series of books and movies. PEI is Canada’s smallest province and, as its name implies, is an island. Or at least it *was* an island! It is now solidly connected to the Canadian mainland by the Confederation Bridge which opened in 1997. The building of the bridge was opposed by many PEI residents who wanted to maintain their peaceful island lifestyle; so a plebiscite was held in 1988 and the building of the bridge was approved with a 59.4% vote in favour. This must have been sad for the dissenting 40.8% of residents whose lifestyle would likely be changed considerably.

My second example of bridges from islands is that of the lovely Italian city of Venice. Thoughts on this came to my mind recently when I was watching a travelogue documentary film about Italy. Journalist Luigi Barzini once described Venice as “undoubtedly the most beautiful city built by man.” Venice – which some call “the City of Bridges,” stretches across 117 small islands along the Adriatic Sea coast of northeastern Italy. These islands are connected by 409 bridges, which were built, obviously, to connect the people living on one island with those on the others – plus, of course, to connect them with the Italian mainland.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venice#cite_note-2#cite_note-2

What about us? Do we – like those 40.8% of PEI residents who voted against the Confederation Bridge – desire to maintain our island status – our *spiritual* island status? Or, like the Venetians, are we desirous to have much communication with our fellow-Christians living on other Church of God “islands”?

What about you? Do you like being spiritually alone? Do you like to be spiritually isolated or cloistered? Do you prefer worshipping alone or in a tiny “living room group” each Sabbath Day? Do you prefer to restrict your Christian worship and fellowship to that of your own limited group?

Outreach!

Often over our years in God's church, we have used the term, "Outreach." Let us think for a few moments about this sub-topic. Let us look at a good example of true Christian outreach – the example of the "Proverbs 31 Wife" – the virtuous woman who is symbolic of God's true church:

Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies. The heart of her husband (*the man who symbolizes Jesus Christ*) does safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life... She stretches out her hand to the poor; yes, she reaches forth her hands to the needy. (Proverbs 31:10-12, 20)

It is true that we have normally used the term "outreach" in reference to giving to the poor – charitable programs. It seems that we have generally tended to direct our charitable efforts – including our "Third Tithe" programs – to our own brethren within our own church groups. I suppose that, to some extent, the saying that "charity begins at home" is true.

But is charitable assistance the only valid aspect of true Christian outreach? Is charitable giving the only good deed that the "Proverbs 31 wife" participates in? No. She does lots of other good things that are mostly irrelevant to this article. But here are a few points that *are* relevant to this sub-topic. Still in Proverbs 31, let us look back at verse 14:

She is like the merchants' ships; she brings her food from afar...

Is it too much of a stretch to believe that the food mentioned here might be symbolic of spiritual food? Food from afar? Perhaps spiritual food from various true, bona-fide Christian sources other than "our own"? Now on to verse 18:

She perceives that her merchandise is good: her candle goes not out by night.

The light of this woman's excellent example shines forth. This naturally leads us to a different, but related, symbol; so please allow me to briefly digress with this quote:

You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:14-16)

Again, let us ask ourselves the question, What does our Elder Brother and His Father want us to do? To shine their light? Yes, of course! But how? Are we to keep our oil-lamps or candles lit under baskets? Or, as Mark's parallel version adds, under our beds? Of course not! Please think about it. What would the results be in either of these cases? Very negative results. Damage. Fire. Smoke. Destruction! The spiritual counterparts of these negative results are, perhaps, obvious.

But more than this fire and smoke damage, spiritually, such confined light-shining only serves to blind the "shiners" with their own light. Is *this* what God wants?

No! While "in the house," He wants us to set our lamps high up on a lampstand. But more, He wants us to shine His light to the world by building our brightly-illuminated houses in brightly-illuminated cities up on top of hills where they can be clearly seen .

But who is it that represents "the house" in Jesus' word picture? Is it just our own group – whether numerically large or small in attendance? Just our own Church of God group?

No! "The house" is the house of God – all of it! The household of God is His church! All of it! Not just some of it! There are no artificial boundaries in the Household of God. No walls. God constructed His house in what we today would call "open plan."

So then, what is the bottom line? What am I suggesting here? I am proposing that we:

1. **Get out there!**
2. **Attend Sabbath services with the local congregations of the various Church of God groups – as many as are geographically available, mutually acceptable and feasible.**
3. **Accept any apparent imperfections of the various local Church of God branches for what they are – *their* imperfections – *theirs* to deal with between them and God.**
4. **Accept their leaders' authority over their corporate Church of God groups.**
5. **Help out as much as possible – in whatever ways that may be possible and mutually acceptable.**

I am not suggesting that when we go visiting various Church of God congregations, we try to correct whatever differences of opinion we may have with them. That is not our job.

I strongly believe that this is a “win-win” suggestion; that it is a two-way thing with two-way benefits. Actually, it is a *four-way thing* if God the Father and Jesus Christ are involved! But we will benefit from the fellowship with our brothers and sisters in these groups; and, if we play our parts correctly, they will benefit from ours.

Yes, it is true that going out for services will take more effort and energy than staying at home to worship. But I am convinced that, if it is God’s will, if He approves of the path upon which we are embarking, if we pray for His help, and if we do our very best in doing it, our Christian light and example will shine through brilliantly via God’s Holy Spirit which is dwelling within us.

Also, we can have confidence that we will be doing our part in a very real and practical way to contribute to the unity that is exemplified by and commanded by our Lord Jesus Christ and His Father – the unity of the true church – the unity of the Family of God!

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