

Boundaries

Although the Feast of Tabernacles is primarily a *spiritual* feast, God commanded that it should also have an enjoyable *physical* aspect. In this regard, here is how He commands us to use our “Second Tithes” funds:

You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year.... and you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires: for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household. (Deuteronomy 14:22, 26)

As we prepare for the Feast each year – perhaps especially our young people and those with young families – we take time to plan enjoyable physical activities... for example:

- Let's go to “Chuck E. Cheese's” or “Going Bonkers”!
- Let's go to “Six Flags” in Saint Louis!
- Let's bike the Katy Trail !
- Let's shop till we drop at the Columbia Mall!
- Let's get a golf game in!
- Let's visit the Churchill Museum at Fulton !

These are all great plans! But do you sometimes find during the Feast that the reality fails to meet your expectations? That your time is not your own? That despite all your plans, you meet new or old friends and your plans change... to what *they* like to do?

Now, of course, this is not normally a bad thing. It is great to change our plans in order to live God's “way of give” at the Feast! But let us change the scene. What about back home – both before and after the Feast of Tabernacles? Do you ever find that other people make some, or many, or even *most* of your plans and decisions for you? Do you ever find that other people are to some extent running your life?

Again, modifying our schedules to serve others is a very fine thing; but it can be taken too far, and our personal boundaries can be violated.

This is what I would like to discuss in this article: Boundaries!

The “Boundaries” Book

My wife and I have been reading a book entitled, “Boundaries” by Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend. We would highly recommend this book to all of our readers, with a very few and very minor reservations. Despite a few Protestant-sounding phrases, the general advice in this book is excellent, soundly Bible-based common sense.

Although I would like to draw from the “Boundaries” book in this article, I do not want to attempt the impossible by trying to condense the book’s contents into a short article. Rather, let me once again recommend that you read it for yourself. What I *would* like to do in this article is this:

In the first half of the article, I would like to briefly cover some examples of boundary violations that can take place in God’s church, and give a short overview of how the recommendations of this book fit in with Biblical principles and with God’s way of life.

In the second half, I would like to concentrate on the most important relationship of all, and its boundaries.

Quotes from the Book's Introduction

The book's attention-grabbing sub-title is "When to say 'Yes' and when to say 'No'... to take control of your life."

To give you some idea of the book's contents, here are a few excerpts from its introduction and overview:

- **Are you in control of your life?**
- **Do people take advantage of you?**
- **Do you have trouble saying 'No'?**

Having clear boundaries is essential to a healthy, balanced lifestyle.

A boundary is a personal property line, and marks things for which we are responsible.

Boundaries impact all areas of our lives, for example:

- **Physical boundaries help us determine who may touch us**
- **Mental boundaries give us the freedom to have our own thoughts**
- **Emotional boundaries help us with our own emotions,**
- **Spiritual boundaries help us distinguish God's will from our own.**

Christians often focus so much on loving and giving to others that we sometimes forget our own limitations.

Have you ever found yourself wondering:

- **Can I set limits and still be a loving person?**
- **What are my legitimate boundaries?**
- **How do I answer someone who wants my time, love, energy or money?**
- **Why do I feel guilty when I consider setting boundaries?**

Beware of Controllers and other Boundary Violators!

In my life so far, I have found that there certainly are “controllers” out there – controlling-type people, boundary violators, people who are not satisfied with controlling their own lives; but are seemingly able to find the time and energy to desire some level of control over *others’* lives too!

And this is not limited to people “in the world.” There are some controlling people in God’s church too! Controllers in the church seem to feel that, because we are all spiritual brothers and sisters, they somehow have the right to treat other church members as they treat their own physical siblings; or that they have the God-given right to take similar liberties with you and me as they do with their own physical siblings. Of course, they should not be taking such liberties with their physical siblings either!

Such problems seemed to be perhaps more prevalent back in the 1980’s, when our Worldwide Church of God (WCG) attendance was at its height, and when new people were flocking into our congregations.

Perhaps that was the problem – or a big part of it. Perhaps some of the new people were not leaving “the world” outside the “gates” in our church boundaries. Perhaps they were not being required to! Perhaps some of the new people were bringing their worldly standards in with them. Perhaps the church leadership was so excited and overcome by the numbers of new “converts,” that they did not have the time or the energy to monitor the new people. Perhaps the leadership was not strict enough on the enforcement of our long-standing church rules and boundaries as they had been in earlier years.

Church Boundaries Violated

Through Jude, God warns us of boundary violations within the church:

For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. (Jude 4)

Ungodly men – and women too – have at times crept unawares into God’s modern day church too, and have penetrated the church’s God-ordained boundaries. Some of them have turned God’s grace into lasciviousness – which is an old English word for unbridled lust, filthiness, wantonness, excess, outrageousness, shamelessness and, very aptly, insolence. Yes, insolence – because that is exactly what boundary violations are. They are insolent!

I often noticed back in the 1980’s that some common phrases among church friends were, “You *should* do this!” or “You *should* be doing that!”

If the advised person chose not to follow the strongly-worded recommendations of the self-styled “expert advisor,” quite often, the result led to offended feelings.

Still thinking about the 1980s, some church members seemed to think that they were experts on this, that or the other thing, and had the freedom to force their so-called “expertise” on others. This seemed especially common in the fields of child-rearing and health-care. We had a prevalence of self-appointed, unqualified naturopaths, first-aid attendants and other types of pseudo health “experts.” Sadly, this continues in various branches of God’s church to this day; and it can be a very dangerous tendency. Yes, literally!

In one congregation we attended, a man took a short training course from some bogus study-by-mail “university” and obtained a phony degree and doctorate in kinesiology. Soon after receiving his phony credentials, he began “treating” some church members, including a lady church member who suffered with some severe health problems. This sweet lady’s condition deteriorated to the point of imminent death and she was admitted to hospital. As she lay in what would shortly become her death-bed, this crackpot “doctor” visited her and yelled abuse at her for putting herself in the hands of “the evil perpetrators of orthodox medicine.” Is this how God wants His children to treat (or rather “mis-treat” or “disrespect”) each other? Of course not!

Still during the late 1980s and early 1990s, our local congregation suffered two instances of the most flagrant and abominable kind of boundary violation – that of sexual abuse of children!

Do we church members rejoice – perhaps somewhat prematurely – each time a new person asks to attend our church services? Do we welcome people to attend our services before they have been made adequately aware of our (or rather *God’s*) doctrines, long-standing church standards and “ground-rules”? We might think that by doing so, we are extending Christian love to the new people. But perhaps doing so without caution might lead to a partial neglect for the comfort and feelings of our long-time, existing church members. In some cases, this can bring with it an automatic penalty!

Are controlling behaviours and other types of boundary violations acceptable to God? Of course they are not!

Types of Relationships and their Associated Boundaries

Here are a few examples of relationships in a Christian's personal life; relationships we would be wise to place proper boundaries around – boundaries which outsiders have limited (or no) authority to penetrate:

- You – alone
(Take a pen and paper, write down the word “me,” and draw a circle around it)
- You and your spouse
(Write “Me and Ermintrude” (or whatever your spouse’s name is) and draw a circle around the two names)
- You and your spouse and your children
- You and your parents
- You and your extended family (e.g. your grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc.)
- You, your spouse and your in-laws
- You, your spouse and your non-church friends and neighbours
- You, your spouse and your fellow church brethren
- You and God the Father and Jesus Christ

These are examples of different relationships around which different boundaries rightly belong.

For example, the boundary around yourself and your spouse has certain rules that apply to it. A different set of rules applies to the boundary around your relationship with your children. A different set of rules applies to the boundary around your relationship with God. And so on!

Now here are a few examples of boundary violations:

- Spousal abuse – whether physical, emotional or whatever – is a totally unacceptable violation of the personal boundaries of your spouse,
- Children have the right to a certain level of boundaries. Excessive discipline is nothing less than child abuse. As well as being a serious transgression of the law of God and the law of the land, it is a serious violation of a child's personal boundaries,
- Disrespect for parents is a violation of their boundaries – as well as being a violation of God's fifth commandment.

In all of this, please do not think that I am saying that we should not live God's way of give, or that we should not sacrifice as is appropriate. Of course we should be doing these things; but in a controlled way. We can and we must set up, maintain and defend our own personal boundaries, and we must respect the personal boundaries of others.

Also, it is advisable to build "gates" into our boundaries, through which people who *we* allow to enter *may* enter. More on this later.

But are Boundaries Biblical?

Where in the Bible does God tell us to set boundaries around ourselves and what belongs to us?

A few scriptures come immediately to mind. Protective walls, fences and hedges were very important to the people of Bible times. There are 234 mentions of “walls” in the King James Version of God’s Word, as well as 39 mentions of “fences” and 18 mentions of “hedges.”

We read in the book of Nehemiah that, among the first priorities of the Jews after returning to Jerusalem after their Babylonian captivity, they rebuilt the protective city walls and repaired its gates. Those walls and gates were important to them, and apparently to God as well.

What about *personal* walls, boundaries and gates? Nine times in His Word, God tells us to love our neighbours as ourselves (Leviticus 19:18 ; Matthew 19:19 ; 22:39 ; Mark 12:31 , 33; Luke 10:26 -28; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14 ; James 2:8).

Both Jesus and James tell us that we should “Let our no be no!” (Matthew 5:37; James 5:12)

God also tells us through the apostle Paul:

No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. (Ephesians 5:29)

And through John:

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? (I John 4:20)

The strong implication in these verses is that it is right and good for us to love, to care for and to protect ourselves and our extended selves, including our spouses and families.

God Family Boundaries

So far, we have seen that we need to maintain care and control over our own lives. Now we part company with the “Boundaries” book, in order to examine one area where we need to give up control.

In John’s gospel account, the human Jesus frequently declared that He enjoyed perfect unity with His Father. There were just two Members of the God Family at that time – with solid boundaries placed firmly around them!

As Jesus drew close to end of His human sojourn, He clearly saw His oneness with His Father:

Behold, the hour comes, yes, is now come, that you shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me. (John 16:32)

Please note that God the Father was with Jesus! No Trinity! Just Jesus and His Father – in perfect unity. Earlier, Jesus made another similarly worded statement:

And yet if I do judge, my judgment is true; for I am not alone, but I am with the Father who sent me. (John 8:16)

Jesus was with the Father! And the Father was with Jesus! When I read this, I visualize a “boundary circle” with both God the Father and Jesus in it. Again, these two comprised the complete God Family at that time.

Now, going right back to the beginning of eternity:

No man has seen God {the Father} at any time. The only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him. (John 1:18)

Jesus was and is in the bosom of the heavenly Father. Here I respectfully picture God the Father with a “boundary circle” in His chest – and with Jesus inside that circle.

By the way, these word pictures are not mine. They are Jesus'. Also, my visualizations are abstract, and so I am not breaking God's second commandment. I am not trying to envisage what the Father or the glorified Jesus actually look like! If you prefer, we can just use the initials "F" and "J" in our boundary circle diagrams. This is detail enough.

I and my Father are one... Though you believe not me, believe the works: that you may know, and believe, that the Father is in me, and I in Him. (John 10:30, 38)

Here I visualize two images:

1. Jesus with His Father in Him, and
2. God the Father with Jesus in Him.

What I see here is God the Father and Jesus Christ as exceptionally diverse Spirit Beings – so exceedingly dynamic in ways that we humans cannot yet fully comprehend. Their “boundary circles” change and move back and forth as they find necessary. This same, amazing double or twin “boundary circle” reappears in:

Believe you not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwells in me, He does the works. Believe me that I am in the Father, and the Father in me: or else believe me for the very works' sake. (John 14:10-11)

Jesus repeats this for emphasis, so it must be important for us to note!

Christians invited within God's Boundaries

But then comes a huge change! Still in John 14, verses 18 to 20:

I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you...

He is talking to His disciples – and to us!...

A little while longer and the world will see me no more. But you will see me. Because I live, you will live also. At that day you shall know that I am in my Father...

Now here comes the expansion – the huge change!...

And you in me, and I in you.

Here Jesus is giving us this picture:

- i) Jesus in His Father,
- ii) Jesus' disciples and us – members of His church – in Jesus,
- iii) Jesus in us!

This is a hard diagram for us to draw on our papers! Circle number 1 – the outer circle – represents God the Father. Circle number 2 represents Jesus, and is inside circle number 1. Circle number 3 represents the disciples and the members of God's church, and is inside circle number 2. Then Jesus again is inside circle number 3!

Amazing? Yes! Impossible? Physically, yes! With God, no! Jesus here seems to be giving us something like an advance glimpse into eternity, and into the humanly incomprehensible, dynamic nature of God.

Jesus is telling us here that He and His Father have built “gates” into their boundaries – carefully controlled gates, of course. He is also telling us that they are very willing and desirous to welcome certain people – people of their choosing – through their “gates” and onto their “property” – into their “boundary circle” and even into their Family!

Abiding in God's Abode

There is more! This gets even more astounding! Still in John 14, now on to verse 23:

Jesus answered and said unto him... {i.e. Judas Thaddeus-Lebbaus}... “If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him.”

Remember earlier that we read about Jesus saying that His Father was with Him, and that He was with His Father? Here we read that God the Father and Jesus will also be with us!

So now let us picture a “boundary circle” containing a Christian with God the Father and Jesus... within their abode.

How can this be? How can this come to pass? How can human beings be allowed to enter within God's boundaries and share their abode with them? What makes this possible?

Jesus gives us the answer in this same verse. Love is the key! Love coupled with obedience – i.e. the keeping of His words. Reciprocal love between the two primary Members of the God Family and their chosen ones. Love is the catalyst that pulls it all together and makes it possible.

Jesus says that, if a person will love Him and keep His words, that His Father will love that person. Also, that Jesus and the Father will come to that person, and make their home with him or her. What a promise!

Jesus expands on this in the following chapter (15) where He talks about us following His example, keeping His commandments, and continuing in and abiding in His love:

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you: continue you in my love. If you keep my commandments, you shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in His love. (John 15:9-10)

Here, the Christian is pictured as abiding in Jesus' love, and Jesus pictures Himself as abiding in His Father's love.

Our visualization is now expanded, and shows that to be “in” Jesus and God the Father is to be in their love... to be continuing in and abiding in their love, which means making our abode in their love.

Jesus passes on the perfect love He receives from His Father to His (Jesus') brothers and sisters.

Belongings and Possessions

Now let us move on into the next chapter (John 16) in a very similar vein:

All things that the Father has are mine. Therefore I said that He will take of mine and declare it to you. (John 16:15)

Here, Jesus is talking about all the things that the Father *has* – His belongings and possessions – which are jointly-owned by Jesus.

Our physical belongings – the things that are ours – are normally kept on our property, in our homes or on our land, within the boundaries of our property. We share our belongings with others as *we* see fit. So it is with God!

Jesus is telling us here that all that belongs to the Father is *His* (Jesus') too, because His Father gave these things to Him – the Father shared these things with Him. Jesus is also telling us that God the Father will take what belongs to Jesus and will reveal it all to us. They will let us in on their precious secrets!

Jesus and His Father share everything, and they want to share it all with those who love them, and who desire to abide with them in their abode – so becoming additional members of God's household and Family.

Now, let us move on into the next chapter (John 17), the true "Lord's Prayer," where we find lots more giving and sharing between the Father, Jesus and their newly extended Family.

Here we continue reading Jesus' words about ownership, about the Father sharing His possessions with Jesus, and about Jesus sharing His possessions with *us*.

Let us quickly skim through some of the relevant verses:

As you ... {i.e. God the Father}... have given Him... {i.e. Me – Jesus}... authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as you have given Him.... I have glorified you on the earth. I have finished the work which you have given me to do. And now, O Father, glorify me together with yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was. I have manifested your name to the men whom you have given me out of the world. They were yours, you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they have known that all things which you have given me are from you. For I have given to them the words which you have given me; and they have received them. I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours. And all mine are yours, and yours are mine. 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. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in your name. Those whom you gave me I have kept... I have given them your word... And the glory which you gave me I have given them, that they may be one just as we are one... Father, I desire that they also whom you gave me may be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which you have given me; (John 17:2, 4-12, 14, 22, 24)

All this is the giving, receiving, sharing and keeping of God's possessions!

Now let us back up, and see again how desirous God is to bring us within His boundaries, into the unity of His Family, and to give us all of these wonderful things:

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... {i.e. the name of the God Family...the Church of God and its members}... 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 have sent me. (Verses 11 and 21)

It is visualization time again! Jesus is represented here as the “outer boundary circle. God the Father is *in* Jesus. Jesus is *in* the Father. God’s people are unified together, and we are *in* the Father and *in* Jesus! Continuing:

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... (Verses 22-23a)

Here, God’s chosen people are the “outer circle.” Jesus is *in* us. And God the Father is *in* Him!

Here, within the space of two short verses, the order is all turned around! Once again, we see this amazing dynamism of God! This is not psychology. This is what we might call “God language”! These are the power-charged words of Jesus Christ communicating directly with His Father! Continuing in the second half of verse 23:

... 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. (Verse 23b)

Here is that essential ingredient again – the love of God. But what love! Jesus declares here that, despite our imperfections, His Father loves us just as He loves Jesus Himself!

Invited through God's Gates

Father, I desire that they also whom you gave me may be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory which you have given me; for you loved me before the foundation of the world. (Verse 24)

Here, Jesus is, in effect, asking His Father to open the “gates” in the fence (or boundary) around the God Family’s property.

Why? To admit the people His Father has given Him – to enter onto their property – onto the God Family property.

Why? So that we can abide all together – within God’s abode – in perfect unity.

Is this not the very ultimate of what the Feast of Tabernacles and the Last Great Day are all about?

Perhaps there are two (perhaps even more) “stages” of God’s chosen ones passing through the “gates” in God’s boundaries and entering onto His property.

Whenever we go onto another person’s property – when we pass through his gates and within his boundaries – we become subject to the owner’s rules. So it is with God.

We went through the “Stage 1 Gate” at the time of our conversion and baptism, when we answered God’s call, accepted His loving and merciful invitation, went through His gate, passed within His boundaries, and onto His property. At that time we lost control over our lives. Hopefully, we did not actually *lose* it. Hopefully, we gave it up voluntarily – we gave up the control of our lives to God the Father and Jesus Christ.

But Jesus does not yet want His Father to take us out of our physical bodies (which are pictured by the apostle Paul as houses or properties). Not yet anyway. Not in “Stage 1”:

I pray not that you should take them out of the world, but that you should keep them from the evil one. (Verse 15)

In “Stage 2” we will gladly give up our humanity, and we will pass from our present physical properties, houses and bodies to new spiritual properties, houses and bodies:

For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (II Corinthians 5:1)

These “heavenly houses” are the well-known “many mansions” and “places” that Jesus speaks of back in John 14:2. But continuing in verse 2 of II Corinthians 5:

For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven, if so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life. Now He that has wrought... *{shaped; fashioned}*... us for the selfsame thing is God, who also has given unto us the earnest of the Spirit. Therefore we are always confident, knowing that, whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord. (Verses 2-6)

As his words were inspired by God, we can forgive Paul for mixing his metaphors here – clothes, tabernacles and houses! God is telling us that our humanity causes something of a barrier between us and God – a barrier which prevents a 100% totally complete relationship with Him. But this is acceptable, because He is the One who made us human and physical! Continuing in verse 7:

For we walk by faith, not by sight. We are confident, I say, and willing rather to be absent from the body, and to be present with the Lord.

Let us summarize to this point. It is right and good for us to maintain solid boundaries in our relationships with our human families, friends, neighbours and church brethren. But as long as we are chained to these physical “buildings” of our mortal bodies, we must build “gates” into our personal fences and boundaries, and we must freely and gladly open them to admit God the Father and Jesus Christ.

Conversely, let us thankfully accept God’s invitation to enter His gates, and to pass within His boundaries, onto His property and into His abode:

Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. (Psalms 100:4)

Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go through them, and I will praise the Lord. (Psalms 118:19)

Let us yearn for the day when Jesus comes to repossess His property here on this earth, and to set up the fulness of His Kingdom, in preparation for the day when His gates will be lifted up and all boundaries will be taken down – the wonderful day of the arrival of God the Father:

Lift up your heads, O you gates! And be lifted up, you everlasting doors! And the King of Glory shall come in. Who is this King of Glory? The LORD strong and mighty, the LORD mighty in battle. Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift up, you everlasting doors! And the King of Glory shall come in. Who is this King of Glory? The LORD of hosts, He is the King of Glory. (Psalms 24:7-10)

*Feast of Tabernacles – Columbia, Missouri
October 6th 2009*

*John Plunkett
Building Bridges, The Church of God - Canada
Qualicum Beach, British Columbia, Canada*