



SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY PROJECT

THE CHRISTIAN

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

A Christian is a person who believes Jesus Christ is God Incarnate, has accepted Him as Lord and Savior, and is committed to following His teachings. He or she has been reconciled with God through the sacrifice of Christ and experienced regeneration through reception of the Holy Spirit. The individual, knowing that God has declared him or her righteous through the removal of past sins, fully embraces the responsibility to bring every aspect of his or her life into conformity with God's law of righteousness.

Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 12:13

DOCTRINAL EXPOSITION

The early disciples of Jesus Christ strove to imitate His actions, teachings, and way of life. It was for this reason they were labelled as "Christians" (i.e., followers of Christ) by nonbelievers to whom the disciples' way of life was obvious (Acts 11:26). During the time of the early New Testament apostolic Church, the term "Christian" was certainly in every way accurate—for the disciples were indeed imitators and followers of the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. But today in the 21st century, the word "Christian" is extremely loosely and inaccurately used, the description being frequently applied to any person or group that simply professes a belief in the person of Christ and acknowledges Him as the Savior. The appellation "Christian" is even applied to all people, irrespective of their religious convictions, who are simply born and reared in a

"Christian" culture. These usages are far from adequate when we consider the original meaning of the term "Christian," which is: "one who actually follows the life and teachings of Christ in detail." Even a cursory examination of our ostensibly Christian culture in general and the many purportedly Christian groups in particular brings out little dependence on the teachings of Jesus Christ and even less resemblance to His actual life.

To be a Christian, a person must have God's Holy Spirit dwelling within him. "Any one who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to Him" (Rom. 8:9). Before one can be baptized and receive this Spirit, he must repent of his sins, express faith in Christ, and then accept Him as his personal Savior. This deep identification with Christ must precede the receipt of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to having the Holy Spirit, one must live and act by the teachings and values of Christ if he is to be considered a Christian. He must live "by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt. 4:4). "He who says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked" (1 Jn. 2:6). The greatest expression of that obedience is a wholehearted demonstration of love toward God and toward neighbor. In this regard, Christ said His disciples would be known by their love, especially for one another (Jn. 13:35; 15:10–17). Ultimately, it is through the Holy Spirit that one can obey God and express love. In turn, God will give His Spirit only to those who are willing to obey Him (Acts 5:32). Therefore, the basic qualities of Christianity go hand in hand with being a true Christian and cannot be separated.

Christianity is a Way of life. It is more than just believing. It is the attitude of mind, which leads an individual to follow God's directives for social conduct and personal behavior. Indeed, before the name "Christian" took over as common terminology, it was their way of life that set Christians apart as different (Acts 9:1–2; 19:9; 24:14).

Christianity revolves around clear, demonstrable

actions that reveal the intents and beliefs of a person trying to live as Jesus lived. Mere belief in a name or title in and by itself, as James points out, is valueless: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder” (Jas. 2:19).

A Christian is one whose whole outlook and frame of mind is in the process of transformation from “carnal” to “spiritual.” When one rises from baptismal waters he becomes a “new man” by taking on a whole new spiritual lifestyle, created after the likeness of God in “true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). Whereas before his conversion he was armed to face life with his own pride, ego, strength, and intellect. But now, the true Christian adds the “whole armor” of God—wearing the girdle of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the shoes of the gospel, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Word of God (Eph. 6:13–17).

These fruits or characteristics of the Holy Spirit become progressively more manifest in the life of a Christian. Hate is replaced by love, anxiety by peace, fearfulness by faith, indulgence by temperance, and pride by meekness. All these and other fruits of the Spirit work together to overshadow the natural, carnal characteristics of adultery, idolatry, strife, envy, wrath, and the many other aspects and variations of human nature.

As the Christian begins to express godly qualities, he grows in the appreciation of their superiority over his own human qualities. From this appreciation grows the goal of expressing more and more of the righteousness of Christ living within him (Gal. 2:20) while he roots out, with God’s help, his own disobedience and self-righteousness. He struggles to move closer to the basic essence of “pure and undefiled” religion: an outgoing concern for others with no thought of recompense for the self; this godly attitude is exemplified in James’ admonition in 1:27: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

The Christian will strive to avoid some of the pitfalls of close human associations. Judging one another (Rom. 14:13), making spiritual comparisons (2 Cor. 10:12), offending those who are weak, gossiping and spreading rumors (Jas. 3); none have any place in true Christianity. On the contrary, each

Christian must do his or her best to “never...put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother” (Rom. 14:13), to compare ourselves only with “the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13), to strengthen those who are weak, and to “bear one another’s burdens” (Gal. 6:2).

Likewise, the Christian will grow in the knowledge of God’s Word and begin to express the wisdom which comes from this knowledge as understood through God’s Spirit. The Spirit of God united with the “spirit of man” within him opens his mind to comprehend godly things (1 Cor. 2:9ff). It gives him understanding and insight and redirects his values and priorities so that God and His knowledge are now first in his life (cf. Prov. 1:7).

Having God and His plan primary in one’s life in no way denigrates the physical cares and requirements of normal living. Quite the contrary, a Christian addresses himself to these things with new understanding of their place in his goal of following God’s way in this present physical life as he strives toward gaining eternal life and entering the God family.

The Christian knows that one who will not provide for his house is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8). Thus, the physical cares of life are no longer an ephemeral end in themselves, but are a means of developing and expressing love through giving. Christians should certainly be the greatest examples of both spiritual and physical success. For a Christian to accomplish less in his physical life than he is able is not only a waste of his own abilities, but also a neglect of his God-given potential.

For most people, completing school and entering the workforce are keys for building a successful life. Additionally, the opportunity to become professionally accomplished and prosperous by the world’s traditional standards—to gain a good reputation in one’s field, a position of responsibility, social recognition, and financial rewards—are not only good but desirable, as long as God and His laws always come first. God wants His children to be successful in all aspects of their physical lives. To develop the full range of our God-given human potential as responsible, mature, effective adults is something all Christians must strive for. Indeed, a successful Christian makes a powerful witness to the practical, efficacious veracity of God’s way of life as revealed in the Bible.

A Christian life is thus in no way passive. It is full

of challenges, both physical and spiritual. It requires great resolve to obey God, to shun both the overt and the subtle evils and influences of human society.

The true follower of Jesus Christ will strive to prove the superiority of a godly way of life through his own example. A Christian does not pursue endless religious bickering and arguments; he does not try to twist arms of people into believing as he does, nor does he try to “convert” them in an antagonistic manner (2 Tim. 2:15–16). He is, however, prepared and happy to answer questions about his beliefs when asked by an interested person. As Peter stated, “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear” (1 Pet. 3:15). A Christian strives to be a “light” to the world by allowing his actions to speak for themselves. It is also the privilege of a Christian to not be silent, but to witness (when appropriate) to those around, of the great things God has done in our lives (Matt. 4:19; John 15:16). He knows that one who tries to love his neighbor as himself will win that neighbor’s love in return and may, according to God’s will, encourage that neighbor toward following Christ as he himself does.

Thus, a Christian has many positive qualities. The most basic summary of these qualities is to say they comprise a life of giving as opposed to getting, of serving others instead of being served, of loving instead of selfishness, and of accomplishing and building instead of tearing down and destroying. It is the way spoken of by Christ in the beatitudes and in the Sermon on the Mount. It is the way naturally produced by the motivation of God’s Holy Spirit. It is the way Jesus lived and acted; and a Christian is one who follows Christ in this way.

But the requirement for a Christian to adhere closely to the principles of Christ does not mean all Christians must be totally identical in personality, personal tastes, or preferences. Quite the opposite is true. God, as the Creator of mankind, was the One who designed the potential for wide differences in human proclivities and personalities, likes and dislikes, and even in our physical and mental makeup. He intended from the beginning that differences in environment and heredity should allow (and even cause) great variety within the human species. And God intends that these differences should be expressed (within certain limits).

We are required to lead a life of personal responsibility and character before God and our fellow man—a life that is pleasing and obedient to our Creator and one that enables the individual to find and reach his greatest personal potential and fulfillment.

God’s great love for man has given man the basic guidelines for a full, abundant physical life and the growth of godly character in every pursuit and activity. These fundamental instructions, as revealed in the Bible, allow for great individual variation so that all can still maintain their own personal identity, preferences, and individuality.

The two overriding principles one should consider in applying God’s law to the everyday cares and pursuits of life involve the continuing and conscious recognition that 1) Christianity is a way of life; and that 2) everything we do as Christians should be done as if under the scrutiny of Christ (Col. 3:17). In different areas of life, these principles take on different meanings.

For example, the Bible clearly recognizes the arts as representing some of the highest expressions of man’s potential. Obviously any art form that encourages the breaking of any of God’s laws is wrong, but beyond this, the Bible makes little distinction as to “right” or “wrong” in art, music, literature, poetry, architecture, etc., other than to emphasize positive purpose in their expression. The application of God’s laws in these areas of artistic expression is more complex today than it was in biblical times. The key principles, applying the fundamental standards of God’s Word, are balance and beauty, elegance and harmony, inspiration and skill, sensitivity and creativity. (Cultural differences may necessitate that certain criteria, “beauty” and “quality,” for example, are subjectively determined. What is beautiful music to one person may be discordant to another, and vice versa. The unifying principle is to be found in an affirmative answer to the question, “Is it edifying to the individual Christian?” As in other matters, each person must use wisdom and discretion based upon these general guidelines and make his own decisions for himself.)

A godly way of life must include the basic aspects of physical health: good nutrition in a balanced diet, proper amounts of exercise and sleep, living in accord with public health ordinances and principles, and taking care to avoid bodily injury. While

eschewing faddism or fanaticism of any kind, the church encourages everyone to eat healthful foods as much as possible and to avoid excessive “junk” foods that can have debilitating physiological effects. In this context, a Christian will avoid the use of tobacco or harmful drugs in any form and drink alcoholic beverages only in moderation. If illness or injury should occur, a Christian has a great advantage over the nonbeliever; he can ask for God’s help in healing, in addition to seeking the most competent medical aid available.

In matters of dress and style, the church teaches and emphasizes the biblical principle of modesty. Balance, good taste, quality, and modesty are stressed in the use of all clothing and bodily decorations such as hairstyles and makeup. How a person looks and what he wears is a personal matter, but an individual should attire himself in such a way as to be presentable to Christ. We are told in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” The church encourages its members to look “normal,” in keeping with the styles and customs of their times and places. Church members should not look overtly different from other people in their immediate surroundings, though they should always be striving to improve themselves, being representatives of God, in all areas of their lives. In all such matters the members are encouraged to avoid extremes and to use common sense. This sound-minded, temperate approach is what a Christian will develop as he grows in God’s Spirit (2 Tim. 1:7; Gal. 5:22–23). The use of balance in these areas is essential, though the Church does not police its members’ personal lives.

In the area of celebration of nonreligious holidays, the Church of God International has never taken any stand against the observance of various and sundry days during the course of each calendar year, whether they are national or personal. In all countries around the world, our members keep non-religious days, which are special to their countries or themselves. For example, the majority of American church members celebrate Thanksgiving Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Memorial Day, Columbus Day, Washington’s Birthday, and the like. Other personal days have long been commonly observed by Church of God members, days such as Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, and wedding anniversaries. These are commonly observed either

through the exchanging of gifts (as in Mother’s and Father’s Days), the celebration over a family meal (as in Thanksgiving), or merely abstaining from work or going on an outing (such as Labor Day, or the Fourth of July, etc.).

The Church of God International, likewise, has no statement of doctrine condemning the common custom of the celebration or the observance of birthdays. The Bible itself keeps careful track of the ages of the patriarchs and of the kings of Israel and Judah (especially at the beginning of their reigns). Levites worked in the service of the tabernacle of the congregation from thirty to fifty years old (Num. 4:23). Our society also requires that we continually list the date of our birth in everything from job applications to the national census.

To some families, the passage of the birthday of a child at age six is quite an important occasion with congratulatory hugs and kisses and the sending of a proud little boy to his first day in grade school. Perhaps, in other families, the event is comparatively unimportant, and there is no special note taken of the passage of any particular year. In all of our memories, it is safe to say that some birthday observances have retained special meaning: perhaps it was a particular plateau of life at which a certain achievement or accomplishment may have been on the horizon, such as entering into teenage or reaching the age of legal responsibility.

Of course, these national or personal holidays should never overshadow the observance of God’s holy days. They are not on a par with, nor should they be elevated to, the importance of the festivals of God, which reveal His plan and thereby convey great spiritual significance.

Taken all together, the Christian life is one of deep religious conviction coupled with vigorous activity, serious accomplishment, sound-minded balance, and common sense. As he applies God’s principles to every facet of his life, the Christian strives to meet the challenges of becoming fully successful while living above reproach before both God and man.

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THE CHRISTIAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

The Christian's relationship with God begins with repentance and faith and is nourished and continually deepened through prayer, Bible study, meditation, fasting, and serving fellow human beings. As we use the tool of communication, a warm personal relationship is established that gives us peace of mind, spiritual confidence, and faith that comes from knowing the Designer, Sustainer, and Ruler of the entire universe.

Matthew 6:5–13; Acts 2:38; Romans 8:15–16; Hebrews 1:1–2; 2:10–18; 1 John 1:3; Daniel 6:10

DOCTRINAL EXPOSITION

Salvation is an individual matter between a person and God. God will grant salvation as an unmerited gift of mercy if the individual has the proper relationship with Him. God will forgive our sins if we, in sincere repentance, ask Him to do so in prayer. God will greatly reward those who diligently study His Word and meditate on His way for the purpose of better serving Him. Thus, it is of profound importance that one attain the deepest and closest possible state of personal fellowship with God.

But the Christian does not merely seek to build and nurture this close relationship between himself and God because he feels forced. Rather, the true Christian finds the developing rapport with his spiritual Father to be a uniquely satisfying and joyous experience that transcends any physical friendship or association. This warm, personal relationship gives the peace of mind, spiritual confidence, and faith that can only come from knowing one really has contact with the Designer, Sustainer, and Ruler of the entire universe.

The intimate relationship a Christian has with his God is that of a family—the affinity is that of a son or daughter with his deeply loving and concerned father. “As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD tenderly sympathizes with those who revere him” (Ps. 103:13, Modern Language Bible). The tie between a Christian and God far transcends the “blood” relationship of physical families—it is the relationship of God's Holy Spirit (1 Jn. 1:3). It is through this spirit that we can have contact with God when even words cannot express our feelings (Rom. 8:26). It is through this spirit we are begotten as God's sons; through it we gain the right to know God, and indeed call Him our “Father” (Rom. 8:15–16); and it is also through God's Holy Spirit we gain brotherhood with Jesus Christ so that He becomes our spiritual elder brother (Heb. 2:11).

As a physical and biological creation, man is constantly in need of food, air, water, and other necessities of life to maintain and strengthen his body. In like manner, the Christian's life as a spirit-begotten son of God also requires proper maintenance. The spirit of God is nurtured and grows within our minds in much the same fashion as our muscles are nurtured and grow within our bodies. Constant, constructive activity of a spiritual nature is essential if a Christian is to thrive and reach his fullest potentialities. Personal and private devotion includes prayer, Bible study, meditation and fasting. These serve to initiate, and then augment and enhance, a person's relationship with God.

Prayer is man's personal communication with God. When one prays, he utters verbally or mentally his praise for God, his thanks for God's blessings, and also his requests from God for himself and for others. Biblical example shows one should maintain close prayerful contact on a daily basis—even several times daily (Dan. 6:10). The Christian's prayers are an offering to God; they are described as incense stored in golden bowls before God's throne (Rev. 5:8). A Christian's prayers are not mere repetitions or imposed or stylized prayers, but rather heartfelt, personal communication with the Creator, analogous to communication with an intimate personal friend. A Christian shares his hopes, dreams, frustrations, needs, and desires with God as he would with a physical father whom he loves and who loves him.

Jesus' instructions in Matthew 6:5–13 are the clearest in the Bible regarding prayer. We are told to

pray to our Father in secret; not to heap up empty phrases; to address God as our Father; to hallow His name; to pray for His Kingdom to come; to ask that His way be followed and His will be done; to thank Him for our sustenance and other blessings; to forgive us for our sins; to help us forgive those who sin against us; to keep us from temptation; and deliver us from Satan; and to help us understand, appreciate, and look forward to the majesty, power, and glory of God.

While no one can dictate the amount of time one should spend in personal prayer, Paul's admonition "be constant in prayer" epitomizes the proper mental attitude for the Christian is to always be close to God. Although praying on one's knees is a common biblical example (Acts 20:36; 21:5), there is no official posture or position of prayer. One can pray at any time, in any place, with any position and for any reason, and know with full assurance God is listening. Of course, the *attitude* of the individual is critical in determining how God reacts to our prayers. On the one hand, God states it is our iniquities and sins that separate us from Him, so that He will neither hear nor answer our prayers (Is. 59:2). On the other hand, when we go to God in faith, with a humble and contrite spirit, He will both hear and spiritually revive us (Is. 57:15).

In order to pray, we must realize Jesus Christ is our Mediator (1 Tim. 2:5), our Intercessor (Rom. 8:34), and our High Priest (Heb. 2:17–18). He sympathizes with our weaknesses and understands our problems, because He was "in all points"—"in every respect" (RSV)—"tempted as we are" (Heb. 4:15). It is only through Jesus Christ and His sacrifice that we can approach God the Father in prayer. This is a remarkable reality, truly an awesome opportunity to literally come into the presence of God and have His full attention, interest, and concern. This is why the veil into the Holy of Holies (where God symbolically dwelled) was ripped apart when Jesus died, as direct access to the Father was suddenly made available for all mankind for the first time (Mt. 27:51; Heb. 9, especially v. 8). But even more than this, our direct contact with God the Father can be *bold* and with *confidence*. Through Jesus Christ our high priest, we can "come boldly before the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:15). Though God is the very Creator of this vast unfathomable universe, He wants us to speak to

Him strongly, directly, honestly, and resolutely. This means that Christians should pray to God with confidence (1 Jn. 5:14), asking Him to forgive them for their sins and to provide them with their spiritual and physical necessities. But we *must ask* in our prayers; we must make the conscious effort; we are part of the process. We must take the active step of aggressively importuning God in faith. As Jesus told His disciples:

"Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.... If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him" (Mt. 7:7, 11).

In the same way that prayer can be defined as communication with God, so can Bible study be defined as God's communication to man through His written Word (Heb. 1:1). The Bible is God's instruction book on how man should live his life. It is also the record of how God has dealt with men and mankind in the past, and how God wants human beings to respond and react to Him. The Bible is the handbook to salvation, the textbook of eternal life. Certainly no Christian could say he knows God if he has not read about God in God's holy Word. He must learn to rightly divide the word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). While the Bible may be and should be studied from different angles and points of view (e.g., in a technical manner to understand doctrine), the most important Bible study for a Christian is to humbly approach God's Word to learn how he can live more perfectly before his Creator. A Christian studies the Bible with the full recognition that God is instructing him to personally apply biblical laws, precepts, principles, and directives in his daily life. A true Christian seeks "training in righteousness," and this can often come about only through correction of error; consequently, the true Christian must search the Bible for God's correction in his life. As Paul wrote to Timothy: "All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Closely related to and practically inseparable from prayer is meditation. Meditation in the Bible is simply concentrated thinking on a spiritual topic. It may include focused attention on a particular bibli-

cal concept or passage in order to probe its deepest message or meaning (Ps. 1:2), or God's wonders and work (Ps. 77:12; 143:5). Meditation can also mean thinking before God, as it were, on a topic about which we need to grow and understand. Similarly, meditation can be any personal thinking with the conscious awareness that God is listening and concerned. Hence, meditation is closely akin to prayer, and often indistinguishable from it. (The original words are often capable of meaning either "pray" or meditate.)

Fasting is illustrated throughout the Bible as a tool by which a Christian can stimulate his personal relationship with God. It is not a means of penance, but rather a type of self-inflicted trial that reminds one of his own humanness and humbleness before his great Creator God. It is by definition a specified period of time in which an individual goes without food (and perhaps without water) in order to remind oneself of his ephemeral, fleeting existence. Fasting forces us to focus full attention on drawing close to God. The examples of fasting in the Bible generally involve grave crises, but fasting was also recognized as a complement to prayer and was used, appropriately, in periodic devotions to God. One should fast occasionally—even when not facing an emergency—as a means of humbling oneself before God and thereby nourishing one's relationship with Him.

Prayer, Bible study, meditation and fasting are not ends in themselves. Rather, they are means through which we gain the spiritual strength and endurance necessary to face the trials and tribulations common to all humanity. The human problems of survival, health, happiness, family, marriage, success, and other such activities of normal life become challenges to the Christian rather than merely tests of endurance. It is through facing and handling personal problems and even tragedies that a Christian builds faith and develops the essential strength of character necessary for salvation. He views life as a training ground where he can develop the positive qualities of love, patience, faith, hope, and the other traits of God's Spirit.

Likewise, the Christian understands the purpose of godly correction and punishment. He knows God's ultimate purpose is to reproduce Himself through man, to elevate man from human nature to God's own nature, from mortality to immortality. He realizes that at times God must correct His chil-

dren to stop them from hurting themselves with evil and direct them into the godly obedience that produces character and happiness. The Christian realizes that all humans at one time or another need God's loving correction, and thus he responds to this correction in his own life with repentance and submission to the laws that are intended for his happiness. God is a loving Father who will, when the occasion arises, correct us—not in anger or out of spite—but rather for our own good.

The twelfth chapter of Hebrews exemplifies God's attitude, His great fatherly love, in correcting His children. We are told "not to regard lightly the discipline of the Lord" (v. 5), because "the Lord disciplines him whom He loves" (v. 6). God is treating us as sons (v. 7), and if He did not correct us, we would be "illegitimate children and not sons" (v. 8). God's motivation in correction is clear: "He disciplines us for *our good, that we may share His holiness*" (v. 10).

In the last half of Matthew 25, Jesus Christ explains how we should be developing a progressively more personal relationship with Him. He told His disciples that when we *serve others*—when we give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, welcome to the stranger, and company to the sick—we are actually serving Jesus Christ Himself.

When we extend ourselves and do good to the least of His brethren, then we are credited as though we had done those same things to Jesus Christ personally. It is a profound point. It shows a Christian's relationship with God must expand beyond internal spiritual thoughts and express itself in an attitude of outgoing concern and compassion for one's fellow man by external physical actions.

Serving human beings is indeed one of the most spiritually penetrating concepts revealed in the Bible. Only by loving one's fellow man can prayer, Bible study, meditation, and fasting have any real meaning.

James put it succinctly: "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead...and I by my works will show you my faith.... You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone" (Jas. 2:17, 18, 24).

It is with this overall understanding of God's ultimate plan deeply embedded in his mind that the Christian, as a truly begotten son, can now actually develop his intimate relationship with his spiritual Father through prayer, Bible study, meditation, fast-

ing, and the full living of the active Christian life.

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THE CHRISTIAN'S RELATIONSHIP WITH FELLOWMAN

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

Just as man has an obligation toward his Creator, he also has responsibilities toward his fellowman. A Christian must love his neighbor as himself, regardless of his neighbor's racial, ethnic, religious or social background; he must be a light to the world by setting a proper example, and must do good toward all men as opportunities arise.

Exodus 20:12–17; Deuteronomy 22:1–4; Matthew 18:15–17; 22:39; 25:34–40; Philippians 2:2–4; Luke 10:29–37; Hebrews 12:14; James 2:8

DOCTRINAL EXPOSITION

Christians do not live in this world by themselves. They are just one segment of humanity, and are surrounded by people of other religions, backgrounds, nationalities and creeds. In fact, all humans must face the reality that they live in a world consisting of other humans of greater or lesser degree, different from themselves. The Christian fully recognizes this reality and strives to live in harmony and peace with all men everywhere.

The apostle Paul set some basic guidelines, instructing a Christian on how he should respond to the world he must live in (i.e., function within the society in which he finds himself) but not be a part of those practices, actions or attitudes that are con-

trary to God's way of life (1 Cor. 5:9–10). John wrote, although Christians must be "in" the world, they are not to be "of" the world. Jesus did not pray that God should take His disciples out of the world, but rather that God should protect them from evil (Jn. 17:15).

Race Relations in the Church

Jesus Himself laid down the highest standard for a human in relation to his fellow man when He described the second most important command: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:39). This love for neighbor must transcend the human barrier of racial, ethnic, and social background. It rises above the human weaknesses of jealousy, envy, hate, and bitterness. It teaches man how to hate the sin (Rom 6:1–2) but have compassion for the sinner, and it must increase to where a man will have love for his enemies even when they are persecuting him (Matt 5:44).

Of course, Christ Himself, who gave His life for all sinners, was the ultimate example of Christianity for all generations and times. Philippians 2 shows He emptied Himself of His power and glory as a member of the Godhead and came to earth, not to be served or waited upon, but as a servant of all mankind. His every action and thought while on earth depicted the epitome of true Christian outgoing concern; this serving attitude is perhaps best illustrated by His willingness to die pitifully on a tree between two criminals. Thus Jesus Himself personified the greatest love a Christian can have for another which, by Jesus' own words, was to lay down one's life for a friend.

Loving one's neighbor means that a Christian must not harbor racial prejudice within his heart. The official doctrine of the Church is discrimination toward persons because of race or ethnic origin is wrong and totally contrary to the teachings of the Bible. Almighty God is the Creator of all the races of mankind. He puts no spiritual distinction between these races (Acts 15:9; Gal. 3:28; etc.). In the Kingdom of God, there will be no racial stigma of any kind. Consequently, the Church of God strives to reflect the coming Kingdom of God in its attitudes toward race at the present time.

God is no respecter of persons; He shows no partiality (Acts 10:34–35; Jas. 2:2). He deals justly with all men. There is no double standard with the

Almighty: "There shall be one law for the native and for the stranger who sojourns among you" (Ex. 12:49; cf. Num. 15:15–16).

How to deal justly and how to love one's neighbor is set forth plainly by Paul in Philippians 2:2–4:

"Complete my joy, by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord, and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit; but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

The giving of esteem, one to another, is a two-way street. To love one's neighbor is to be concerned for his spiritual and physical welfare. To love one's neighbor means to respect him or her, to admire their accomplishments. The point of Philippians 2:2–4 is a Christian must radiate the attitude and actions of unselfish service toward his fellow man. He must esteem his fellow Christians better than himself, because he knows his own weaknesses in contrast to his brother's accomplishments. It is this attitude of love and concern that is imperative if we are to have healthy and proper individual and group relationships.

Ethnic integration of the races is as much a factor of modern western society as was integration of various ethnic groups in the Roman society of the first century. The example of the early history of the New Testament Church was to show no partiality between Jew, Greek, or any other ethnic group (Col. 3:10–11). Women, too, were to be respected as spiritual equals (Gal. 3:26–29).

"Truly I perceive," said the apostle Peter, "that God shows no partiality, but in every nation everyone who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him" (Acts 10:34–35). And again, God has "made no distinction between us and them" (Acts 15:9; Gal. 2:11–16).

While the political situation in some few areas of the world may require a limitation of social integration, this is not a doctrine or overall policy of the Church. In matters of church fellowship and office, there is no discrimination because of racial or ethnic background. Different ethnic groups are free, of course, to preserve their own culture and identity, including having church-sponsored ethnic socials as a Latin dance, German evening, or an ethnic folk night. But the Church does not teach or practice

regular segregation of different ethnic or racial groups in its general services or social and fellowship events. Members are encouraged to get to know everyone in its services. Members are encouraged to get to know all the members of all the groups. Only then can they appreciate the qualities of others and practice love, one to another, which is the central message of the Bible.

In matters of church fellowship and office, there should be no discrimination because of ethnic/racial background. The criteria for baptism are repentance and belief. Ordination to the ministry—at whatever level—is based on those spiritual criteria indicated in the Bible, such as conversion, calling, and service. Ethnic or racial origin is no factor. This is the belief and practice of the Church, and it holds this to be in accord with the Bible and the mind of God.

Over the years, the term "integration" has been tarnished with the corrosive taint of emotionally loaded epithets. *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines "integrate" in the primary sense to mean: "to make whole or complete by adding or bringing together parts...(secondarily) unity."

God has integrated His church to teach us His way of assimilated harmony between peoples. It is this Christian unity, the Christian culture and the mind of Christ, rather than the rigid ideas and entrenched biases of men, which unites rather than separates us and which will determine how "integrated" or fitly framed together we (the Church of God) really are (see 1 Cor. 12:12–27).

Misunderstandings have often arisen from incorrectly interpreting another's thoughts or motives about what is true integration. When the topic of race relations is brought up, many in the white community tend to think immediately of interracial marriage. The black and other minority communities, by contrast, are more concerned about having the same opportunities for education, work, advancement, and economic reward that the average white citizen has, than about interracial marriage or ethnic assimilation.

Minority people perceive their struggle for justice, fair play, and racial equality to be life and death attempts to stay afloat in a competitive society while shooting the rapids of racial prejudice and injustice. Human cultures have their inherent weaknesses. So long as this present evil world stands, there will always be unjust weights and measures—something God Almighty hates (Prov. 20:10).

Church history reveals the attitude of contemporary society has, to one degree or another, always been reflected in religion. But we in the Church of God cannot allow society to determine our racial mores and standards, nor to force us into its mold of racial bigotry and social injustice. Our conduct is rather to be exemplary of the principles set forth in the pages of the Bible. Our unity cannot be artificial, but a clear expression of Christian love.

Race relations in the Church can be termed human relations—the attitude, respect, appreciation, and brotherhood that should be expressed among all races. We are admonished by the Word of God to be willing to lay down our lives for our brethren: not just loving in word or speech, but in deed and in truth. And who are our brethren? Christ clearly answers this for us: “For *whosoever* [regardless of race] does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mt. 12:46–50). God does *not* see as man, nor does He look on the outward appearance.

The integrated Church of God is the herald of God's Kingdom and a new culture, wherein God's perfect government will at once banish racial discrimination, while urging all families of the human race to develop to the fullest of their unique racial and ethnic human potential.

Wise marriages are those that match people suited for each other. Compatibility may be determined by consideration of the many different traits of personality, cultural background, intellect, character, and even physical features. A marriage in which neither partner properly understands the other's language is not likely to be the most fulfilling. The same general considerations come into question when people of two obviously diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds consider marriage. Two people could, hypothetically, be compatible though of diverse racial backgrounds. In actual practice, such differences usually imply other important differences, which will compete with rather than complement each other. Clearly, picking a mate is a very personal and subjective choice and requires patience, prudence, and a variety of considerations that come with maturity, which usually may take time to manifest—that's really at the heart of this subject—when one considers a marriage partner.

The Church cannot and does not forbid people of the *same* race or ethnic background to marry even when unsuited for one another. Likewise, we cannot

and do not forbid people of *different* racial or ethnic backgrounds to marry even though such marriages may face unnecessary societal challenges that unfortunately come from racial or ethnic tensions. The Church simply does not attempt to regulate in these matters of marriage. (And no stigma must ever be attached to children that may result from a mixed union—though in the world they may well face social tensions, struggles, and heartaches.)

There is no limit to what the Holy Spirit can do through the individual that submits to God. God's church is exhorted to break the bonds of prejudice by putting on the “new man” which is renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him: “Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision...bond or free: but Christ is all, and in all” (Col. 3:9–10ff). It is the responsibility of each church member to repent of past wrong attitudes toward those of other race or ethnic groups. We are all one in Christ and must have that Christian love for all, which only God's Spirit makes possible.

Christian Responsibility in the Community

A Christian must set an example in all areas of life. He is not blind to the evils of this society. He sees the vast majority of nations and individuals are living and acting in opposition to God's perfect law. The effects of crime, pollution, and immorality are all obvious—the poor are oppressed, wars are waged, hatred between peoples flourishes. But a Christian must differentiate between sin and the sinner, between evil and the evildoer.

The proper attitude for a Christian is to hate the deeds of the evildoer, but to retain love for the individual. Jesus set a perfect example in this regard by deprecating sin and by giving His life for all sinners at the same time (Jn. 3:16). This love for the evildoer is not a self-righteous or condescending attitude, but rather distinctly *compassionate* for the one who is essentially ignorant of his own spiritual blindness. Indeed, every Christian himself was and is part of this society and has been, and unfortunately all too often still is, a partaker of its sins.

But to condemn everything the world has ever done as “evil” would be short-sighted in the extreme, and would broadcast one's ignorance of the vast advances mankind has made in the areas of science and technology, medicine, art and literature,

and also the good millions have done through charity. Nevertheless, Christians are admonished to avoid “worldliness.” “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world...For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world” (1 Jn. 2:15–16). Worldliness is partaking of the norms of society (vanity, false pride, greed, envy, lust, strife) instead of the godly values of love, concern, giving, and helping one’s neighbor. A Christian should avoid those activities and attitudes of mind, which oppose God’s law in its letter and in its intent.

The Church places great stress upon the need for Christians to serve their fellow man: “...by love serve one another. For all the law is fulfilled in one word...love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal. 5:13–14). The obligation for us to “look on the needs of others” (Phil. 2:4) extends beyond the family and the Church to embrace all of one’s neighbors—indeed humanity as a whole, who do not as yet have the blessing of knowing God’s truth. Christians should “always seek to do good to one another and to *all*” (1 Thess. 5:15), and be zealous for good deeds” (Tit. 2:14). A Christian is thus ultimately known by what he *does*, and not alone for what he professes. “Pure religion,” as defined in James 1:27, “is to visit the fatherless and widows.” Caring for the needy, or neglecting to, is tantamount to doing the same to Christ, according to Jesus’ own words (Mt. 25:31–46). The church acknowledges the need to serve one’s fellow man should be filled both by the individual himself and by the collective body of believers, the church. All persons need to be “rich in good works, ready to distribute” (1 Tim. 6:18) in their own private lives.

One outstanding example is that of the “good” Samaritan in Luke 10:29–37. This story was used by Christ to expound the second great commandment and define “who is my neighbor”; thus, the Christian learns whom he should serve. Jesus’ point is anyone in need is our neighbor, and believers have a duty to help others in such spontaneous one-on-one situations. We are encouraged by God’s Word to earn extra money for the sole purpose “that he may have to give to him that needeth” (Eph. 4:28). Likewise, those employed in certain service-oriented positions in society should use their individual opportunity to exert extra effort to improve the welfare of their fellow citizens within and with-

out the Church of God.

Jesus told His disciples—and by direct extension He is telling all Christians—“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:14–16). What “good works” is Jesus referring to? It cannot be the “good works” of prayer, Bible study, fasting, etc.—these must be done in private and not before men (Matt. 6:1–2). Obviously, the “good works” that Christians can do that non-Christians will praise must reflect a genuine, unfeigned *outgoing concern* for other people (Matthew 25:34–46).

The Church as a whole has an affirmative biblical responsibility to serve the nonbeliever by demonstrating its collective *outgoing concern* for the surrounding community. Since the Church is a body with “many members,” it develops the strength from those members to accomplish with an integrated, organized structure much more good for society and civilization than could its individual members accomplish by themselves.

The local church congregation, as the microcosm of the whole Church of God in the local community, should extend itself in whatever way will best serve its neighbor such as through programs to help the elderly, the sick, and the blind. Such activities may vary from two church members simply volunteering their time to major church-sponsored events. During time of disaster, emergency, or other special need, the membership should be willing to help with whatever physical and spiritual needs are made manifest. Each congregation should strive to establish itself as a respected, *giving* part of the community, whose every motive and action is that of helping, serving, and encouraging—in every way setting a positive example of the true Christian way of life. The Church strives to carry out the apostle Paul’s admonition: “As we therefore have opportunity, let us do good to *all* men” (Gal. 6:10).

A Christian is also aware of his civic responsibilities and privileges. Paul wrote that Christians should be subject to the constituted human authorities. This included paying taxes and rendering due respect to the symbols of that authority (Rom. 13:1ff). Jesus Himself paid a tax, which He legitimately could have avoided (Matt. 17:24–27).

Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem because of the edict of the Roman emperor. The New Testament is filled with such examples of complying with government legislation and national custom where they did not conflict with God's laws. Church of God members have always shown patriotism by saluting the flag and singing the national anthem of their own country.

In some countries, voting is put on a par with other governmental requirements. The New Testament no more prohibits voting than it does paying taxes. The Church does not attempt to legislate in the matter of voter registration or voting in local, regional, or national elections—this is left up to the individual member as they determine what is right for their conscience (Romans 14:23).

The Church as an organization does not enter into this world's political affairs. It does not support any political party, nor attempt to influence its members to support or not support any issue or person. Of course, the Church's *values* are well known in the community, and its very existence should therefore strengthen the support for moral decency, obedience to the constituted authorities, and civic pride.

The Church continues to stress the transient nature of earthbound political institutions. The Kingdom of God is not going to be voted in by men, but forcibly established by Jesus Christ. When the time comes, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of the Lord, and of His Christ; and He shall reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). This is the ultimate goal of the Christian—to be a part of that kingdom—and it is toward that eternal kingdom that he should expend his greatest efforts.

Jesus Christ said, "My kingdom is not of this world." The kingdom a Christian looks and longs for is an eternal kingdom or government, not a temporal, physical, human one. Yet when Jesus said His disciples are not *of* this world, He also recognized that all Christians are citizens of one of the many countries in the world. Neither does this negate the principle of having our "citizenship [state or country]...in heaven" (Phil. 3:20, NIV). The apostle Paul, who wrote the preceding statement about our true citizenship, was himself a physical Roman citizen (Acts 22:25–28).

Another area of civic concern is that of holding public office and serving on juries. The church in no way prohibits its members from such activities, and

indeed the community would be well served by having true Christians fulfilling these functions. There are cautions here; Christians may find making certain judgments and rendering specific decisions difficult, because the laws of God can conflict with the laws of men, and their primary responsibility must be, to the former. Also, one who may serve (or wish to serve) in an elected governmental capacity must not get involved with unchristian practices commonly associated with politics. No Christian should ever consciously compromise his inviolate values of love for God, fidelity to God's law, and love for one's neighbor equal to himself. Nonetheless, the biblical examples of Joseph ruling Egypt and Daniel ruling Babylon are powerful statements about the capacity and opportunity of a true servant of God to serve (albeit rarely) in responsible governmental positions, even though their governments were still of this world.

Associated with jury duty is the question of whether a Christian should seek legal redress through the legal system. First Corinthians 6:1–9 categorically states that a Christian should not go to court against a fellow Christian. It says to do so is a "shame" (v. 5) and the one who does so has "[done] wrong" (1 Cor. 6:8). Matthew 18:15–20 adds that a Christian who feels he has been wronged by his brother should approach that brother personally to resolve the problem. If the brother will not hear, he should take one or two witnesses and approach the man again. If he will still not respond, the injured party should take the matter to the officials of the Church where a judgment can be made. (There are, of course, areas over which the civil authorities have total authority, i.e., the legal granting of divorce; in such cases, the civil courts must be resorted to, but only after all Christian duties toward a brother or a sister have been fulfilled.)

The question of whether a Christian should take a non-Christian to court is more complex. Obviously, a Christian should still use the same basic approach outlined in Matthew 18—first trying to resolve the issue between him and the offending party. However, it is equally obvious a non-Christian will not necessarily abide by, or submit to, the authority of the Christian's Church. This means if a matter is still unresolved, a Christian may take a legal dispute to the recognized civil authorities (to whose authority the non-Christian will, of course, have to submit). The question of whether a Christian *should*

take one to court under these circumstances must be an individual decision, based upon a balance between the principles of Christian forgiveness and the man's responsibility to maintain his own integrity and rights before the laws of God and of man. But understandably, justice is the right of all individuals, and holding someone accountable for an injustice they have committed is not inappropriate—but keep in mind, God is holding us accountable.

Questions also arise about a Christian's responsibility toward military service. The Church of God International recognizes the paradox involved with the desire of a Christian to be anti-war, and yet the recognition that there is a time to fight. Clearly, *human* warfare, and the attitudes behind it, is often the exact opposite of God's law and the Christian way of life (Jas. 4:1–2). Yet Jesus (Luke 3:14) did not instruct the soldiers to change their vocation. Peter (Acts 10:22, 44) saw the Holy Spirit come upon a Centurion who was devout, and had a good reputation among the Jews. Paul also recognizes the lawful authority (from God) for rulers and countries to deal with evil (Rom 13:4). Rather than a blanket statement on military service, the Church recognizes some choices are “decisions of conscience,” as Paul explores in Romans 14, where he speaks of different beliefs Christians might have, about subjects ranging from vegetarianism, abstaining from alcohol, and opting to keep special observances. Our ministry can offer scriptural counsel to help members decide a proper course in their lives regarding military service, with the understanding that the choices might be different, for different individuals, based upon factors including their personal convictions. Paul acknowledges this conviction of conscience when instructing “Let each be fully convinced in his own mind” (Rom 14:5) while also cautioning us to not judge our brother in these matters of conscience (Rom 14:10). Whether deciding to participate in military service or not, a Christian certainly has feelings of loyalty to his country, and the desire to take part in positive Christian service for his country. In all things, a Christian's first loyalty is to God (Acts 5:29).

In summary, we as Christians and brothers of Christ must follow His example of genuine outgoing concern for our neighbor in our thoughts, actions, and attitudes. This love for our fellow human being is far from being merely an emotional

feeling in our hearts, but it is the very real act of living as servants by following the examples of Jesus Himself.

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THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

The marriage relationship is the basis of the family, which in turn is core to a stable society. As the primary physical analogy of God's plan for mankind, marriage, child rearing, and the family are given preeminence in the teachings of the Bible and Church. Although roles are distinctly defined, potentially, men and women are spiritually equal before God.

Exodus 20:12; Malachi 4:5–6; Ephesians 5:22–29; 6:1–3; 1 Timothy 5:8; 1 Peter 3:7

DOCTRINAL EXPOSITION

The church believes and strongly teaches that marriage, which is a covenant between one man and one woman, is of divine origin and is a sacred institution. Marriage and the family picture the family relationship of God. God is revealed as a family composed of two persons—Father and Son—which is now reproducing itself through mankind by the addition of sons and daughters. In like manner, mankind physically demonstrates this God-plane relationship through marriage. Man, like God, can build a family and add to it while experiencing the joys and happiness that family life produces. Paul refers to this analogy between marriage and the

family and God's purpose and plan of reproducing Himself through Christ and the Church as "a great mystery" (Eph. 5:32)—Why? Because it reveals the very purpose for which God created mankind.

True happiness and personal fulfillment for both sexes can result from a proper understanding and application of God's instructions concerning the roles of men and women. All people—regardless of race, nationality, social status, or sex have the same ultimate goal and are spiritually equal before God. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). God's purpose of reproducing Himself through mankind clearly applies to both male and female, because all shall be "sons and daughters" of God (2 Cor. 6:18).

When it comes to the marriage and family relationships, however, both male and female have certain roles and responsibilities that are not interchangeable. In procreation the male and female roles cannot be switched. In less mechanized and specialized societies the strength of the male makes him better suited for hunting and defending the community, while the activities for which the female is most suited tend to center around the home and children. The children take their place in the family and community as they mature. It is not a question of superiority or inferiority but of contributing to the common goal in the way each is most able.

The modern family also requires each of its members to fulfill a certain role, whether that of husband, wife, or child. Someone has to have the final say when a decision is required. On the other hand, the sharing of responsibility based on physical strength is no longer so essential in most modern societies. Natural intelligence is equally distributed between husbands and wives. Therefore, the wife should contribute fully to any decision even though the husband is the one who bears final responsibility (Col. 3:18; 1 Pet. 3:1–7).

Furthermore, just as the husband has the final responsibility for family decisions, he must also shoulder the task of seeing to their needs. He is a leader, not a taskmaster; a father and husband, not a boss; one who looks out for the welfare of his entire family and puts them before him. He should be respected because he has earned respect. The wife and children should be willing to submit to his decisions because he has demonstrated wisdom and

sound judgment and has taken their desires and suggestions into account. The wife is content to have her own desires overruled on occasion because she knows her husband will give preference to her judgment when it is clearly correct. The husband should be the leader of the family, showing the same love and respect for his wife as Christ shows for the Church. A husband is instructed to love his wife as Christ loves the Church—that is, to be willing to sacrifice himself for her in every way, for her benefit (Eph. 5:25). This basic principle can be expanded by analogy and comparison with Jesus' life and death for humanity to every conceivable aspect and area of life. Women are instructed to "be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church.... As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands (Eph. 5:22–24). Paul then follows this admonition to wives with an equally strong admonition to husbands that they must love their wives just as much as they love their own bodies (Eph. 5:28); to indeed nourish and cherish their wives (v. 29). Husbands and wives are therefore to be joined to each other as "one flesh" (Eph. 5:31, quoting Gen. 2:24). It is interesting to note how much the Bible is ahead of its time in championing and upholding the equal position of women in marriage and society.

The very analogy of God's Church as the "mother" of Christians illustrates that from God's point of view both father and mother have specific roles. Both are absolutely essential. The spiritual responsibility of the church to nurture, protect, care for, instruct and even discipline God's spiritual children is analogous to the wife's responsibilities to nurture, care for, instruct and discipline the family's offspring. This, of course, no more negates or diminishes the husband's responsibilities in such matters than it does God's responsibility as a spiritual Father toward His children. In addition, the Bible describes a fundamental responsibility of a wife is to sustain the home environment ("keepers at home," Titus 2:5 KJV, "domestic," RSV).

But Proverbs 31 reveals that a woman's area of responsibility and opportunity is far broader than those who might interpret "domestic" responsibilities as only scrubbing floors and cleaning bathrooms. Instead, the ideal wife is pictured as one who has creatively developed her talents and interests. She is fully trustworthy, skilled with her hands,

hard working and industrious, intellectually stimulated, wise, and kind. She has a keen sense of financial risk and responsibility (Prov. 31:16), has sharp business acumen (v. 18, 24), and is a competent administrator (v. 15). Such a woman is depicted as being “far more precious than jewels” (Pro. 31:10). (Once again, this passage reveals the presence of biblical superiority over other ancient literature in promulgating an expanded role for women, thus foreshadowing and anticipating our modern era.)

Even in contemporary society, it is still mutually advantageous (in addition to being biblically proper) for the wife to maintain and build the domestic area while the husband maintains a job or business. But at times, such as when the husband is unemployed or pursuing an education, it may be necessary to share or exchange certain duties, which would usually be done by the other partner. The important thing is that family activities be conducted in mutual love with respect and appreciation for the needs and wishes of the other (Eph. 3:21–33), and in accordance with the basic biblical principles. Many wives are completely fulfilled in caring for their homes and children. Those who have adequately fulfilled their domestic responsibilities (e.g., whose children are grown or in school) and who feel the need for further self-expression should be given the opportunity to the extent their family situation allows. Improper suppression of any human’s potential—male or female—is both physically unwise and spiritually contrary to the plan of God.

The Bible also teaches that a healthy and joyous sexual relationship should be present within Christian marriages. God created the sexual differences and attractions between male and female for several reasons. Besides the obvious purpose of procreation, sexual relations within marriage are God-ordained as a means whereby a husband and a wife can express their love for one another (1 Cor. 7:3–5; Heb. 13:4). Any sexual relations other than with one’s marriage partner (such as premarital intercourse, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, etc.) are condemned in God’s Word.

Within marriage the bed should be “undefiled,” meaning not corrupted by adultery or immorality (Heb. 13:4, RSV). Aside from the common-sense instruction that couples should abstain from sex when fasting (1 Cor. 7:5), or during a woman’s menstrual period (Lev. 18:19), the Bible—and

hence the Church—has no proscriptions against specific acts of sexual relations except to teach that they must express mutual love, concern, and be consistent with basic biblical principles. (Sodomasochism, for example, would be clearly contrary to such principles.)

The Church recognizes that even as God determines how large His family will become, a couple has the right to mutually agree upon, and to determine, the size of their family. Unlike the doctrine of some churches, the Church of God International does not see scriptural support for doctrines against using birth control. The Church promotes the sanctity of life, and so it’s suggested members seek to counsel with proper medical authorities to select suitable prenatal birth control methods—not “morning after pills.”

Because of the sanctity of marriage, the Church of God strongly discourages divorce among its members. As a last resort, there are only *three scriptural reasons* why church members may divorce—with subsequent rights to remarry.

(1) *Fraud*: This amounts to an annulment, though divorce is usually required to terminate the marriage. The marriage covenant was made under a false pretence. One party later finds out he or she has been defrauded and decides to take action (Deut. 22:13–21). (The spirit of this scripture may be applied to a variety of fraudulent acts besides the pretext of virginity.)

(2) *Illicit Sexual Activity*: In Matthew 5:32 and 19:9, Jesus Christ states, “whoever divorces his wife, *except for unchastity [porneia]* and marries another, commits adultery.” The Greek word *porneia* includes fornication, adultery, harlotry, homosexuality, etc.; it is best-translated “unchastity” as in the RSV. When *porneia* has been committed, the offended party may break the marital bond (Deut. 24:4; Mt. 5:31–32; 19:9). However, a Christian should surely be counseled to explore what possibilities there are to be *forgiving* towards their mate.

(3) *Desertion*: If one member of a marriage is or becomes an “unbeliever,” and deserts his or her mate—not being “pleased to dwell” with her or him—the offended party is freed from obligation. He or she may formalize the separation and any subsequent divorce gives the right to remarry since “in such a case the brother or sister is not bound” (1 Cor. 7:15).

If no adequate scriptural grounds for divorce are present, the Church strongly recommends the couple not divorce though they may choose to live separately. If they do divorce, they should not remarry (Mt. 5:32; Lk. 16:18). Reconciliation should be achieved as soon as possible. If this is not possible, they should remain single. If adequate biblical grounds for divorce are present, the couple may divorce if they have first exhausted all other attempts to resolve their differences.

While the Church allows its members to divorce and remarry under the above biblical conditions, it does not generally recommend it. God says He hates divorce (Mal. 2:16), and that should be the attitude of the Church, its ministry, and each of its members. The Church insists every possible effort be made to *reconcile* offended parties. *Forgiveness* is an intrinsic part of the Christian character (Mt. 6:14–15) and must be given a prominent role in possibly resolving marital problems. The Church lends its counseling services to aid in achieving such reconciliations.

Effective child rearing is also basic to the building of a strong and healthy family unit. It is as important as marriage in portraying the plan of God in that the relationship between parent and child is the physical type of the spiritual relationship between God and man.

As in other areas of the Christian life, God's Word allows great latitude in the rearing of one's children within the general biblical guidelines. Of course, it is self-evident that a father and mother must clothe, feed, and shelter their youngsters as best they can within their means. For a parent to ignore these basic responsibilities is, in God's sight, to be "worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim. 5:8). But the principles of proper child rearing must be far more inclusive than the basic necessities of life.

The Bible's primary admonition is for parents to show deep love and manifest real affection toward their progeny, just as God does for us. This love will take many forms: protection from harm, instruction, encouragement, respect, participation in family activities, and balanced correction when necessary. The Church especially stresses the need for parents to express their love for their children in both work and play. Likewise, great emphasis is placed upon the need for parents and children to communicate and show genuine interest in each other by active listening. To this end the Church encourages its

members to set aside at least one day a week for a "family night" of planned activities and recreation together.

Parents have a responsibility to provide moral and spiritual guidance for their children and to establish values consistent with the goals of Christianity, through their example as well as by formal religious instruction. The establishment and nurturing of true values and moral behavior will at times necessitate moderate disciplinary measures, such as removal of privileges ("grounding," "time out," etc.), for wrong-doing. All such punishment is done in *love* only (never in uncontrolled anger), is always reasonable, consistent, and *never* injurious to the child emotionally or physically.

The proper balance in discipline of one's children is important to achieve. Two scriptures that help define the boundaries of such balance are Proverbs 13:24 and Ephesians 6:4. In the former, parents are instructed, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him"; in the latter, parents are cautioned never to "provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord." Thus parents are entrusted by God to generate and nurture physical, mental, moral, and spiritual growth in the children that He grants to their care.

Likewise, children have responsibilities toward their parents. While it is true that the obligation is first the parents are to properly rear their child, it is also true the child is responsible for his own actions after a certain age. A child is required by God to positively respond to his parents. He must love, respect, honor, and obey his genitors and guardians. In so doing, he will contribute to harmony within the home and receive for himself the blessings of obedience. Indeed, the fifth commandment, "Honor your father and your mother," is called "the first commandment with a promise" since God states that as a result of obedience, "it may be well with you and...you may live long on the earth" (Eph. 6:2–3).

Although the building of a family is and can be a training ground for learning important spiritual lessons, God in no way commands everyone to marry. On the contrary, the apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 7:25–40 that at various times and for various reasons some may find it better not to marry. Indeed, these verses indicate some unmarried persons may find a better opportunity to serve

the Church physically and spiritually because of greater amounts of available time and fewer personal cares and concerns. Neither the married nor the unmarried state has any inherent spiritual superiority over the other, however. Everyone should evaluate his own circumstances and make his own decision in this very private and personal matter.

God is working out a great purpose here below. He has given men and women great latitude of roles

and responsibilities within certain basic guidelines so they may reach their ultimate physical and spiritual potential.

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