Why Can't We Unify the Church?

By Norman Edwards, December 2018

Recently, I received an email from a minister in a Church of God group who specifically "proposed we begin discussions on how we can unify the church". There are many other brethren asking the same or similar questions right now. I have received hundreds of letters like that over the past 25 years.

The question sounds honest and fair. Wouldn't it be good if we unified the church? There are hundreds of Church of God splinter groups and more appearing all of the time. Most of them are getting smaller as the years go on. It is natural to think: what can we do to reverse this trend? How can we help churches to become larger, more powerful, more effective? Couldn't we make many more new converts that way? Wouldn't our children be more likely to continue attending?

I believe the Scriptures show us exactly how we can unify the Church, but the answer might be different than you would expect. I hope you will listen to the article to its conclusion.

A great man worries about the Work.

Jesus said John the Baptist was the greatest man thus far (Matthew 11:11). There was a time when John was baptizing more people than all of Jesus disciples (John 4:1-2). John had divine revelation that Jesus was the Messiah and would die for the sins of the world (John 1:29-34). He knew that Jesus' work was more important than his and he looked forward to Jesus being in charge (John 3:27-30).

But events did not transpire as John expected—just as God does not always do what we expect. Instead of assisting Jesus to bring in His Kingdom, John was put in prison for saying that Herodias should not have married Herod. It was a tough time for John—almost certainly tougher than what we face.

> *And when John had heard in prison about the works of Christ, he sent two of his disciples and said to Him, "Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things which you hear and see: The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me" (Matthew 11:2–6).*

John, as well as Jesus' disciples, hoped that Jesus would establish the Kingdom of God at that time—which would mean removing the Romans, curtailing the corruption in government and establishing the Law, Prophets and Writings as supreme. But Jesus did not promise any of that to John. Instead, He talked about acts of kindness, love and mercy to those who were struggling. If the great John the Baptist became disheartened by the direction of God's work, it is not surprising that we often have the same struggle?

Jesus told John—and us—not to be offended by the direction His work has taken. Some historians believe that John, son of Zachariah the priest, was the only remaining rightful heir to the Aaronic office of High Priest. If so, it is fitting that he should die childless—because Jesus is now High Priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:20). As it happened, John the Baptist's work came to an end and he was killed by King Herod. Did all of John's disciples become Jesus' disciples? Apparently not. About two decades later, Paul encountered Apollos and other followers who had only received the "Baptism of John" and not the Holy Spirit (Acts 18:24-19:7). Paul had to lay hands on them so they could receive the Spirit. Other secular history finds there were still "disciples of John" for much of the first century.

Similarly, we should not assume that the way we thought God was working was correct. The big Church of God groups said they were preaching the gospel to the world so that the end could come (Matthew 24:14). But the obvious reality is that the massive, worldwide preaching ended decades ago and most of the people who heard it are now dead. We are blessed if we are not offended by what God has done. If it is God who

allowed the big seventh-day church organizations to break up, should we be asking Him to put them back together? Or should we ask Him to show us why and what He wants us to do now?

God moves in the early church – by persecution!

After His resurrection, Jesus' disciples were still hoping He would set up a physical kingdom, taking over the human rulership. Jesus gave His disciples their marching orders.

> *Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, "Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:6–8 NKJV)*

Things went quite well for the believers for the next five chapters in Acts:

- The Holy Spirit came upon them in great power
- The Jewish leaders put the apostles in jail, but God miraculously delivered them—so they were afraid to jail them again.
- Many believers lived together in a Christian community—selling their possessions and sharing what they had with each other. Seven men were appointed to make sure all of the widows were properly cared for.
- God kept corruption out of these communities by causing Ananias and Saphira to die when they lied their secret stash of cash.
- There were numerous healings, attesting that the great power of God was among them.
- Many thousands of people were baptized.

Nevertheless, this big group of believers and all of its powerful works stayed largely in Jerusalem. In Acts 6:11-7:60, persecution arose and Stephen was stoned to death. Then:

> *… At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. … As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Therefore, those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word (Acts 8:1, 3-4).*

It was not easy to leave the comfort of their big church communities to venture out to preach the Gospel elsewhere. Nevertheless, Christ gave them that mission. They made no coordinated plan to take the Gospel outside Jerusalem; they went as refugees. Only the Apostles, with their divine "prison proof" protection (Acts 5:17-25), remained there.

These early church members did not give up on God in disaster, they took the Gospel message with them as they fled. Like us, they were separated from their former big groups and apostolic leaders. But these "average believers" did smaller works all over the world. Acts 6 names seven believers who were assigned to "wait on tables"—serve the widows in the Church. Many of our readers have cooked food, served widows and helped the poor. Is it possible that God has something else in mind for you? One of those "table waiters" was Stephen, a man God used to do many miracles and powerfully lecture the national leaders. Another waiter was Philip:

> *Then Philip went down to the city of Samaria and preached Christ to them. And the multitudes with one accord heeded the things spoken by Philip, hearing and seeing the miracles which he did. For unclean spirits, crying with a loud voice, came out of many who were possessed; and many who were paralyzed and lame were healed. And there was great joy in that city (Acts 8:5–8).*

Throughout the Roman Empire the Word of God—the Old Testament—could be heard in the synagogues of almost every city (Acts 15:21). The worshippers there needed to hear the message that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah who fulfilled those Scriptures—that salvation was available by repentance and faith in His blood for the forgiveness of sins. They needed the Holy Spirit to live Christ-like lives. The Christians brought that message to the people who needed it. It was a message of love and healing, building on their Old Testament truth combined with the love of Christ in their hearts—bringing people to their ultimate potential as children of God in Christ. The disciples did not go out and build new church buildings; they went to the synagogues and market places where the people were already gathered. At times they had to contradict demonic adversaries or false traditions, but most of their message was positive and loving.

Today, the situation is in some ways similar, but some ways different. We, in the church of God groups, have been sent out of the big churches where we were once comfortable. The apostles faced the world that knew the Old Testament, but lacked the New Testament—it had not yet been written. Today, it is almost the opposite. Nearly all people identifying as "Christian" have knowledge of salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection. Beyond that, it is a mixture of truth, tradition and trouble. Many church organizations operate more like political parties than the Body of Christ. Mainstream Christianity desperately needs people who have read all the Scriptures, who have read and lived the truths that Jesus' practiced. Many former Church of God members have this **spiritual gift of knowledge**—and they need to be sharing it.

We have moved others—with some effectiveness!

This writer, who occasionally reads a great variety of doctrinal statements on the Internet, has begun to see a certain amount of change over the past 20 years. I think these things are partly a result of long-time CoG teachings and our intermingling with other Bible-believing groups. Here are some of those changes:

- "Go to church on Sunday" has sometimes changed to "go to church once per week". Big churches now often have Saturday services. Yes, Saturday services are usually considered a matter of convenience, but this writer has found members and ministers in those groups who attend on Saturday because they believe it is a Bible teaching.
- Churches once commonly required believers to accept a "Trinity" of co-equal God persons, but some statements have changed to something like "God the Father, Christ the Son and the indwelling Holy Spirit"—terminology acceptable to nearly all Bible believers.
- Many churches now teach against Halloween and offer an unrelated church event on that day to keep their members away from its influence.
- Numerous non-CoG churches now have some kind of observance of the Feast of Tabernacles and the other fall Feast Days.
- Some churches have made great efforts to remove Santa Claus, mistletoe, and all the other non-biblical elements from their celebration of Jesus' birth.
- A very prominent Christian evangelist said on live TV that most Christmas traditions are pagan, but we observe Christmas anyway, because it is many people's main contact with Christ and the Bible.
- "Sinners will suffer eternity in hell" has sometimes changed to "God will judge all men fairly".
- "We will go to heaven" occasionally gives way to "we will reign with Christ at his coming".
- Adult/teen baptism by immersion, rather than infant sprinkling, is now very common.
- Choosing not to eat unclean animals has been accepted as an individual's choice in following the Scripture—not condemned as "trying to obtain salvation by works".

I hope nobody is upset that mainstream churches are taking "our doctrines". They are not ours, they are God's. The older, big churches denominations are declining in size around the world. They are often stuck with doctrinal statements that are hundreds of years old. Their colleges teach them and any effort to change

them might result in some ministers and or members becoming upset and leaving—so the old doctrines stay. This is little different than our own experience with doctrinal changes in the Church of God groups.

Non-denominational, non-sectarian Christian congregations are growing the most rapidly. They do not have decades of tradition to satisfy, so they can embrace biblical doctrines that are not historically taught. Most of their members are new to Christianity and are more likely to accept teaching found in the Bible than they are from "traditional Christianity".

Is this what we want to happen? Do we want other church groups to grow large, incorporating some of the biblical truths we have understood for years, while Church of God groups remain small and scattered with few new members? Should they be following us, since we were the source of these truths?

Or is it possible that the Church of God groups have the gift of knowledge but are lacking in other things? Is it possible that we have too much pride and think too highly of ourselves? Is it possible that is why, in simplistic terms, God is bringing our doctrines to them rather than their people to us? Does the Bible tell us how to treat other groups claiming to follow Christ but who are not working with us? Yes!

Jesus tells us how to treat groups claiming to follow him

This writer has read these verses many times before, but did not realize how they were all related until his recent study in A. T. Robinson's *A Harmony of the Gospels*. A single important teaching of Jesus Christ was described by Matthew, Mark and Luke, each adding specific details. By reading them all together we can recognize the full import of this lesson for Christian leaders. For additional confirmation, *Baker's Harmony of the Gospels* and *A Harmony of the Gospels in Modern English: The Life of Jesus Christ* also place these scriptures at the same time, describing the same event. We start in Luke, the shortest:

> *Then a dispute arose among them as to which of them would be greatest. And Jesus, perceiving the thought of their heart, took a little child and set him by Him, and said to them, "Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me. For he who is least among you all will be great."*
>
> *Now John answered and said, "Master, we saw someone casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow with us."*
>
> *But Jesus said to him, "Do not forbid him, for he who is not against us is on our side" (Luke 9:46–50).*

Christ was teaching disciples vital principles for their ministry work:

1. Disciples should not argue "who is the greatest", Christ will judge that.
2. We need to be more concerned about receiving "children in Jesus name"—both physical children and spiritual "babes in Christ"—than we are about being "the greatest"
3. Another group actually did works in Jesus name. The Bible says "casting out demons", not "trying to cast out demons". By contrast, the Bible records both Jesus' disciples and other groups failing to cast out demons (Matthew 17:15-21; Acts 19:13-16). Dealing with demons is dangerous work and not to be taken lightly. When Jesus was falsely accused of casting out demons by Beelzebub, prince of demons, He warned that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit would not be forgiven in this life or the world to come (Matthew 12:22-32). This unforgiven sin is knowingly claiming that the work of the Holy Spirit is the work of demons. The important point is that neither Jesus nor his disciples claimed these exorcists were ineffective or evil—they just said that they were not following Jesus in their group.
4. We must not disparage works done in Jesus' name even by people who "do not follow with us". If they are not fighting us, Jesus said they are on our side.

More detail is found in Mark's account. Let us read it!

And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you discussing on the way?" But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me."

John said to him, "Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us." But Jesus said, "Do not stop him, for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. For the one who is not against us is for us. For truly, I say to you, whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you belong to Christ will by no means lose his reward.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea. And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire. —

And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell [Greek: Gehenna]. — And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, 'where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' For everyone will be salted with fire. Salt is good, but if the salt has lost its saltiness, how will you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another" (Mark 9:33–50, ESV).

Additional learning from Mark:

5. The disciples knew that Jesus did not want them arguing about who was the greatest. Today, we still know that. Yet we argue among ourselves that our denomination, congregation, doctrine or leader is better than others. If Christ were standing among us right now, we would probably look more to His greatness and be quiet about our own. We just need to be reminded. So, I am putting myself on notice, and sharing with whoever reads this, we do not want to argue which servants of Christ are the greatest.
6. Christ does not simply correct the disciples for their arguing, but expounds His way to be "last and servant of all". If Christ has given us a small work to do—just serving a few poor or struggling people, we are glorifying Him by doing that. So are other groups who appear to be "last and servant of all".
7. Jesus clearly acknowledged other groups would do mighty works in His name and would not speak evil of Him. On the other hand, He also said, "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters" (Luke 11:23), but that is **His judgment to make,** whereas the disciples were told not to judge the worth of other groups or "who was the greatest".
8. People who help true disciples of Christ will receive a reward even for something as simple as giving them a cup of cold water. Who is going to receive these rewards? When and where will they receive them? It is not something we think about much. But Christ will keep His promise, and we should be slow to speak against someone whom Christ will be rewarding.
9. There is a huge "un-reward" or punishment to for those who offend little ones in Christ. The context of this "offense of little ones" is people disparaging other groups or not honoring the work that they have done. We must believe Christ when He says it would be better for us to be drowned or dismembered than to do this. He further states we could be cast into Gehenna, the dump where criminal's bodies were thrown. Without trying to explain exactly what that means, we can conclude it is serious and it is bad. When we or our friends have a major illness, we are greatly concerned and pray and fast for them. We need to do the same when we realize we have offended a "little one".

10. Every believer will "be salted with fire"—have difficult trials. We must not lose our salt: our value, our spiritual gifts, our truth. **We need to live at peace with other groups, being careful not to offend "little ones".**

Mark's conclusion of Jesus teaching, above, is the same as Matthew's, below. But Matthew gives us so much more vital teaching that is not covered in any other Gospel. We will study it in three segments:

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.

"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!

"If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.

"Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.

"What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish (Matthew 18:1–14).

While covering much of the same material, Matthew gives us these additional details.

11. We not only need to receive children—little ones in the faith—but need to become humble like children in dealing with others claiming to follow Christ—whether they are in our group or not.
12. Jesus clearly knew that a lot of people would offend each other in the process of proclaiming Christ to the world. Indeed, when this writer ministered to hundreds of homeless people, he often asked why they did not go to church or read the Bible. The most common answer was mistreatment by or difficulties between people who claimed to be Christian. We do not want our arguments with other Christians to be a "little one's" introduction to Christianity. But I think I have done that at times. I think others have, too.
13. "Little ones" have angels in heaven that plead their case before God. We do not think about this very often either. This verse and Acts 12:11 seem to indicate that people have angels personally assigned to them. Jesus has gone to a great effort to explain the consequences of offending little ones when church leaders debate "who is the greatest" or disparage other groups who are not "following them".
14. Jesus gave the famous 99 and one sheep parable here. He also used it in Luke 15:1-7 to answer the Pharisees and scribes' murmurings about His eating with sinners. But here it is directed at Jesus disciples, in the hope that they, **and we**, would not offend little ones in our dealings with others following Jesus. Also, Jesus hopes that we would seek after those which are lost—just like He would.

It is in this context of not offending little ones that Jesus gave His famous teaching on dispute resolution:

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.

"Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:15–20).

15. When disciples have disagreements, resolving them alone is the best way not to offend little ones—they never hear the dispute. This is especially true for leaders with doctrinal differences: go to each other, rather than take one's doctrines to "little ones" in an effort to convince them "I am greater than the other leader" and thereby offend them. This writer now realizes that he printed criticisms of other teachers in his past newsletters without making an effort to talk directly to them. Why? I did not think they would talk to me. But if it is not worth trying to talk to a person about a difference, then one should be quiet about it. If the person refused attempts at resolution, then one has Christ's permission to progress further through Matthew 18. (I did use these verses for dealing with individuals many times—and they worked.)
16. So many arguments we make to ourselves, or with one other person, would never stand up to a neutral person's examination. The obvious flaws would come out. With two or three witnesses, arguments can easily be established as to be credible or frivolous. By keeping them confined to a small group of witnesses they will not offend little ones
17. My own experience using this Matthew 18 formula shows disputes rarely reach the "tell it to the church" step. When they do, it is most often because one party refused to cooperate in the first two steps—and will usually refuse step 3, also. But if those rare cases where an issue has been discussed by the parties and then in front of witness, the issues are usually well established and ready for a church—an assembly of believers—to hear them and render a judgment which everyone can accept before God.
18. It is only at this point, when a resolution by the above three steps has failed, that a person has permission to treat someone as like a "heathen and a tax collector", **not before!** After the process is complete, then God promises to take the decision of the church and bind it in heaven. It is a mistake for Christian leaders to pull Matthew 18:18 out of context and think God binds all of their decisions. Church history shows many church decisions do not work out as well as expected—this is probably a major reason why.
19. God promises to take action to back up decisions made by this just process. The "two or three" gathered together in His name is the same number of witnesses that were required above. If there is no congregation available to hear the matter, or if the other party refused to cooperate, the two or three witnesses may make a decision—and Christ will be in the midst of them.

The rest of Matthew 18 continues the same lesson being taught by Christ. After these Scriptures printed here from Matthew, Mark and Luke, all three of the Gospels go on to other subjects.

Then Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment be made. The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, "Master, have patience

with me, and I will pay you all.' Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt.

"But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, 'Pay me what you owe!' So his fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.' And he would not, but went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done. Then his master, after he had called him, said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you begged me. Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?' And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him.

"So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (Matthew 18:21–35).

20. Peter was probably overwhelmed with the difficulty of patiently reconciling and forgiving people that had and could sin against him in the future. He had seen the persecutions against Jesus. He saw people press in so they could get healed. He heard Jesus tell people to be quiet about their healing, only to find they went and told many others who mobbed their ministry. Indeed, it seems difficult that we would even try to go to other people whom we have offended or have them come to us. Do church leaders really need to talk to other church leaders before writing against their doctrine? And how many times does this process need to go on? Peter probably felt generous by offering to forgive seven times. Except for family members, we usually discard a friend who has sinned against us just a few times. But Jesus gives him 490 times—a number too big to effectively keep track of.
21. The final story of the two debtors has a simple but far-reaching lesson: We will be forgiven as we forgive others. This wisdom is in the "Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:13-14) and in Christ's general principle of all personal judgment: "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Matthew 7:1-2). **If we judge others to be unbelievers because of errors they have unknowingly made, will we be judged as unbelievers for errors we unknowingly made?** I hope this does not happen to anybody. But "eternal judgment" is one of the six "elementary principles of Christ" (Hebrews 6:1-2). I think most Church of God brethren and all Christians everywhere need to think of the importance of these things—especially if we want to be effective servants for Christ!

This concludes the combined coverage of Matthew, Mark and Luke on this vital lesson of Jesus. Christ prayed that His followers could be one as the Father and He are one (John 17:11). We do not serve Christ well when we reject others who teach in Jesus' name because of errors that could be resolved with enough time and attention. Even as I write this, it is as if I can hear thousands of voices saying: "Get all the church groups together? That will never happen!" And it will probably not happen among church organizations, each striving to preserve their own doctrines, donations, practices and payroll. But it will happen among individual believers whom He is preparing to reign with Him at His coming (2 Timothy 2:11-12; Ephesians 4:13-16).

Doctrinal terms not in the Bible

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Christians cannot work out their differences unless they agree that the Bible is the source of all truth. Sure, there may be differences of opinion due to literal vs symbolic meaning, interpretation, translation or, rarely, which original language manuscripts are correct. But these issues can be reconciled with communication,

study, humility and prayer for understanding. Sometimes we can agree to disagree on minor issues, knowing that Christ will reveal them eventually while we can agree on the most important issues now.

Unfortunately, some Christian groups accept the words of their hierarchical leaders or church councils as equal to or greater than the Scriptures. It is natural to want to accept the revelations of the leaders or prophets from which one heard the Gospel. Indeed, the Bible teaches that God does make revelations through His servants, the prophets (Amos 3:7; Rev 22:6). But it also teaches that there are many false prophets (Matthew 7:14; 24:11, 24; Acts 13:6; 2 Peter 2:1; 1 John 4:1; Rev 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). This is why we must rely on the Scriptures for "doctrine" and "instruction in righteousness". Whereas, the words of prophets are subject to the judgment of a congregation using the Scripture:

Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge (1 Corinthians 14:29).

As brethren mature in the Spirit and in their reading of the Scriptures, they realize their leaders might have been wrong on some things. Whereas "babes in Christ" might not be responsible for sorting out these things, mature brethren are responsible for judging the prophets—those claiming to speak for God. Indeed, Revelation 2:2 says, "And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars." When we read all Christ's seven letters to seven Churches in Revelation 2-3, we see a lot of errors made by the brethren, but no command to leave the "worst" churches and go to the "best" ones. The brethren are advised to repent where they are—though there are other biblical commands to leave certain false brethren and fellowship. God will work with the mature believer to show him/her whether he/she is to stay in the current environment to help others who look to them as leaders or to move on so their good witness will not be mixed up with the error that characterizes their church group.

This is why we can expect mature believers to be scattered among a variety of church groups, not relying on their church group for doctrine, but the scripture—and willing to learn from and work with believers who may be serving in other groups at the time.

One of the best examples of Christian "doctrinal terms not in the Bile" is the doctrine of the Trinity. There are dozens of slightly different explanations of this doctrine, and a great many so-called "fringe" Christian sects reject it all together. Indeed, the Bible mentions God, the Father; Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit in thousands of places. Yet, there is not one chapter devoted to explaining the relationship between the three. Theological teaching contains main phrases not found in the Bible:

- Trinity, triune, trinitarian, etc.
- Three in one, one in three
- Coequal persons
- Three persons, personhood
- Distinct but without division

Efforts to biblically resolve doctrines based upon the above phrases will go nowhere because the Bible never says either "God is a Trinity" or "God is not a Trinity". The same problem exists for each of the other points, above. The Scripture cautions us against adding to it (Revelation 22:18). **Mankind does not need any better descriptions of God than those already in the Bible**—we simply need to look to the most appropriate Scriptures for whatever question we have at the moment. We should not be surprised that the fullness of God is simply beyond human understanding (Ecclesiastes 8:17; Isaiah 55:9).

Eternal judgment is the process of God, through Christ, judging all men—including believers (Romans 2:16; 14:19; 2 Corinthians 5:10). It is not about man judging God, either now or later. Christian teachers of all groups must stop trying to describe God in "better" terms than the Bible does. He knew what to tell us, and He did! Avoiding new terms and extra-biblical reasoning will lead to peace between believers, a better understanding of the Bible and less criticism of Christianity from unbelievers.

If Church of God groups are to be fair in judgment, then we must judge ourselves with the same judgment we judge others. "For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged" (1 Corinthians 11:31). Have CoG groups used doctrinal terminology that is not found in the Bible? Yes. Fortunately, many groups have dropped this unbiblical terminology during the last few decades. But I have to admit there was a time when I personally believed in the following unbiblical terms and supported their teaching to others:

- The government of God *or* government from the top down
- Man can become God as God is God
- The Church is the Kingdom of God in embryo
- First tithe, second tithe, third tithe
- Second resurrection, third resurrection ("first resurrection" is in the Bible!)

This is not to say that the concepts of all of the above words are wrong. For example, the next person who rises after the "first resurrection" could certainly be said to rise in the "second resurrection". But whether there are two, three or some other number of resurrections is not clearly spelled out in the Bible. Luke 12:41-49 and Revelation 22:11-12 mention four groups of people that will be judged in different ways. When we must teach doctrines with terms and phrases that are not in the Bible, we are probably teaching outside of the scope of the Bible. God does not hold us responsible for knowing or living by what is not there. Teachers are not "more spiritual" if they claim to know truth "beyond the Scripture". Christ would rather see us more fully love Him with all our hearts and our neighbor as ourselves (Matt 22:35-40).

At one time, I fully believed in the concept of the "government of God". One of the larger CoG organizations taught it was God's way of doing His work on earth—that it had always been in existence throughout the Bible and in today's world it was a human hierarchy of individuals, the leaders of which were employees of a certain nonprofit corporation. They said it was my responsiblity, as a Christian, to obey that human hierarchy and trust that if it needed correction, God would correct it "from the top down". When the head of that organization died, new leaders arose that changed many of the former doctrines—including the "government of God". It was at the time that I realized God could not possibly be completely behind two contradictory leaders and teachings, and I began to read the Bible with prayer and earnestness. That was good.

As that time of renewed Bible study began, I realized I had the sin of idolatry—I was letting a man stand in place of God. I needed to trust God and the Bible to show me the way, not simply defer to the "government of God"—a phrase never found in scripture.

Did I do it in ignorance? Yes. Was I still disobeying one of the Ten Commandments? Yes. When we confess our sin, is God faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness? (1 John 1:9). Yes! Does God do that only for Church of God groups? Does He do it for anyone who has repented and trusted Christ for salvation, surrendering his/her life to Him as best as he/she knows how?

Who is a believer?

We all know it is ultimately up to Jesus Christ to decide who is and who is not a believer.

> *But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His* (Romans 8:9).

> *Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:2–3).*

Knowing that even professing Christians sometimes lie about such things, we do not always know who has the Holy Spirit. We still need to make decisions about whom we will consider to be a believer. With whom will we attempt to fellowship? Whom will we allow to fellowship with us? What teachers will we learn

from and which will we recommend to others? Whom will we work together with in ministry? With whom do we want our children to associate? Who shall they marry?

Jesus certainly taught it was possible to claim to worship God while not doing so:

> *"And in vain they worship Me, Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men" (Matthew 15:9).*

> *"And we are His witnesses to these things, and so also is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him" (Acts 5:32).*

Sabbath-observing groups have frequently used these and other scriptures to teach that people who do not obey the ten commandments—especially the Sabbath—cannot receive the Holy Spirit and are therefore not believers. But we should look at the context of these verses. Were they about a doctrinal dispute over a few points? No. Were they about people claiming to be in the Church, but who were not? No! These were disputes between Jesus and the apostles versus Jewish religious leaders who did not believe in salvation through Jesus at all! Jesus and the apostles were doing great healings and casting out demons, showing the power of their obedience to God. The Jewish religious leaders were jealous of these things and wanted to silence or kill them. They were not like Sunday-observers—people ignorantly avoiding a command of God.

The book of James refers to his readers as "brethren" 15 times (James 1:2, 16, 19; 2:1, 5, 14; 3:1, 10, 12; 4:11; 5:7, 9, 10, 12, 19), yet he says to them:

> *Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"? (James 4:1–5).*

James' readers are disobeying the 10 Commandments! But James does not say they are unbelievers nor does he tell the "good people" in the congregations to leave the "bad people". Rather he says this:

> *Therefore, submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded (James 4:7–8).*

A person can be "double-minded"—part following God and part following the ways of the world. The solution is for each person to repent of their sins, not to point fingers at each other's sins. If a person must perfectly obey God to be considered a believer, there are not any believers. Can God impute righteousness to us by faith in spite of our works? Yes! (Romans 4:6, 11) But can He do this for others also? Yes.

The Sabbath was given as a sign of God's people in the Old Testament (Exodus 31:13; Ezekiel 20:12, 20) and it continues in that capacity for the Jewish religion and Christians who understand it. But Jesus, knowing that believers would have trouble keeping all of the Ten Commandments—as they did in the book of James or as we have when we made idols out of our church leaders—gave new methods of determining who belonged to Him:

> *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; **as I have loved you**, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34–35).*

> *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit" (Matthew 7:15–17).*

If a person does not have the love of Christ and does not bear any spiritual fruit, it does not matter how well they observe the ten commandments. **We need to be very careful when we decide who we will treat as an unbeliever—lest we condemn ourselves with our own judgment** (Matthew 7:1-2; 5:7).

The book of James is not alone. The New Testament lists several hundred sins and errors made by people it describes as believers. Yet only a couple dozen Scriptures clearly teach us to treat certain people as unbelievers or stop fellowshipping with them. It is well worth the time to read every one of these verses and its surrounding context. For this article, we have classified them into categories of similar verses and placed them in order of their first occurrence in the Scripture.

Reason to treat people as unbelievers	**Scriptures**
They refuse to resolve a dispute by listening to their brother, two or three witnesses and then a church congregation—or deliberately leave fellowship of true believers.	Matthew 18:17; 1 John 2:18-19
People involved in a large amount of obvious personal sin. (Repentant people should be restored—2 Corinthians 2:5-9)	1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 2 Timothy 3:1-9; 2 Peter 2:2-22; 1 John 5:16-17; Jude 1:3-8
They preach another gospel (Paul defines the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-6).	Galatians 1:6-9
False teachers who teach differently than the Apostles. Today, we do not have the Apostles, but we have their words in Scripture. These heresies were major departures from Scripture.	Galatians 2:4-6, 2 Thessalonians 3:6; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:14-18; Titus 1:10-16; 3 John 1:9-11; Revelation 2:2
People who are deliberately doing evil and intentionally trying to hide it from other believers. Expose them if it is a wise thing to do.	Ephesians 5:6-16
People who blaspheme God.	1 Timothy 1:19-20; 2 Peter 2:12
People who believe or teach doctrines of Satan and his demons.	1 Timothy 4:1-4; Revelation 2:9; 3:9
People who are creating constant friction, upsetting the faith of others and causing division.	1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:14-18; Titus 1:10-16; 3:10-11
People who do not want to work, but simply receive from other brethren or enrich themselves financially.	2 Thessalonians 3:6-8; 1 Timothy 6:3-10; Titus 1:11; 2 Peter 2:3, 14; Jude 1:3-11
People who claim they are perfect	1 John 1:8, 10
People who deny Jesus is the Christ or that Christ came in the flesh.	1 John 2:22-23; 4:2-6; 2 John 1:7-11; Jude 1:3-4

This list of 11 reasons to treat people as unbelievers is small compared to the hundreds of lesser mistakes for which we should go to our brother and help him/her overcome. If we are spiritual, we should take Paul's advice:

> *Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:1–2).*

An Honest look at who had done what…

This section is about good things that have been accomplished in the name of God.

Unfortunately, the many warnings in the previous section were for good reason. Much evil has been done in the name of Christianity—unchristian people have gained control of large organizations and ran them like political entities, getting far away from the gospel message and the love of Christ. We will not be able to figure out exactly who is responsible for what evil and who did the most of it—but we could get a lot of people upset and do a lot of damage to "little ones" in the process.

Let us briefly summarize what has been done that is good.

Church of God groups have provided these things

1. Broadcasts, magazines and booklets in many languages teaching the Bible—both common teachings, and some largely unique to CoG groups:
    a. Christ came once as the humble servant, teacher and savior and will return as King of Kings and Lord of Lords
    b. God has a plan to save those who die in this life without knowing Him.
    c. The Bible teaches an ongoing observance of the Sabbath from creation to the New Testament to today.
    d. The observance of God's Feast days continued from Moses (or before) until today.
    e. Some modern holidays have elements of demonism (Halloween) or other non-Christian religion.
    f. The avoidance of unclean meats was understood by Noah and continues until today.
    g. The Bible continually pictures God as a Father and Son, and Holy Spirit as God's super-power which is used by God and placed in believers in various quantities. The Holy Spirit has the ability to communicate, but does not have a personal name, never has a conversation with the Father or Son and is never seen by anyone as a separate being.
    h. The purpose of mankind is to become Christ-like in our thoughts and actions so that we may reign with Christ at His return and live forever with Him. God intends to share His entire creation with those who are saved.
    i. The governments of this world and the philosophies behind them, no matter how well "respected" they might be, are largely not of God and will end when Christ returns. The nations need national repentance much more than a strong military.
2. Regular Sabbath services all over the world.
3. Feast of Tabernacles sites and Feast Day services all over the world.
4. Children's Bible classes, activities and summer camps.
5. Christian colleges for young people and the training of ministers.
6. An organized, trained ministry spread in congregations all over the world and touring areas without CoG congregations to teach people, pray for them, anoint them for healing, baptize them, etc.

CoG groups and Christianity as a whole have relied on non-Sabbatarians for the following things:

1. Bible original language manuscripts copied through the ages.
2. Bible translation. We use the translations of others. The Wycliffe Associates has already identified every language on earth (even ones on Pacific Islands with only a few hundred speakers) and plans to have a Bible in every language by 2050. Nothing could be more important for spreading the Gospel to the entire world. The only Sabbatarians known to this writer who translated the Bible are Fred Coulter and some "Sacred Names" groups. Yet most Sabbatarians do not quote these translations, but prefer the ones done by Sunday observers.
3. Bible distribution. The Gideons and other Bible societies have printed billions of Bibles and distributed them to the majority of the world.
4. Bible commentaries, concordances and other helps we use all the time.
5. Spiritual songs of inspiration used in church services and by people needing God in their lives.
6. Christian marriage videos, audios, books, seminars, etc.

7. Christian child rearing videos, audios, books, seminars, etc.
8. Women teaching women ministries (Titus 2:3-4).
9. Hospitals, healing ministries, care for the elderly, disabled, children, etc. Many people will choose a "Christian organization" over a secular one when they need care for themselves or loved ones. Even the Federal government has sought out Christian groups when they need foster parents, adoption services, prisoner reentry programs, etc.
10. Extensive scientific research showing the universe and living things have a clear creation—they are not the result of long years of random chance.
11. Ministries helping to deliver people from demons.
12. National laws promoting freedom of religion and some biblical principles of civil government. These we implemented by people who believed the Bible. All we need to appreciate this work is look at nations who do not have such laws, but persecute Christians whenever they desire.

We need to realize that these works are done by people who do not hold CoG doctrines. Much of the Bible translation and concordance work has been honest—those workers did not flagrantly alter the Scriptures or leave entries out of their concordance to help bolster their denomination's doctrines. Sure, sometimes false doctrines show up in Bible commentaries, songs, marriage material, etc. But there is so much good, that they are used and recommended by CoG ministers and members alike. Seventh day groups have some literature on marriage, child rearing, deliverance ministry, etc., but other Christian groups have far more and this writer remembers CoG headquarters ministers recommending them to their members.

Christianity as a whole has been a good witness to the world because non-Sabbatarians have accomplished these things:

1. Basic Christian teaching of repentance, forgiveness and salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ to much of the world. This has delivered millions of people from lying, lust, depression, drugs and untold other sins. Their testimonies are in every Bible believing church, and in tens of thousands of Christian books and websites.
2. Christian missions abroad, caring for people whose governments cannot or will not help.
3. Numerous Christian hospitals throughout the world (though the Seventh Day Adventists have provided excellent hospitals throughout the world).
4. Christian substance abuse recovery programs.
5. Homeless shelters and feeding the poor.
6. Spiritual gifts of healings, miracles, prophecy, speaking in tongues, etc.

We need to ask a serious question: Could the people who did all of the above work have done all of it without the Holy Spirit? When I have asked this question in the past, CoG brethren have been quick to point out places where God uses people to accomplish His work without His Spirit: Adam, Pharaoh, Nebuchadnezzar, Cyrus, Caiaphas the high priest, etc. Indeed, God does work this way. But these men largely managed other unbelievers—the main characters who taught God's ways and set us good examples in both Old and New Testaments were people with the Holy Spirit.

In the lists above, we are not talking about isolated parts of what God has done in the last 2000 years, but the majority of the work of maintaining, distributing and teaching the Scriptures as well as living the examples that Christ said Christians would do. The work done in the last two lists far exceeds that done by Sabbath keepers. If most of what the world understands to be "Christian works" over the past two millennia has actually been done by non-Christians without the Holy Spirit, what does that say about the need for Christians or the Holy Spirit at all?

I am not trying to say that everybody who called themselves a "Christian" has the Holy Spirit and is a Christian. Certainly, throughout history, many people called themselves Christians because they were "born

into it", their friends were doing it or because it helped their business or political plans. But there were others who did bear Christian fruit, even though they did not bear the same fruits that CoG brethren have.

> *"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.*
>
> *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them (Matthew 7:13–20).*

To me, it is a most uncomfortable position to insist that the Church is and always has consisted of only Sabbatarians. Most people who have been Sabbatarians for several decades are all too aware of the sins of our own brethren. We have had to deal with liars, thieves, fornication, adultery, etc. We have had leaders who coveted each other's congregations and who did or taught whatever was necessary to keep their jobs—even when they knew it was wrong. Though we have much true doctrine, we also have false doctrine: Almost every Seventh-day group can point out some doctrinal difference from the other groups—but they cannot all be right.

To a large degree, many of the seventh-day groups and individuals suffer the sin of pride—each thinking too highly of themselves. It is not surprising—even the apostles deliberated "who was the greatest" on multiple occasions. We need to do what they did: Admit it, not deny it, repent of it and go on to produce the fruit that Christ said we should. Christ is waiting for us to pray for love and spiritual gifts so He can fill us with them:

> *But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way (1 Corinthians 12:31)*

The "love chapter" (1 Corinthians 13) immediately follows this verse. The biggest spiritual gift chapters (1 Corinthians 12 & 14) surround the love chapter. Add the other spiritual gifts verses (Romans 12; Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Peter 4:9-11), and one has the recipe for good Christian works that has functioned for thousands of years, no matter which churches or secular governments were in power.

In conclusion: Revisiting the original question

Why can't we unify the church? The initial answer probably should be: Christ is in charge of the church and He is the one to unify it. But beyond that, we need some definition to the words "unify" and "church". Do we really mean this?

> Why can't we [Church of God leaders] unify [bring into one human organization] the Church [CoG members now scattered in hundreds of groups]?

I think this is the question that most Church of God members are really asking. If they all really believed it was God's highest priority for preaching the Gospel, they could do it by using the method for choosing a new apostle in Acts 1:15-26. At that time, the disciples first created some qualifications for a replacement Apostle, and then cast lots to choose between two who were qualified. Today, the leaders of the various splinter groups could agree to meet in a neutral place. There they would put forth qualifications—which would probably include doctrines—that they believe essential to lead a new work. Then every qualified man would put his name on a single token, each person would pray for God's decision to come forth and promise to follow it, the otherwise identical tokens would be shaken in an opaque bottle and one would be poured out. The new leader would begin the task of inspiring the brethren and unifying all of the diverse Church of God groups. He would eliminate many duplicate headquarters buildings, magazines, booklets, broadcasts, local congregations, paid employees, etc. This would result in bigger congregations and millions

of dollars available for preaching the Gospel. Many small ministerial training programs could be shut down and a full four-year college could be opened in their stead!

But I think most Church of God leaders today would have difficulty coming to such a meeting. It would be tough for them to agree to qualifications for a leader that had even one doctrinal belief different than their own. (Have we ever changed our doctrinal beliefs during the time that we considered ourselves to be a Christian?) Those that could agree to a broad set of qualifications for a leader would have trouble merging their organization if the new leader was not themselves or one of their good friends. Can we admit that it would be difficult to give up our present church environment and trust God for an uncertain future?

Yet that is exactly what God did to the Jerusalem church in Acts 8: He allowed it to be persecuted and scattered. I think the reason most church groups would not accept the above unity plan is because they are not sure that God would choose the new leader—that it might just be a random event. And they are probably right—because even though many people pray for it, the events of the last 30 years show us that God is not now making another single big CoG organization. Rather, He is continuing to let it divide.

This writer worked at a large worldwide CoG headquarters in the 1980s and 1990s and has personal knowledge of efforts by leaders there to gradually change the doctrines of that group so that numerous smaller split offs would occur, rather than a single large split that might attract nearly all of the former members. This writer was on the board of a medium size split group for two years, and watched as thousands of members went to join yet other split-offs during that time. God could have stopped those secret plans—most people knew nothing of them and were not responsible for them. But God knew, and He did not stop them.

So, let us ask the question one last time: "Why can't we unify the church?" But this time, let us think about it in a spiritual, Christ-centered, way rather than a self-centered, human-organization way:

> Why can't we [each believer submitting to Christ] unify [bring together in the harmony of the Spirit] the Church [the believers everywhere with His Spirit and love]?

The answer is, **"We can!"** All we need to do is adopt the approach of treating everyone who names the name of Christ as a fellow believer, resolving our differences with Matthew 18 as necessary, and let Christ judge the rest. Sure, there will be some people doing works that we do not find scriptural, so we may not help them, but we do not need to fight them. Others may not want to work with us because of our beliefs, but we can be a kind Christian witness and pray that we will see our fruits and understand.

To the extent others are willing to be unified with us, we are unified with them. That is all we can do. That is how Christ is bringing unity to His Church! And we can be a part of it now!