

The Biblical Pattern of Sabbath Fellowship

The gathering of God's elect on the Sabbath, Feast days, and other occasions are precious events, so critical for our regular uplift and encouragement to maintain spiritual focus within a world filled with so much darkness. We are told in Exodus 20:10-11, Leviticus 23:2-3, and Isaiah 58:13-14 what a glorious day the weekly Sabbath ought to be, to give us renewed hope when our "spiritual batteries" may have wound down through six days of battling the world's abuses. I have outlined ten basic directives regarding this most wonderful day.

- 1. A holy convocation.** In Leviticus 23:3, *holy* comes from *godesh* "A sacred place or thing." *Convocation* comes from *miqra*, "something called out, as a public meeting; a rehearsal."
- 2. A Sabbath of rest.** We read in Leviticus 23:3 and Exodus 20:11 that no work is to be done on this day.
- 3. A Feast day.** As told in Leviticus 23:2, we are to "feast" on this day, on both physical and spiritual food.
- 4. Don't do your own pleasure.** Isaiah 58:13 tells us not to engage in self-gratifying pleasure on this day.
- 5. Make it a delight.** In Isaiah 58:13, *delight* comes from the Hebrew *oneg*, "delight, pleasant," and in verse 14 *delight* is the Hebrew *anag*, "a primitive root, to be soft or pliable."
- 6. Honor God in the day.** Isaiah 58:13.
- 7. Don't speak your own words.** Isaiah 58:13.
- 8. A reflection back to the Garden of Eden and the original creation in Genesis 1 and 2.** Exodus 20:11 tells us this.

9. A blessed day. In Exodus 20:11 we see the word *blessed* used, the Hebrew *barak*, "a primitive root, to kneel, by implication to bless God, as an act of adoration, and to bless man."

10. A hallowed day. Again in Exodus 20:11, we see the word *hallowed* used, from *qadash*, "a primitive root, to be (causative), make, pronounce, or observe."

Note that Exodus 20:11 shows that the day reflects back to the recreation of the earth. Why is that? **BECAUSE THE NATURE OF THE SABBATH IS LIKE EDEN ITSELF; WE ARE TO LIVE IN THIS DAY AS IF WE WERE IN EDEN ITSELF, AS PICTURED BY THE OTHER REQUIRE-**



The new age coming is going to be wonderful beyond imagination, and is pictured by the weekly Sabbath rest.

MENTS FOR THE DAY:

- A time of delight
- A time of rest; no work
- A time of feasting
- A time of speaking God's words
- A time of closeness to God Himself

What an incredibly special time our Creator has reserved for us each week! It is a rest that typifies the very nature of the coming Eden upon the earth ... one might say a "weekly practice session" for life in that new realm where life will be lived in the peace and

abundance that human life was intended to be lived (John 10:10)!

The Biblical Pattern

Viewing these qualities we are to exhibit of the Sabbath day is one thing, but actually carrying them out is quite another. Many of us have come from Protestant or Catholic backgrounds, some from the Seventh Day Adventist Church or other Sabbatarian roots, some from Judaism, or even Muslim or Hindu upbringings. Each group carries with it traditions that may or may not fit the pattern God teaches in His word of how fellowship ought to be ordered. There is a chapter in Scripture that does outline this pattern, however, so let us examine carefully that source: it is I Corinthians 14.

Before delving into that chapter let me first demonstrate how Paul is leading up to this most important matter of fellowship. Let us dissect the progression of his thoughts.

Chapter 11: The Passover and the need to partake of the body and blood of Christ, and receive the spirit of God..

Chapter 12: Spiritual gifts given to each of us through the spirit of God.

Chapter 13: The nature of love (agape), that is even a “better” way that transcends spiritual gifts.

Chapter 14: Conduct of fellowship and prophesying of the saints at their Sabbath convocations.

Chapter 15: The future resurrection for all those called, a culmination of chapters 11 to 14.

Now notice the very first verse of I Corinthians 14: “Follow after love (*charity, agape*, as in Chapter 13), and desire spiritual gifts (Chapter 12), but rather that you *prophesy*.” *Prophesy* is the Greek *propheteuo*, from a root that means “to foretell events, divine, speak under inspiration, exercise the prophetic office.”

Paul is telling *all* of the brethren that they should “follow” (Greek *dioko*, “to flee, to pursue”) love and spiritual gifts, but above all that they should *prophesy*, or speak to the brethren under inspiration! This is not a command to just the elders or ministers, but to everyone in the congregation! Notice that he repeats this command at the end of the chapter in verse

39, where he says they must “covet to prophesy, and forbid not to speak with tongues.” *Covet* is the Greek *zeloo*, “to have warmth or feeling for.”

Prophetic Speaking

Paul gives specific guidelines for exercising this prophetic speaking. See verses 26-33 of I Corinthians 14. The instructions are as follows:

- All things are to be done in order.
- Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should *judge* (v. 29; *diakrino*, “to withdraw from or [by implication] oppose; figuratively, to discriminate [by implication, decide], or [reflexively] hesitate. Translated ‘contend, differ, discern, doubt, judge, by partial, stagger, waver’”).



Though not a fellowship meeting of the saints, this Norman Rockwell painting captures the spirit of freedom and liberty that ought to exist during church meetings.

- Speaking in tongues is not to be discouraged as long as those tongues are interpreted.
- Offerings are to be given during fellowship: a psalm, a doctrine, a tongue, a revelation, an interpretation (v. 26).

Psalm = *psalmos*, “a set piece of music, a sacred ode (accompanied with the voice, harp, or other instrument)”

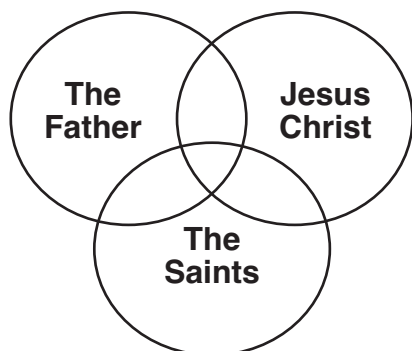
Doctrine = *didache*, “instruction (the act or the matter)”

Tongue = *glossa*, “the tongue, by implication a language (specially, one naturally unacquired)”

Revelation = *apokalupsis*, “disclosure”

This speaking must be done in order, of course (I Corinthians 14:40), and the “judging” (verse 29) of what is said must be freely allowed, much like the Bereans did when they “searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11). The judging that is implied here is not just silent search-

God’s government within the ecclesia



- The spirit of brotherhood, or each looking upon others as better than oneself (Matthew 20:25-28; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:2-15; 17:20-23; Romans 8:29; 12:10; Philippians 2:1-5; Ephesians 5:21; I Peter 5:5)
- Each is equally valuable, with “the least being the greatest” (Luke 9:48; Matthew 23:11-12)
- Service to others with one’s spiritual gifts, given at baptism and the laying on of hands, is one’s essential duty (I Corinthians 12; Romans 12:6-8; I Peter 4:10)
- A spirit of love and forgiveness (II Timothy 1:7; Galatians 5:22-23; John 13:34; 15:12, 17; Romans 12:10; 13:8; Ephesians 4:2; Luke 17:3-4; Matthew 18:21-22)

Satan’s government within the world



- The spirit of domination over others, looking upon others as more inferior down the pyramidal structure (Matthew 20:25; Luke 22:24-25)
- Value depends on position within the pyramid, with “the highest being the greatest” (Luke 22:25; *lordship* = *kyrieuo*, “to exercise control over: and authority over = *exousiazō*, “to exercise power or authority over anyone”; Mark 10:42; *lordship* = *katakurieuo*, “to control, subjugate; authority = *katexousiazō*, “to wield full privilege over”)
- Control over others to order them as a slave (see the references above)
- A spirit of self-centeredness and narcissism (II Timothy 3:1-5; Romans 1:28-31; Galatians 5:19-21)

Interpretation = *hermeneia*, “translation”

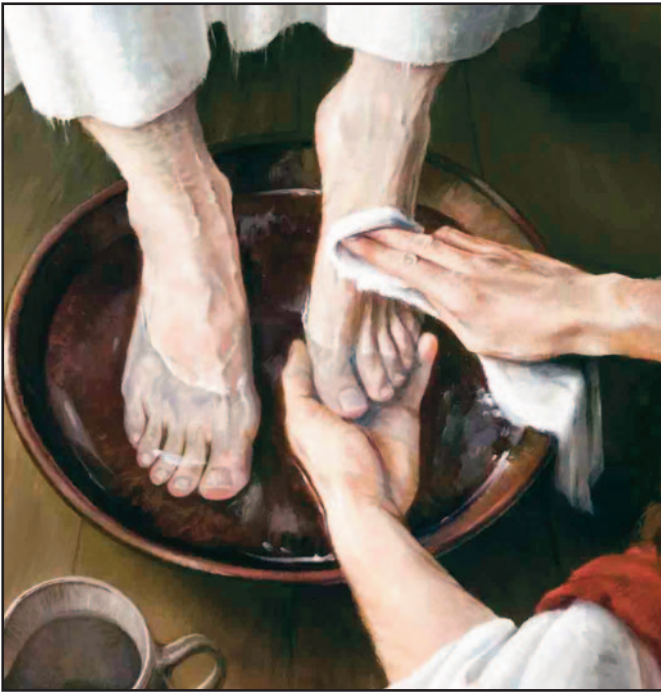
It is clear from this message of Paul to the Corinthians that Sabbath services are to be an “open forum,” as it were, to allow the gifts of the spirit and agape love to prevail, and above all for inspired prophetic speaking to be encouraged amongst whomever in the congregation is inspired at the time ... with others in the congregation free to judge and evaluate what is said, to “cross-examine.”

This means that a predetermined format for fellowship is not required — rather, it is discouraged — to allow the free flow of the spirit to motivate inspired speakers to get up and share their revelations to all, so everyone will be encouraged and instructed.

ing within one’s mind, but active speaking up to challenge a possible flaw in a prophet’s teaching, or to add to what is said with additional insights.

Order and Positions Within the Fellowship

In order for the fellowship of the saints as described in I Corinthians 14 to happen, it is critical that the brethren understand the correct governmental structure within the ecclesia ... and by government I mean the nature of the interrelationships of the brethren. This subject I have covered in depth in the book *Understanding God’s Government* (Xulon Press, 2017), but some essentials to understanding



Washing someone's feet is pictured as the task of a servant who is lower in value than the one whose feet are being washed ... but not so under God's government. The greatest is the least!

these relationships are given on the previous page — showing contrasts to the world's (Satan's) system.

The differences between God's system of brotherhood and humility and Satan's system of fear and force are profound! It is essential that every one of the people in the congregation feel welcome and on an equal, brotherly plane with everyone else, no person feeling or acting superior in any way. Recall that Onesimus, once a slave of Philemon before he ran away to Paul, and was baptized, returned a brother in Christ and on an equal plane with Philemon.

“For perhaps he [Onesimus, the slave] departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave — a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon 15-16).

We as God's people can in no way rule over anyone else. As brothers of Christ and one another it is imperative that we take on the attitude of Jesus Christ as when He washed the disciples' feet in John 13:12-15.

“Do you know what I have done to you [by washing their feet]? You call Me teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.”

Read those words again: “***Do you know what I have done to you?***” What is Jesus saying here? He is saying that He, the Creator of all that we see and the One who willingly shed His life's blood for us, had just placed Himself in the position of a *servant* to the disciples — even though He was “Teacher and Lord.” What gives here? Is He not reiterating what he said so many other places, like the following?

“The Kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called benefactors. But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves” (Luke 22:25-27).

“Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if an affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind, Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:1-5).

As dumbfounding as the idea might seem, our Savior Jesus Christ placed Himself not above, but *below* the position of His disciples despite the fact that He was their Lord and Teacher, illustrating the awesome humility and love contained within His

Being ... the humility and love we must have for one another within our fellowships by considering others better than ourselves. We must wash one another's feet as do brothers in need of each other's help, as we strive together against the strong headwinds of today's society on its way to annihilation unless Jesus would return to stop it all (Matthew 24:21-22).

More About Positions

What has already been said in this article makes it abundantly clear that any positions of authority have everything to do with *humble service*, using the gifts the spirit has bequeathed to each of the elect to uplift in the power of that spirit (I Corinthians 12). This then leads to experiencing the *agape love* Paul so eloquently voiced in I Corinthians 13. So often church leaders believe they must by assigning tasks to brethren to order the group like a corporation, when in reality the order comes from God's spirit working through the brethren.

There is oftentimes a misunderstanding of who those in authority truly are. When Paul visited an area to establish a congregation, he would preach and gather those whom the Father drew to Christ (John 6:44), and then out of the group of *elders* [*presbyteros*, "a senior or older person"] either appoint (based on their gifts), or more often have the brethren vote on who ought to fulfill various administrative functions. Hands were sometimes laid on certain people for the performing of certain functions, like the elders did for Timothy in I Timothy 4:14. Here the gift of prophecy (revealing truth through teaching) had been given to Timothy through baptism and the laying on of hands sometime before this, and this laying on of hands was a recognition to the congregation that this gift granted to him was to be respected by

all.

In fact, we have the clear message through both Paul and Peter that the older members of the congregations were to be *overseers* [*episkopos*, "an inspector, an overseer, a watcher or guardian"] and *shepherds* [*poimaino*, "to tend as a shepherd, feed, as cattle"] for the people — not just one or two or three older people, but *all* of the older brethren were to be overseers and shepherds!



Elders in the ecclesia are merely older people who, by virtue of their age and commitment to the truth, are able to oversee and shepherd the congregation, not lord over and control it like in the world's institutions.

“Therefore take heed to yourselves [the older men from Ephesus] and to all the flock, among which the holy spirit has made

you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His blood” (Acts 20:28).

“The elders [older men] who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed; shep-

herd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; not as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock ...” (I Peter 5:1-3).

The older people of the ecclesia had a particularly important role in teaching and guiding the believers, and they were to do so not through coercion but willingly, not lording it over others as do governments in the world. This was (is) a brotherhood of God's people, not a corporation of men.

The Setting

Up until about 250 A.D. there were no designated buildings constructed in which Christians gathered, unlike the assemblies of the followers of Mitra, Dianna, and other pagan deities that had their temples in many places. Richard Krautheimer, in *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, (Penguin Books, 1975, page 24), wrote the following:

“Until A.D. 200, then, a Christian architecture did not and could not exist. Only the state religion erected temples in the tradition of the Greek and Roman architecture. The saviour religions [for example, Mithra or Isis], depending on the specific form of their ritual and the finances of their congregations, built oratories above or below ground, from the simplest to the most lavish, but always on a small scale. Christian congregations prior to 200 were limited to the realm of domestic architecture, and further, to inconspicuous dwellings of the lower classes.”

Where, then, did God’s people meet during the years following Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection? In *homes*! There is both direct and indirect evidence in support of this fact. Please be aware that, in spite of this, there is no Scriptural directive saying that other venues such as meeting halls, schools, convention centers, or hotels cannot be used for the meetings of God’s people.

Direct evidence:

1. The assembly in the Ephesian house of Aquila and Priscilla. (I Corinthians 16:19). This was probably not the only house church in Ephesus.

2. The assembly in the Roman house of Priscilla and Aquila. (Romans 16:3-5). Like in Ephesus, the house church of Priscilla and Aquila was not the only assembly of Christians in Rome.

3. The assembly in the house of Philemon. (Philemon 1-2). The Christians of Colossae assembled in Philemon’s house.

4. The assembly in the house of Nympha. (Colossians 4:15). In the area of Laodicea there appeared to be two groups of Christians.

Indirect evidence:

There is much indirect evidence of the early believers meeting in the homes of Christians, in places such as Jerusalem (Acts 2:46-47; 5:42; 8:1-3; 12:5-12), Thessalonica (Acts 17:5-7), Corinth (Acts 18:7; I Corinthians 1:11, 16; Romans 16:22-23), Ephesus (Acts 20:17-20; I Corinthians 16:19), Troas (Acts 20:6-12), Caesarea (Acts 21:10-15), and Rome (Acts 28:16, 23, 29-31; Romans 16:1-5, 10, 15).

While it is not essential for the fellowship of God’s people to take place in homes, it certainly is a very favorable setting in that the warmth of the host, the familiarity of pleasant surroundings (versus oftentimes stark and cold trappings of meeting halls), the absence of rental fees, and the encouragement of prophesy and love in a familiar setting. The scriptures back this view

Practice the Biblical Pattern

It is easy to fall prey to the system of government around us, and from which we were called out of ... many of us from Protestant and Catholic backgrounds. I came from a Lutheran family, and it has taken many years to distance myself from the habits of government and liturgy instilled through that upbringing. We need to “... contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3), and always strive to grow to the stature of our Lord and King Jesus Christ.

Take no part in any vertical hierarchy governmental structure within a fellowship, but seek the brotherly, lateral associations within which love and service can grow. You cannot truly love a brother or sister if that person is in a position of authority over you. Serve one another with your gifts, and strive to prophesy (speak inspired messages) during fellowship. You older gents (elders), be overseers and shepherds to the flock even if you have never before understood that such is your responsibility, and help others, especially younger brethren, to grow to the stature of Christ. Fellowship in homes, perhaps in a rotating circuit, or create a home-like environment wherever you meet. Encourage Sabbath fellowship, and assembling together at Feasts and other times (Hebrews 10:25). Be inventive. Bring joy and peace to your brothers and sisters in an age of restlessness.

Paul W, Syltie — January 8, 2019

