

The Church Family - Convinced And Persuaded

Faith and Submission in the Family of God

Martin G. Collins

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The President receives the news that his government is divided between optimists and pessimists.

The President asks, "Who are the optimists?"

"They are those who believe that we will be eating grass by the end of the year," says the adviser.

"Who are the pessimists?"

"They are those who think that there will not be enough grass for everybody."

So you see the difference between a pessimist and an optimist—in government there is not much.

I fear that some of you are pessimists! Pessimists are those who are too quick to blame Satan every time something goes wrong, while at one and the same time they are too quick to believe that they are being punished by God for everything that happens in their lives. In many cases they have persecution complexes.

Our battles are against Satan, the world, and our own human nature. We fight sin every day. We also struggle to overcome physical obstacles.

The natural course of life is for us to have many more failures than successes. I think that most of us in here can attest to that fact. Things go wrong more than they go right for the average person, and we learn much more from our failures than we do our successes.

God has a purpose in allowing us to suffer those failures so that we can learn valuable lessons to prepare us for the Kingdom of God. It is so that we can reach the goal of wonderful and permanent successes.

Pessimists are depressing people to be in the company of for very long. They create an

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ominous atmosphere.

Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary defines "pessimism" this way:

"The tendency to expect misfortune or the worst outcome in any circumstances; the practice of looking on the dark side of things."

As members of God's church we certainly do not want to look on the dark side of things. Synonyms for pessimist are: cynic, worrywart, naysayer, wet blanket. These are all terms that we recognize. Pessimists are unable to see the authority of God in action. Pessimism is faithlessness.

Too many are pessimistic about the work of God and what He is accomplishing here on earth in our lives. God's government is a theocracy, with God the Father as Supreme, and under Him, Christ at the helm of the church, and God's chosen ministers fulfilling responsibilities under Christ in the form of a pyramidal hierarchy.

Theocracy means a government by God. It is a government of faith, in which the leaders submit their wills to God, and the members trust Christ to administer His church through those leaders.

Granted, the leaders are not always faithful in carrying out His will. But, our faith must be in Christ, so that when the leaders fail, our faith does not waver, because it is grounded in a strong and perfect foundation.

We know that God hates confusion and disorder. While He is a loving, merciful and kind God, He is also strict and demanding. Therefore, He requires our total love which manifests itself in our keeping of His commandments. Those who do not obey, that is, those who do not recognize His infinite authority, do not love Him and do not trust Him. Distrust in God is faithlessness.

In everything there must be authority. Moreover, the authority must be recognized, or chaos will result. Religion is certainly no exception.

God the Father is supreme commander of all things, including the church. Christ did not hesitate to state clearly, "My Father is greater than I." Even so, the Bible directly states that Jesus Christ has been delegated as over all direction of the affairs of the church.

Jesus Christ has complete authority, because God speaks through His Son. The Father

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exclaimed, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased, hear Him".

Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. All we do must be done in Jesus' name, or by His authority, if we are to glorify God. Paul taught Jesus' will, and Jesus Himself said, "... the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life".

The primary reason for all the confusion in the religious world today, is the failure to recognize, and submit to, Jesus' authority. Such submission is required if we truly believe in Jesus' authority. Luke 6:46 records that Christ said, "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?"

Authority is the power or right to give commands, enforce obedience, take action, or make final decisions. It is jurisdiction over a certain area. It comes from the root word, "*author*." As Christ is the "*author and finisher of our faith*."

Hebrews 12:1-2 Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The word "*our*" is not in the original in verse 2, and obscures the sense. The meaning is, He is the first and the last as an example of faith, or of confidence in God. He has in this, as in all other things, the pre-eminence, and He is the most complete and perfect model that can be placed before us.

The apostle who wrote Hebrews (whom we believe to be Paul) had not enumerated Christ among those who had been distinguished for their faith (Hebrews 11, which we call the "Faith Chapter"), but he now refers to Jesus as above them all, as a truth that deserves to stand by itself.

In verse 2, the English word author, from the Greek word *archeegon*, means the source, or cause of anything; or one who makes a beginning. The Greek word *archeegon* does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament. The phrase "the beginner of faith," or the leader of faith, expresses the idea. He is at the head of all those who have furnished an example of confidence in God, because He is Himself the most illustrious example of that confidence and faith.

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The English word finisher is from the Greek word *teleioteen*. It corresponds in meaning with the word author. It means that He is the completer as well as the beginner; the last as well as the first.

As there has been no one before Him who could be compared with Him, so there will be no one after. Jesus Christ revealed to the apostle John in Revelation 1:8, 11 His own words, "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, the first and the last."

The word finisher does not only mean that He was the finisher of faith in the sense that He makes our faith complete or perfects it—but also that He occupies this elevated position of being beyond comparison above all others. This is who is Head of the church.

He is the same in the beginning of faith, and in its ending, He stands pre-eminent. To His perfect example we should look, as a runner would on the one who had always been so successful that he surpassed all other competitors and rivals.

I want to review this fundamental truth to establish in this sermon that Christ is Head of the church family. Our faith is begun and completed by Him.

There is a fundamental difference between Satan's military system and God's government. The military works to impose the will of a nation's leadership upon individuals. It does not matter whether they agree with the policy or not.

Contrast this with God's system, where individuals are persuaded to agree from the heart with the policies of the leadership. God's system does not require the force of authority; its citizens obey government because it is the right thing to do and they want to from the heart.

Romans 6:17 But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered."

This basic principle of imposed or persuaded is not superficial. It defines the basic approach of each government form. The military governs those who do not necessarily agree. As a result, it must have power to force its will on others. This demands that the tools of military government be guns and bombs; the things that allow leaders to impose their will on others.

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On the other hand, God's government is seeking agreement with its policy. Individuals under God's government obey because they believe it is the best thing to do. This means that the tools of God's government are those of persuasion. The government of the Kingdom of God convinces its subjects that they should obey God's governmental principles. Of course, in this, I speak of the church.

Granted, the day is coming when Jesus Christ will return with a rod of iron to punish sinners and establish the Kingdom of God here on earth. It will not be a time of persuasion, but now is, because God is developing a family—the family of God! Understanding, transmitting and supporting healthy authority is an essential responsibility of the church.

Hebrews 13:17 has positive instruction about how God's government is supposed to work. Traditionally, this verse has been used to show that God's ministry has authority over the brethren.

Hebrews 13:7, 17 Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

It is interesting to note that the word translated obey is from the root in the Greek word *peitho*, meaning to persuade, or to win over. So, verse 17 would read "be persuaded by those who rule over you." Regarding the word obey in verse 17:

The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament (NT:3982):
"peithesthe" (middle/passive) means:

To let oneself be persuaded, or to be persuaded.

Thayer's Greek Lexicon: Peitho in the passive voice and middle voice means:

- a. to be persuaded, to suffer oneself to be persuaded; to be induced to believe: absolutely,
- b. to listen to, obey, yield to, comply with

So, we see there, in that word "obey," that there is a sense that we are to have the attitude of wanting to be persuaded of what the minister, or what God, is teaching us from His Word. It does not mean that we are to want to do it blindly. Of course, we are to prove all things. We are to have a submissive attitude. This also puts extra weight on the minister who has to be persuasive and convincing with his facts and with his preaching from God's Word.

This word *peitho* should be contrasted with the more common Greek word *hupēkousō*, that I quoted in Romans 6:17, meaning obedience or obey. It is more of a definite requiring of obedience. The sense of *peitho* is that of ruler ship based upon convincing or persuading someone to obey—not of compelling obedience through force. There is a major difference there between the use of those original Greek words.

To get a better idea of what *peitho* means, listen to how it is used in Acts 26:28: "Then Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuade me to become a Christian." That word persuade is the same word as obey in Hebrews 13:17.

Here, King Agrippa, a person who was clearly not under the authority of the apostle Paul, stating that he was almost *peitho* (persuaded) by Paul. This scripture shows that obedience as defined by *peitho* is not a matter of submission to the power of authority, but a matter of agreement.

This is not to say we should not be submissive—we should! But, the point is, that the submission is as the result of being persuaded—of being convinced in this sense.

Let us look at more biblical evidence of how *peitho* is used. In Galatians 3:1 and Galatians 5:7 the word is used in the phrase "obey the truth". We know that obedience to the truth is a matter of faith and conversion. And, we see in this that we are persuaded and convinced. The result is, that our obedience then comes from the heart. That is what God's goal is in persuading and convincing us of His truth. He wants it to be from the heart, rather than out of only a sense of duty. I do not mean to downplay the sense of duty, because we do have a duty to obey God's commandments. But, God also wants us to be persuaded of it, so that our obedience is from the heart.

It is interesting that those who do not obey the truth are *apeitho*, meaning

literally "not to be persuaded." We see this in the following verses:

Romans 2:7-9 eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek;

Hebrews 3:18 "And to whom did He swear that they would not enter His rest, but to those who did not obey [*apeithe*—are not persuaded]?"

I Peter 2:7-8 Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, "The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone," and "A stone of stumbling and a rock of offense." They stumble, being disobedient [*apeitho*—not persuaded] to the word, to which they also were appointed.

I Peter 4:17 For the time has come for judgment to begin at the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the end of those who do not obey [*apeitho*—are not persuaded of] the gospel of God?

Obedience to God's way of life is a matter of conversion, not submission to the force of authority. If a person is disobedient, he has not been persuaded to agree with God's policies of government. No amount of coercion and authority is going to convince him otherwise.

Such a person may be forced to obey, but still will not agree with what he is doing. You have heard the saying, "A person convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." The problem with such a person is in the mind; again, it is a matter of faith and conversion.

James 3:17 shows it is God's Spirit that makes us easy to be entreated or persuaded (*peitho*).

James 3:13-18 Who is wise and understanding among you? Let

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him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

God clearly states that we cannot dwell with Him unless we agree with His ways. "Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3). The main focus of church government must be that of producing agreement with God. Church government has the primary responsibility of persuading others to obey God's instructions.

Does this mean that God's government has no authority? Or that it has no ability to deal with rebellion? Of course not, it has every bit of authority to deal with that.

In Malachi 4:3, God states that He is more than capable of destroying His enemies. Yet, God does not have the destruction of His enemies as His objective.

God's government is an instrument designed to produce organization, harmony and happiness within His Kingdom. Church government should be a reflection of God's system of government. The church's government should have the characteristics of meekness, kindness, gentleness, and persuasion.

Christ is Head of the church, even as the husband is head of the wife. The human family is a type of the divine Family of God, and is to be governed according to the Law of God, which is summed up by the word love.

What is God governing in His church? The church, by definition, is the body of those who have God's Spirit and are destined to be first-fruits of God's Kingdom. The Church of God is part of God's family.

The basic approach of church government must be tailored to a family

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environment. We can learn a lot about this God-family environment through the human families that God has created in the image of His family.

Today, we see many dysfunctional families full of flaws because of hatred, jealousy, and envy.

Matthew 19:8 records Christ's words to the Pharisees: "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so."

But, God's Word tells us that families were designed to operate on love, mutual concern and service for one another. Families, as God originally created them, did not require an authoritarian figure to issue harsh orders and decrees regarding how the family was to operate.

As God devised the human family, the husband is to love and give himself for his wife. He is to care for her and try to fulfill her desires to the best of his ability. Although God commands a wife to be submissive to her husband, this certainly is a normal reaction to the one who is giving his all to make his wife's life comfortable, interesting, rewarding and fulfilling. He has done this by persuading and convincing her that everything he does is for her, in the context of the family.

Paul was inspired to reveal the mystery concerning the marriage between husband and wife and how it compares with Christ and the church. The Head acts by loving, nourishing and cherishing the body. Wives act by submitting to their husbands in a similar way to how the church submits to Christ.

Ephesians 5:21-24 submitting to one another in the fear of God. Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything.

Submission within our physical and spiritual families should be a practice ground for the right application of authority.

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Understanding, transmitting and supporting healthy authority is a fundamental responsibility of the family. The effective pursuit of happiness is made possible through the active human growth that takes place within an intact family. The entire nation is strengthened if the basic unit of its family life is strengthened. What happens to a nation happens first in its families. We see the families in the United States deteriorate, split, with divorce rates above fifty percent, with many children in this nation in single parent families. As goes the family, so goes the nation. The nation is full of disunity.

Submission in marriage too often finds itself swept under the proverbial carpet. This stems from a gross misunderstanding of what submission looks like in its pure form. Often, the scriptures dealing with submission are taken out of context.

Feminists snarl at such ideas as the command in Colossians 3:18 for wives to submit to their husbands. They miss the verses prior to verse 18 that instruct Christians to bear with and forgive one another and to treat each other with compassion, kindness and patience.

In I Corinthians 12:25, Paul outlined God's design that every part of the body of Christ should have equal concern for each other.

God's admonition to submit applies to everyone and needs to be placed within the framework of the Bible as a whole. Submission does not translate into a tug-of-war of power versus helplessness. Yet many Christians struggle to see how the practice of compromise and selfless giving in a relationship will not squelch their individuality. So we see the teenagers in high school trying to be individuals and out of rebellion they dress like each other and look exactly alike. Where is the individuality? Well, that is the perverse sense of it.

The greatest relationships start on a foundation of sacrificial giving (that is, sacrificing something in order to provide for someone else's needs), which in turn creates love and consequentially a desire to submit.

A common fear among women is that men will use submission as a power trip, setting themselves up as almighty dictators. Submission, as outlined in the Bible, does not promote tyranny. Men are to love their wives as Christ loves the church. Jesus Christ died because of His love for us.

Ephesians 5:25-33, 6:1-9 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church. For we are members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones. "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This is a great mystery, but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let each one of you in particular so love his own wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband. Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother," which is the first commandment with promise: "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth." And you, fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord. Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eye service, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

Our responsibility as fathers and parents is to persuade and convince our children of the right way of life. We see a softening of the iron fist ruler ship that employers, leaders, parents and ministers have sometimes had in the past.

Notice the qualities necessary in unifying a physical family, and how they are obvious qualities of Jesus Christ—the Head of the Church.

Children will happily honor and obey parents that are obviously giving

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themselves for the children's benefit. But, children will not respect the parent they can walk all over. Human families, as God designed them, were to be full of love and serving and sacrifice for the other members. The family, the way God designed it, only works properly if all the members of the family love and serve each other.

God's spiritual family operates at an even higher level of love and personal sacrifice. Jesus said that He and the Father were so close that they could be considered one. For us to be part of this family oneness there must be a change of attitude in our minds—it requires a miracle we call conversion.

Church government must operate like a family! For a church government to operate any other way is to misrepresent God's system of family government.

When we look at the instruction God gives those He assigns responsibility in the church, we see the overall approach is one of gentleness, understanding, and humility.

Let us look at some scriptures related to these important characteristics of a Christian family:

I Timothy 5:1-2 Do not rebuke an older man, but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger as sisters, with all purity.

II Timothy 2:24-25 And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth,

This approach acknowledges that people must be persuaded and convinced that it is best to obey God. Those who have been given God's Spirit have a different attitude from the rest of the world. Each wants to obey God.

People are not all the same. Each one requires different amounts of time and different experiences. But, what we all need is patience with others for this kind of conversion and conviction to develop.

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What about other scriptures that "seem" to indicate a more harsh approach to church government?

I Timothy 5:20 Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.

Titus 3:10 Reject a divisive man after the first and second admonition,

The church's approach to each person must be determined by each person's level of conversion. Those who are deeply converted should be handled with gentleness.

King Solomon tells us that a gentle approach to correction is far more effective with a converted mind.

Proverbs 17:10 (ESV) "A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool."

On the other hand, those within the church having worldly attitudes must be dealt with using the power of authority that the worldly mind understands. It is not long before those who persist in worldly attitudes will have a negative effect on those who are trying to overcome sin, Satan and the world. In these cases, God gives His ministry the authority to reject or disfellowship those who continue in false doctrines or serious sins.

Romans 16:17-20 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple. For your obedience has become known to all. Therefore I am glad on your behalf; but I want you to be wise in what is good, and simple concerning evil. And the God of peace will crush Satan under your feet shortly. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. Amen.

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The overall purpose in taking such actions is, either to protect the body of Christ, or to help a sinner repent. The adjusting of the minister's approach to a person's personality or level of conversion is the same principle that God uses in His dealing with human beings.

Let us look at something that causes disunity in the church, in families and organizations and so on. One of the foolish things a parent, employer, minister or leader tends to do is to hear only one side of a complaint or story, and immediately draw a conclusion, make a wrong judgment and unjustly act on it.

Then, making matters worse, publicly humiliating the falsely accused person. This brings shame to both the prideful falsely accusing leader and the falsely accused.

Proverbs 11:2 When pride comes, then comes shame; But with the humble is wisdom.

I Timothy 5:19-21 Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear. I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality.

This type of injustice is devastating to the parent's or the employer's or the minister's or the leader's trustworthiness. Confidence in the unjust leader is destroyed.

It destroys trust and confidence in the one who has been unjust. When it happens repeatedly all trust and confidence in that unjust leader is annihilated because he has become unreliable.

James 2:8-9 If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

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For millennia some children have been inclined to run to their parents out of jealousy falsely accusing others. Often, their parents believed them and acted upon the accusation without searching out the matter.

As a result, the parent becomes an unjust parent who loses respect in the eyes of his children. He also loses their confidence in his judgment. When it happens repeatedly he is no longer trustworthy. The same holds true for employers, ministers, leaders and anyone in positions of authority.

The whole law is the will of God and to break any part of it is to violate that will and therefore to be guilty of sin. The principle here in James 2 is that to break any part of the law is to become a law breaker.

Even under this society's human justice system a person becomes a criminal when he has broken just one law.

It does not matter how good we are in other areas of our lives, if we pass a wrong judgment on someone as a result of partiality toward another, we have acted against the will of God and we are transgressors.

That is, if we automatically believe the accusation of a person who we are favorable to against another person and then act on that one-sided information, we move from giving mere preferential treatment, to being a respecter of persons, to being guilty of partiality, when we pass an unjust judgment upon the accused.

James' presentation of this principle is both relevant and practical to our lives today and can be applied to a wider spectrum of situations.

William Barclay simplifies this a bit in his Daily Study Series on the Acts of the Apostles.

"A man may be in nearly all respects a good man; and yet he may spoil himself by one fault. He may be moral in his action, pure in his speech, meticulous in his devotion. But he may be hard and self-righteous; rigid and unsympathetic; and, if so, his goodness is spoiled.

We do well to remember that, though we may claim to have done many a good thing and to have resisted many an evil thing, there

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may be something in us by which everything is spoiled."

The church must never forget it is a family organization designed to operate through oneness of mind and love and service for others.

When Acts 28 describes the situation after the apostle Paul's ship was cast upon the shores of Malta, it casts light on the character of Paul. It shows that Paul was a man who could not bear to be doing nothing; there was a bonfire to be kept burning and Paul was gathering brushwood for it.

Paul was an intensely practical man; and as great a biblical scholar and minister as he was, he was not ashamed to be useful in the smallest thing.

Barclay's Bible Study Series on the Acts of the Apostles relates this story:

"It is told that Booker Washington in his youth walked hundreds of miles to one of the few universities which took in Negro students. When he got there he was told that the classes were full. He was offered a job at making beds and sweeping floors. He took it; and he swept those floors and made those beds so well that before very long they took him as a student and he went on to become the greatest scholar and administrator of his people. It is only the little man who refuses the little task."

During the incident at Malta, the apostle Paul was cool, calm and collected. In one of the bundles of brushwood was a viper that bit his hand. He handled the situation calmly, as if it was of little or no concern. So Paul was industrious, serving and had self-control. His is an example to follow. God tells us that a good minister takes a fatherly approach toward those in his congregation.

I Corinthians 4:15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel.

Paul took a very fatherly approach to the congregations. A minister may labor diligently at preparing messages and others duties on behalf of the

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members of the church, but if he is not also developing personal relationships with his congregation, how can a family atmosphere develop?

The world is full of fathers who work long hours to bring home the family income, yet families end up falling apart because they never spend any time with their wives and children. The situation is similar in the church; if those who have responsibilities never develop relationships with other people, what has God's church accomplished toward developing the God family?

This is not to suggest that preaching, teaching, and other leadership responsibilities are not necessary, but that these things also must be producing a harmonious family relationship. We must never forget that the objective of the Church of God is to develop the family and character of God.

We should understand that next to our relationship with the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ, the most important thing is our relationships with one another within our own families and within the family of God. Just as a physical family in the world affects how a nation works, so also families in the church affects how the family of God works.

The Bible shows that God takes the family relationship within His church very seriously. This family attitude must be developed and matured before God's Kingdom can begin on earth. This family attitude is so vital to God's plan that it cannot succeed without it.

Malachi 4:5-6 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LOORD. And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse."

The Hebrew word translated curse is *khay'rem* and can mean extermination.

In Zechariah 14:11, this same word is translated utter destruction. Obviously, this is a very serious situation. God is telling us that unless family relationships change among His people, He is going to destroy the earth, that is, actually abort His plan for man to become God! But, God is all powerful and there is no doubt that He will accomplish what He has set out to do.

We have concluded from verse 6 of Malachi 4 that God considers the relationships in His family serious business. But, there is much more that this verse has to tell us. First, it shows us that the current family relationships are flawed. If God says they must be changed, then there must be something wrong with them now. Second, the verse tells us exactly what family matters must be changed within God's church.

Notice that the instruction is for the fathers to turn toward the children and the children to have good relationships. But, when we look at this instruction more closely, we find it seems to be a direct contradiction to other scripture. Notice Christ's statements in Matthew and Mark:

Matthew 10:35 For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'

Mark 13:12 Now brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.

These verses do not paint a picture of Christians having flourishing family relationships with their parents. Scripture tells us that God's calling will often break up physical families (Matthew 19:29).

In a family where either parents or the children have an unconverted mind—a mind at war with God—a chance of fulfilling Malachi 4:6 is virtually non-existent.

And, in a family where the parents and children are converted, the hearts are already turned toward one another.

Therefore, we must conclude that Malachi 4:5-6 cannot be referring primarily to physical families—it simply does not make sense that way. The usage of the terms father and children in these verses must be of a symbolic nature. Malachi is an end-time prophecy about the church—especially the ministry.

God's inspired written Word, the Bible, uses the terms father and children in a symbolic way for the church.

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I Corinthians 4:15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I [Paul] have begotten you through the gospel.

I John 2:1 My little children, these things I [John] write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Both Paul and John refer to the relationships between God's people and His loyal ministers using the symbols of fathers and children. Therefore, Malachi's instruction is that God's end-time Church must be developing a family relationship between the ministry and God's people.

Malachi is clear that this relationship has not existed. The relationship between God's people and His ministry cannot be one of hierarchical authoritarianism copied from the military. That kind of approach to government does not address the needs of the converted mind and cannot produce a family relationship. We saw that mistake made in the Worldwide Church of God through the '50s, '60s and '70s and on into the '80s. Leadership was in many cases harsh and with an iron fist.

God's ministry should place an emphasis on developing personal relationships with God's people. But, this must be balanced with the fact that God has given His ministers a higher position of responsibility in the church. But, respect for that position is not fully realized until God's people view the minister as a loving, caring, concerned father.

I Timothy 5:17 "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor."

This indicates that some ministers will rule better than others. We must try to develop relationships with those who rule over us. And those who rule over us must try to develop relationships with us. The apostle Paul admonishes God's people in,

I Thessalonians 5:12-13 And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love

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for their work's sake. Be at peace among yourselves.

The minister-lay member relationship should be similar to that of parents and grown children. Even though the children may have grown to the point where they are almost equals to their parents, upright children will always honor their parents for their maturity and the sacrifices they have made for them.

When children call their parents "Dad" and "Mom", it is not a title of position, but of affection and endearment. In the same way, when one of God's people addresses a loyal minister with a title, it should not only be because of the minister's position, but because of the closeness the member feels in the relationship.

On the other hand, the minister should view the lay member as a father views his grown children. Fathers desire that their children become more intelligent, more skilled, and more respected than even they are.

The driving force behind a father-child relationship is the father's caring concern for his children. With good fathers, this concern never diminishes, no matter how old the children are.

In order for God's system of government to work, there has to be humility, meekness, gentleness and patience in the members of the family. This requires a change of attitude and perspective from worldly to godly as the result of a renewing of the mind by the Holy Spirit. We call this change of mind conversion.

As the end of this age nears, God is sifting and separating His people. Those who are close to Him and each other will end up together in His spiritual family. God expects us to be using His Spirit to develop the family relationship of the Kingdom of God. This unity is brought about through humility.

Philippians 2:1-4 Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any 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

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out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

This is what each and every one of us have as a duty and a responsibility toward one another.

Here, the apostle Paul gives us three serious causes of disunity:

Selfish ambition. There is always the danger that people will work for the primary reason of advancing themselves rather than advancing the will of God. In contrast, we must humbly appreciate others as better than ourselves.

Desire for self-prestige. For many people prestige is a huge temptation, even more so than wealth. Some people live to be admired and have their opinion sought. Their undying desire is to be known by name and appearance—to be flattered. In contrast, the goal of a Christian should not be self-display, but self-sacrifice in service.

Concentration on self. If a person is obsessed with his own interests, he is on a collision course with others. If he is constantly competing with others for attention, he will view others as opponents that must be pushed out of the way. When a person concentrates on himself he will inevitably seek to eliminate others he perceives to be competition and he will attempt to push them down.

Real love is cleansed of self—it is pure outgoing of the heart to others. Again, the heart is central to the right attitude. It is central to being persuaded, being convinced and having humility.

Romans 12:9-18 Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. Bless

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those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.

The word Paul uses in verse 10 for "kindly affectionate" is used nowhere else in the New Testament. The word is *philostorgos*. The Greek word for family love is *storge*, and it represents the tender affection that exists between parents and children. It means that Christians should have similar feelings toward each other, as belonging to the same family, and as united in the same principles and interests. In verse 10, it says "be kindly affectionate to one another," that is, have family love to one another, with brotherly love, and with honor giving preference to one another.

We must love each other, because we are members of one family. We are not strangers to each other within the church; much less are we isolated units; we are brothers and sisters, because we have one Father, God.

The Kingdom of God is the Family of God! And, we have a supreme Father who loves us!

So, who in God's church can look at life, and what God has prepared for us, and be anything but optimistic! I cannot imagine anyone in the church being anything but optimistic with what God had laid in front of us.