

# Fellowship in Homes

## *The Hebraic Model*

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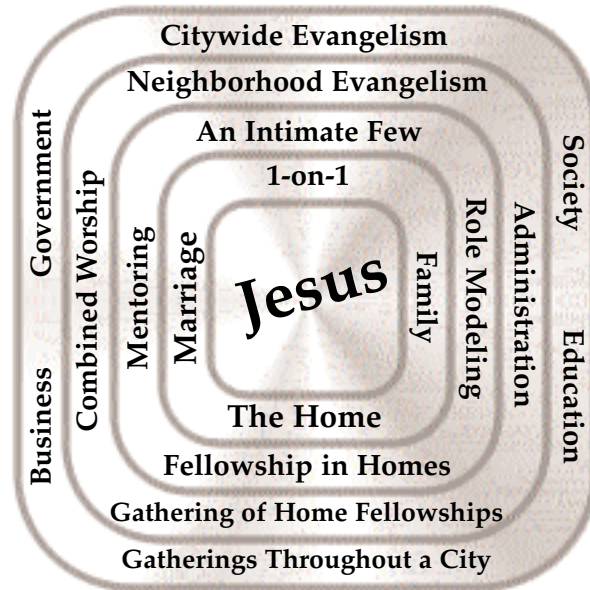
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# God's Design for His Church

Priorities are important! They help you decide what is most important to you.

The priorities of the early Church were based on a Hebraic-influenced spiritual focus. Take a moment to examine the diagram and the priorities it implies. The focus emanates from the center outward, indicating that your walk with Jesus should take highest precedence in your life. The outflow of that relationship then carries over into the next layers of priority.



We developed this diagram during the course of our research of the early Church while we were in Israel. The *interconnectedness* embodied in the diagram begins with the close, personal relationships connoted in the center three boxes. As relationships expand outward to the congregational level, a greater degree of administrative and organizational structure may be needed to coordinate the penetration and impact that you and fellow followers of Jesus in the restoration will have in your community. But beware of activity overdose! Any organizational structure should *enhance and encourage* intimacy at the home fellowship level rather than promote programs that could in any way detract from those relationships.

Parallel the relational process that is represented in the diagram to your own growth and development as a person. Following your birth you began the process of becoming increasingly more aware of your connection to ever larger groups of people. At first you were conscious only of your mother, then your family, your extended family, your neighborhood, town, and world.

When you are born again in your spirit, this same process reflects God's biblical design. He intends that you grow in intimacy with His Son Jesus. At the same time, through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, you begin to learn to express love and

receive love in a unique and special way within your home. Supportive relationships that include a few other believers committed to mutual nurture and strengthening in a home fellowship are an outgrowth through which you are disciplined to bear fruit for the Kingdom. As pockets of developing fellowships congregate, their opportunities expand to minister among broader relational arenas and to financially support those who are sent on specific missions for the Kingdom.

The nation of Israel was a relationship-based people group that paralleled the progression illustrated in our diagram. The family relationships and authority systems provided the model for organizing the entire nation. For Israel this organization pattern was vital, particularly when it came time to fight their enemies. If they were to win they needed to respond "*as one man*" when the war trumpet sounded. The nation of Israel as described in the Bible followed this progression: an *individual* belonged to a *family* that was part of a *clan* that identified with a *tribe*. Finally, *twelve tribes* who were ruled by their elders (and later, a king) made up the *nation*.

The *relational responsibility* that bound Israel together kept them organized as individuals, families, clans, and tribes. When David became established as king over Israel, he designated fortified cities to be built all over Israel. Each city was led by *zakens*, or respected elders. Each city possessed an individual identity and experienced a certain measure of autonomy. Each was expected, however, to respond for the good of the whole nation when the battle trumpet was blown.

The restoration occurring in the church today parallels this pattern. An individual puts wholehearted trust in Jesus. Perhaps those in his or her home observe this changed life and also choose to trust Jesus. (Maybe they have long been praying for that family member to join *them* in trusting Jesus!) Believers on the pilgrimage to becoming Christlike need spiritual intimacy with others who come alongside them in a home fellowship to support each other's trust in Jesus. Pockets of fellowships can then gather to form a congregation, which then joins other congregations throughout the city to cooperate in larger endeavors to impact unbelievers at large.

The supportive relationships in the home and home fellowships are an effective mechanism to permeate neighborhoods, businesses, and the cultural and social sectors of the city. The primary weapons of God's Kingdom, as always, are praise for His faithfulness, intercession to tear down the enemy's influence, obedience to the Word, and the personal testimony of believers as they reflect increasing Christlikeness in speech and action. The administrative coordination at the congregation level helps to maintain focus and purpose.

Think about it. Your relationship with Jesus, represented in the center of the diagram, does not require organizational structure. It is out of our Father's love that Jesus is revealed: "*No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day*" (John 6:44). This relationship is personal and spiritual. No human organization is needed at this level, only the regenerative work of God through the Holy Spirit. Neither structure nor organization are necessary in one-on-one relationships or in intimate relationships with a few. Even neighborhood home fellowships are affiliated through relationships with others in the faith community and/or through the evangelist or church planter who cultivated the groups. When organization is kept to a minimum, the Holy Spirit's guidance of those involved is fervently depended on. Fewer

distractions of activity and programs arise to divert believers from focusing on God's plans and purposes.

## Load-bearing Relationships

The institutionalism that has crept into the church today in the US has relationally crippled followers of Christ. They no longer know how to commit themselves deeply to other people, nor do they see the need to take the time to do so. Too often American Christians are like eggs in a carton. Their shells rub up against each other at services and meetings, but their lives never become "scrambled" in intimate relationship. Even the "cartons", the separate congregations, seldom mix.

Personal load-bearing interaction with others may seem foreign to you. You may have committed yourself to a marriage but find it difficult to *intimately care* for your covenant partner. Perhaps you're committed to a specific congregation and even attend Sunday school or a home group, but still you find it almost impossible to commit yourself to others in *deeper, caring relationships*. Many Christians find themselves committed to the *effects* of believing in Jesus: being saved, having their sins forgiven, or having their prayers answered. Sadly, few find themselves in an *ongoing daily relationship* with the person of Jesus.

While in Israel our believing Jewish friends asked, "Why do you Christians in the United States always need an activity like a Bible study in order to get together? Can't you get together just because you love and care for each other?" We were deeply convicted by their observation. Think of the words that describe the early Church: "*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved*" (Acts 2:46,47). These folks were *eager* to be with one another in union with their Lord!

Remember this: Jesus loves each person individually and personally. He died for each one so that each could enjoy a relationship with Him. You may have been drawn to Him for personal reasons: for forgiveness to escape the wrath to come and for the cleansing that enables you to have fellowship with God. But as a follower of Christ you also enter into a process. You become a *disciple*, a lifelong practice of being transformed into His image.

Jesus modeled discipleship not as a program conducted by leaders of a congregation but as an extension of your growing relationship with Him. He desires every believer to be in a relationship with other believers both as they are themselves discipled and as they disciple others. You may be brand new to the Kingdom, but as long as you have one hand in the hand of the Master, you can reach back with the other to guide someone even newer along the path you have walked!

God still sees His Church as the *ekklesia*, "the called-out ones." *His people* are the Church, even the gathering of two or three in His Name. Wherever God's people are throughout the week, there is His Church, permeating society and connecting with the very people He wants His children to lead into His Kingdom.

The *ekklesia* who already have an ongoing relationship with each other gather for fellowship, communion, and building up of one another. This level of relationship, referred

to in the diagram as the “intimate few” or “home fellowship”, represents a seven-day-a-week commitment to each other. This depth of care and concern signifies far more than just scheduled meetings together. It is a mutual commitment to *uphold righteousness* and to *bear one another’s burdens*. The early churches met in homes as well as gathered in the temple courts for worship and instruction. The temple courts represented the congregational assembly of the home fellowships. These people were relational, unified by their love for God and their commitment to each other as His people.

People today generally identify one congregation with one church building. As many believers have found whose congregations are built upon neighborhood home fellowships, though, several congregations can share the same facility. At the time of the apostles all the congregations that met throughout a city would have collectively been considered “the church”: “*To the church of God in Corinth*” (1 Corinthians 1:2); “*To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia*” (2 Corinthians 1:1); “*Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea*” (Romans 16:1).

As believers empowered by the Holy Spirit went about the daily business of life, they carried the message of Christ to all they encountered. David DuPlessis contrasts the effectiveness of early Christian witness with today’s pallid testimony: “In the first century all church members were scattered abroad and the Church was the mission; today, the Church stays home and the apostles are scattered abroad to be missionaries...It was the method of ‘every-member evangelism’ that did the miracle in apostolic days.” Are *you* in the habit of bearing witness to what you have seen and heard as you go about your daily business?

## **Man’s Design: Programs and Institutionalism**

Most American churches today minister to *crowds* of all sizes. Almost every facet of church life, including the seating and aisle arrangement, is designed for crowd control. Even the concept of “church” is often a *place* of formal gathering or a service. Man has erected large edifices to control blocks of people. When you come to Jesus through this system, you are deposited into a big, impersonal organization called the “congregation”. Within the vastness of the congregation you then try to find some people who will care for you individually as a person and with whom you can “one-another.” Your congregational may offer contrived groups in order for you to be involved in “church activities”, but you probably still feel like an outsider.

For too long churches have attempted to fabricate programs in the hope of generating loving relationships. Congregations are partitioned into homogeneous groupings such as couples’ clubs, youth groups, college and career fellowships, erroneously believing that common circumstances will encourage interpersonal caring. This programmatic pattern of ministry is based on the Greek model rather than the Hebraic. The Hebraic paradigm would provide relational opportunities for *mentoring* by the older and wiser. *Intergenerational contacts* would be modeled and encouraged. With the home as the main meeting point for fellowship, most programmatic groups would be unnecessary.

In much of man’s design for the church, even their identity as “worshippers” appears to have been lost. “In [worship’s] place,” notes A.W. Tozer in *The Pursuit of God*, “has come that strange and foreign thing called the ‘program.’ This word has been borrowed from the stage and applied with sad wisdom to the type of public service which now

passes for worship among us....[Even] sound Bible exposition may be carried on in such a way as to leave the hearers devoid of any true spiritual nourishment whatever. For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but *God Himself*, and unless and until the hearers find God in *personal experience* they are not the better for having heard the truth”(emphasis added). Think about that.

Stop to consider the different churches in your community, then ask yourself: Does God really desire that Christians cling to the secondary doctrinal issues that now divide the church into thousands of denominations? Does this current prejudicial division come from the Father? Isn't this division counterproductive to the advance of the Gospel? How do these separations subvert the biblical emphasis on *unity*? Ponder the admonition of Philippians 3:15,16: “*All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too **God will make clear** to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained.*” If such divisions in His Church counter God's plan, can it be that the restoration underway around the world is His way to remove the barriers that now separate believers?

Many doctrines and traditions incapacitate the church by focusing on what is divisive rather than on what unifies. Rather than apperceiving the Word of God and fostering agreement as did the early Church councils that followed the biblically Hebraic approach, subsequent councils even to the present day use the win-lose argument of the Greek philosophers: “If we think differently, then I must be right and you're wrong—and I'll prove it!”

Estrangement and separation have been the fruit of this type of thinking for centuries. Often the central theme of church history has been division, hatred, and murder of Christians by Christians, each believing they are serving God. Revisit the *doctrines* of the early Church, those matters derived from God's Word for which believers were willing to die. Conversely, the church from the time of the Greek philosophical influence has been filled with “doctrinal traditions” for which believers were willing to kill or despise others. The Greek spirit in the church today has produced *intolerance*, a weapon wielded by Satan to keep Christians ineffective in reaching cities for Christ.

From God's vantage point the church is torn apart, revisionists against revisionists. As the restoration continues and apperception once again gains ground among God's people, they will increasingly pray to understand and follow the *original intent* of the biblical writers and the Hebraic roots that so influenced them. The result will be an ever-increasing unity and harmony by God-lovers who are willing to let God make it clear.

While at the retreat center we witnessed the fruit of revisionism in the inability of local churches to unite in face of a spiritual threat. In the late 1980's television news reported that two thousand satanists were moving into Connecticut to “take the state for Satan.” As small as it is, Connecticut for years has been #1 in per capita income in the nation. Initially, satanism entered companies and businesses through the guise of personal growth seminars that incorporated eastern mysticism and meditation.

For those who recognized and understood spiritual warfare, the satanic underpinning was readily apparent. The efforts of a few believers to voice their concerns and to mount an effectual offensive proved fruitless. We were reminded of the Jewish people in “labor camps” during World War II who struggled futilely to awaken others inside and outside the camps to their real function as prisons of death.

As the satanic controls over these companies grew, formerly pleasant work places

became oppressive. Several financially sound companies ultimately filed for bankruptcy. Media coverage questioned the bankruptcy of one particular Connecticut company, especially the disappearance of \$11 million of company assets at the hands of two “mysterious strangers”.

Since we had relationships with many Christians from different churches, we encouraged them to join with other believers in the affected companies to intercede against the demonic takeover. “Doctrinal” differences, however, separated these individuals and rendered any efforts ineffectual.

It is our hope that God’s *restoration* will expose the source of the philosophical doctrines that now divide believers. Pray for ever-increasing cooperation among Christians in neighborhoods, workplaces, and cities in concert together for the cause of Jesus Christ.

***“Then Jesus came to them and said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’”*** (Matthew 28:18-20).

“Making disciples” is your responsibility just as it is for every follower of Jesus. The early Church illustrates that no one should be on the sidelines. Even Philip the deacon (see Acts 5) became Philip the evangelist (see Acts 8) who led a revival in Samaria. Each and every individual, family, and neighborhood home fellowship are God’s best means of permeating a godless society. These represent the relational troops that can be mustered and coordinated at the congregational level for a more encompassing outreach.

Of greater impact, however, is the *relational mobilization* of God’s people through personal contacts and relationships in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and communities. Compassionate and caring contacts with unbelievers requires you to personally convert your own faith into action.

You can determine to individually and collectively intercede for your neighborhood, workplace, and community. Crime and evil have proliferated in part because Christians have failed to exercise their authority in Jesus through trusting prayer. A painful reality exists if you truly believe God’s Word: No matter how close you yourself draw to Jesus and to others in the faith, there will still be those you know and love (and countless others you’ve never met) who will enter a Christless eternity in hell because they have *not* understood and accepted the Gospel. Our Lord commands His flock to share the Good News!

Think about the following truth as the Hebraic early Church understood it. The Book of Genesis makes clear that every human being is created in the image of God. Although sin ruptured our relationship with a loving Father, He graciously provided the means of reconciliation. Through the willingness of His own Son to lead a sinless life and to shed His blood, we can have fellowship with the Father once again. Our loving response to His love is to be burdened for humanity in the same way that He is. A popular saying in the 1970’s is appropriate as we consider the restoration of the church now underway: *“With one hand reach out to Jesus, with the other bring a friend.”*

## **Recap: God's Design for Growth in Christlikeness**

The process of your relational expansion from *one* to *one-on-one* to a *few* is always *personal*. The progression always starts from the center of the diagram, with Jesus. Your fellowship must first of all be with the Lord and then with others whom God provides for mutual strengthening and encouragement. Every step and extension of commitment to other people as you move toward the outer rings is based on a network of personal relationships, someone caring for you and you expressing care for them. Your trust in Jesus will be strengthened only as you abide in caring relationships, experiencing His love (that you already know by faith) through the love and admonition of others. As the fullness of God's love grows in you, you can then share the vitality of your faith with those who have yet to encounter Jesus.

You'll discover that through the intimacy of relationships in your family and in your circle of load-bearers in the home fellowship, your awareness of the Holy Spirit's work in you will grow. The Spirit continues to fill you to be God's vessel of blessing to others as you manifest His gifts. Thus you are able to truly appreciate the power of belonging to a body in which *everyone does his part*. Equipped and empowered, you can then fulfill His commission to you and to all believers: to make disciples of all nations.

***“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,’ declares the Lord, ‘and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile’”*** (Jeremiah 29:11-14).

Jeremiah's words remind us of the command the Lord gave us in Miami after our return from Israel in March of 1994: *“Free the captives.”* God desires to prosper His people in their pilgrimage of Christlikeness and to display His glory among them. This will happen when followers of Christ have the courage to forsake whatever hinders them and to wholeheartedly seek Him with a faith empowered by His Spirit and nourished by His Word.

Through apperception of the Scriptures (going back to the original intent of the biblical writers), the following sections contain some practical suggestions to acquire the powerful, cooperative faith of the early Church, a Church built upon a Hebraic understanding of the Bible. The priorities of Jesus, marriage, family, and home fellowship are essential to His restoration. People of God need to seek the *rhema* of the Holy Spirit just as fervently as the early Church did for specific guidance and direction.

## **The Home Fellowship: Promoting Righteousness**

***“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”*** (Acts 2:46,47).



**“Greet also the church that meets at their house.  
Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the  
province of Asia”** (Romans 16:5).

**“The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla  
greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does  
the church that meets at their house”**  
(1 Corinthians 16:19).

**“To Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that  
meets in your home”** (Philemon 2).

**“Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to  
Nympha and the church in her house”** (Colossians 4:15).

The above verses make clear that Paul was writing these particular letters to the *ekklesia*, the “called-out ones” who met in homes. As noted earlier, many of the early Church practices duplicated those of the God-fearing synagogues at the time of Christ. Like their synagogue birthplace the early Hebraic home gatherings (or neighborhood home fellowships, as we are calling them) retained the characteristic of *personal participation*. The earliest believers experienced the neighborhood home fellowship as an *extension of the home* for spiritual growth.

The preceding verses also reflect early Church *koinonia*, the fellowship and caring interaction that developed among those in the churches that met in homes. At the time of Christ the home signified the spiritual training base for the Jewish family. It was in the home that parents shouldered the responsibility for training up their children in the wisdom and will of the Lord. The home fellowship represented an extension of the home, not a programmed activity of a larger congregation that met at the temple. This is an important distinction, one that is vital if you are to understand the significance of the progression outward from relationship with Jesus to spiritual growth in the home to intimacy with fellow load-bearers to gatherings of worshipers in congregations at large.

Note: We were once interviewed to head up a new home fellowship ministry for a large congregation. During the interview we found that we could not communicate clearly with the interviewer. He was looking for programs and activities to occupy and coordinate the congregation as they met in contrived “care groups.” In effect, he wanted a “Christian program” that would guide and instruct group attendees so that there would be standardized, predictable outcomes in every group. Everyone would study the same passages or materials and follow the same format. Our emphasis on personal righteousness and load-bearing relationships built on an individual’s trust in Jesus actually seemed intimidating to him.

A church leader from another denomination once told us, “We can’t have our people trusting Jesus. That would cause *mayhem!* We need to control and direct the spiritual activities of the people in our congregation.” Do trust in God and obedience to Him *really* produce mayhem? “*For God is not a God of disorder but of peace*” (1 Corinthians 14:33).

“An Intimate Few”, or *Neighborhood Home Fellowships*, are also known as care groups, cell groups, or home churches. Regardless of the terminology, in the early Church they represented a *seven-day-a-week commitment* of the followers of Jesus to one another. As an extension of the home, the neighborhood home fellowship was the relational network that upheld personal righteousness. Keep in mind this distinction as you read this section. In many churches today “care groups” are viewed as scheduled meetings of small groups of believers whose interest is primarily “self.”

The focus of the early Church was twofold: righteous, load-bearing fellowship that equipped followers of Jesus for *godly living* and *Gospel sharing*. Paul commended the Thessalonians for both the love they had for one another (2Thessalonians 1:3) and for the holiness and faithfulness they walked in through His Spirit (2:13).

Remember, the goal of your pilgrimage with Jesus is a personal relationship that draws you to increasingly *trust* the Lord and to *bear fruit* for Him. True ministry within a home fellowship equips followers of Christ to share their trust in the only true Source of life and provision. *Authentic fellowship* finds load-bearing believers encouraging each other as they wholeheartedly trust God. *Authentic ministry* comes as one Christ-follower helps another to lovingly trust the Lord in all circumstances. Paul understood that as believers followed Jesus, the Lord would allow them to encounter difficult situations “so that we might not rely on ourselves but on God” (2 Corinthians 1:9). It is God Who prompts His people to reach out beyond themselves to come alongside the needy and minister His mercy to them.

Such availability and vulnerability requires deprogramming from the institutional approach that is so embedded in a broad area of church culture today. If you are ever to experience the love, understanding, and acceptance that God is restoring to His people, you must, by His grace, get past the depersonalized associations to which you may have grown accustomed. Those who have been part of congregations that rely heavily on programmed activities designed only to benefit the participant may need several months to adapt to the increased personal responsibilities of a home fellowship built on the early Church model.

## Purity of Heart and Answered Prayer

***“Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God”*** (2 Corinthians 7:1).

Early Church believers approached God to worship Him and to have their *prayers answered*. This may sound like a small point, but think about it. It wasn’t just the act of praying, but *answered* prayer, that got the early Church noticed. The book of Acts begins with a small band of disciples: “*They all joined together **constantly in prayer**, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers*” (Acts 1:14). When Peter and John were released from the Sanhedrin’s capture (see Acts 4), they went directly to their fellow believers: “***After they prayed**, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly*” (Acts 4:31). When these people prayed, something happened. Miraculous answers to

prayer abounded as they trusted wholeheartedly in the One to Whom they prayed. Peter's miraculous release from prison (see Acts 12) further confirmed to them that prayer moved God to respond.

Think about Paul and his numerous requests for prayer: "*Pray continually*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17); "*And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints*" (Ephesians 6:18); "*With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may count you worthy of His calling, and that by His power He may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith*" (2 Thessalonians 1:11). Paul wasn't asking that mere words be lifted to God. He was earnestly seeking the response that God would give in answer to those prayers.

***"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"*** (Matthew 6:33).

Because of their knowledge of God from the Hebrew Bible, the early Church understood God's conditions for answering the prayers of His people. The book of James contains many Hebraic themes identified with the early Church: a trusting faith that results in action; concern for the poor and underprivileged; humility versus haughtiness. Apperceiving Proverbs 15:29, "*The Lord is far from the wicked but He hears the prayer of the righteous,*" James reemphasizes God's prerequisite for answered prayer. That prerequisite is righteousness.

*"Therefore **confess your sins** to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a **righteous** man is **powerful and effective**. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops"* (James 5:16-18, emphasis added).

Addressing the prayers of Jesus, Hebrews 5:8 states: "*He was heard because of his **godliness** [righteousness]"*(emphasis added). Again the writer of Hebrews emphasizes the importance of righteousness: "*Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the **teaching about righteousness**. But solid food is for the **mature**, who by **constant use** have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil"* (Hebrews 5:13,14, emphasis added).

The Israelites had a strong sense of identity as a *people* chosen by God. That communal sense enabled them to be connected with any other Hebrew person in the world. Conversely, the western culture is so disconnected and fragmented that few have any concept of their unique identity in Christ as "*a people, a chosen priesthood.*"

Because of the *communal* as well as personal awareness of the Hebraic early Church, the followers of Jesus were deeply concerned with individual and communal righteousness. The Hebrew Scriptures had demonstrated that God had prevented the entire nation of Israel from conquering the city of Ai because of the hidden sin of one man, Achan (see Joshua 7).

God had upheld this same standard of righteousness for the fledgling Church by tak-

ing the lives of Ananias and Sapphira (see Acts 5:1-11). A holy fear gripped any believer who might tread the path of unrighteousness. Perhaps the *absence* of holy fear today has prompted churchgoers to so freely pursue sin and self-gratification with no concern for the consequences to themselves or to others.

The Lord's Supper is based on the Jewish Passover observance. Passover required all leaven to be removed from the land, which then signified a state of holiness (righteousness). Jesus and His disciples could not keep the Passover unless all leaven, or spiritual impurity, had first been swept away. Paul elaborates on the state of righteousness required of those sharing communion:

*For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night He was betrayed, took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, 'This is **My body**, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.' In the same way, after supper He took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the **new covenant in My blood**; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of Me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be **guilty** of sinning against the **body and blood of the Lord**. A man ought to **examine himself** before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord **eats and drinks judgment** on himself. That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. But if we **judged ourselves**, we would not come under judgment (1 Corinthians 11:23-31, emphasis added).*

Partaking of communion in the early Church was a serious communal activity. The early Jewish believers understood the holiness of the Passover and believed Jesus's words, "*This is My body*"; "*This is My blood*." Plato's dualism that separated the sanctity of spirit and matter had not yet influenced the Church. Therefore, the philosophical argument over the communion elements (transubstantiation, consubstantiation, or spiritual remembrance) that so divides denominations today did not separate the true believers.

Hebraic block logic, bolstered by trust, accepted the words of Jesus without further explanation. Jesus was the sinless Son of God. His fulfillment of prophetic Scripture as the sacrificial Lamb could in no way violate God's command to abstain from blood consumption. Thus, Jesus could assure His disciples, "*The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life*" (John 6:63). The faith of the Twelve could accept His words even while the mental struggle of other disciples caused them to turn back and desert Him (see John 6:60-68).

Some research of the early Church supports that the followers of Jesus got together in homes for the specific purpose of sharing communion. This encompassed a time of participation and an opportunity for repentance. Later, when communion took on a sacramental nature, participation was incorporated into the congregational gathering on the Sabbath. A very important personal and communal *scrutiny* element of the early Church was thus lost. Where sins were confessed and righteousness prevailed, prayers were answered in a powerful way. These were "God-size" answers. When sins remain unconfessed, prayer becomes *form without power*.

Paramount in any of the early Church practices was fellowship with God. Without a right relationship with Him there is no other fellowship: *“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ”* (1 John 1:3). A merciful and gracious God provided the means to restore fellowship and righteousness that had been broken by sin: *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

The breaking of bread in the home was critical not only to maintain strong relationships but to preserve righteousness. Home gatherings provided a medium for relational accountability so that the Lord’s instruction for dealing with a person who sins could be followed.

*If your brother sins against you, **go and show him his fault**, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of **two or three witnesses**.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to **the church** [the called-out ones in relationship with one another through Jesus], treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven. For where **two or three come together in My name**, there am I with them* (Matthew 18:15-20, emphasis added).

The primary goal of the above passage is maintenance of individual and communal righteousness, and restoration of the repentant. God knows man’s frail inability to always maintain His standard of righteousness. Even King David, a man after God’s own heart, was an adulterer and murderer. In order to restore fellowship the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to rebuke him. David, his heart broken and contrite before his God, repented and confessed his sin. His intimacy with God was restored.

For the neighborhood home fellowship of today, confession and repentance are key to maintaining ongoing prayer that brings divine answers. Recall that to be “born again” in the early Church meant that you put full trust and reliance in Jesus Christ. Followers of Christ covenanted to enter into a Lord / slave-servant relationship. The foundation of this relationship was mutual love that carried with it a certain responsibility. The *Lordship* of Jesus necessitated obedience from His servant. Lack of trust, unlovingness, or disobedience by the servant was sin, a breaking of fellowship with God. Confession recognized that sin had indeed occurred.

God was seeking a repentance that sorrowed over the separation of intimacy with Him. This sorrow produced repentance that turned away from evil and toward God: *“Yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your **sorrow led you to repentance**. For you became sorrowful **as God intended** and so were not harmed in any way by us. **Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death”** (2 Corinthians 7:9-10, emphasis added).*

Over the centuries the church has acquiesced to a sinner’s confession that an offensive act has been committed. That agreement, however, is cognitive and deals judicial-

ly with the unlawful act. In effect, the perpetrator is focused only on the wrong action, not on the person or the relationship that was violated. This reasoning is incomplete. The Hebraic early Church was relational, not cognitive. Repentance required taking responsibility for *damage to the relationship* as well as restitution for the offense. Note the difference of emphasis from focus on “the hurtful action” to concern with “who was hurt by the action.” Since the reality of being born again was a loving trust in God, the severity of personal sin was all the more poignant—the sin violated Someone with whom the offender had enjoyed a loving and trusting relationship.

Atonement for sin could be made only through the shedding of blood (see Hebrews 9:22). Because of their knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish people recognized the futility of atonement by human effort. Forgiveness required the grace of God, that He would accept the substitutionary atonement of the annual sacrifice of an unblemished lamb. How well Jewish believers understood the importance of the shed blood of Jesus to fulfill the just requirement of their holy God!

The Hebrew Scriptures clearly established that God could not be approached in just any manner without severe consequences. Even the high priest who represented the entire Jewish nation could enter the holy of holies only once a year after the sprinkling of blood. Jesus shared the parable of the wedding banquet to describe the kingdom of God (see Matthew 22:1-14), warning His listeners that some people outrightly resist the King’s offer; while others even kill His messengers.

Some accept His invitation but fail to prepare themselves to enter His presence:

*But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. ‘Friend,’ he asked, ‘how did you get in here without wedding clothes?’ The man was speechless. Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’ (Matthew 22:11-13).*

Early believers recognized that even earthly kings had standards for entry into their presence. Esther understood this when Mordecai implored her to approach her husband, King Xerxes, on behalf of the Jews about to be annihilated:

*All the king’s officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court **without being summoned** the king has but one law: that he be **put to death**. The only exception to this is for the king to **extend the gold scepter** to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king (Esther 4:11).*

As you read Hebrews 4:16, compare the conditions of approaching that earthly king to drawing near our Lord: “*Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*” Standing alone, this verse might seem to indicate that believers may approach the throne even if filled with unrepentant sin. The early Church, however, clearly understood such presumption to be false. The writer to the Hebrews emphasizes the necessary prerequisite of the shed blood of Jesus:

*He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption...How much more, then, will the **blood of Christ**, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, **cleanse our consciences** from acts that lead to death, so that **we may serve the living God!** (Hebrews 9:12,14, emphasis added).*

It is not through our righteousness that our prayers are heard by God. It is because of our humble reliance on the shed blood of Jesus to cover our sins that we receive forgiveness from Him as we confess and repent. The humble and contrite person who trembles at God's word and trusts Him with heart, soul, mind, and strength is the one esteemed by God (see Isaiah 66:3).

Prayer in the early Church included spiritual warfare. The example of Daniel from the Hebrew Bible demonstrated that *persevering prayer* and *trust in a loving Father* were key to God's response. Demonic forces opposed the ministering angels who brought God's answer (see Daniel 10; Hebrews 1:14). Righteous Daniel prayed for twenty-one days before the heavenly messenger, with the help of the archangel Michael, broke through with God's response. Jesus voiced the parable of the persistent widow (see Luke 18:1-8) to encourage His followers to pray without ceasing: "*And will not God bring about justice for His chosen ones, who **cry out to Him day and night?***" (Luke 18:7, emphasis added).

Satan is aware of the importance of righteousness combined with prayer that perseveres until the answer is received. If he cannot hinder through unconfessed sin, he will discourage God's people from praying by instilling doubt and unbelief that the Lord will ever answer. This is why the intimate righteousness of the neighborhood home fellowship is critical to encourage each other to persist in prayer. A home fellowship of today that does not experience God-sized answers to their prayers may have already given way to Satan's scheme. [See also *The Restoration of Spiritual Gifts* by Mike and Sue Dowgiewicz. This booklet discusses the coordinated use of spiritual gifts as weapons of warfare in faith communities.]

***"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.***

***Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching"*** (Hebrews 10:24,25).

The home fellowships of the early Church encouraged participation in communion through the mutual upholding of biblical standards. The home gatherings represented the location in which individuals were included or excluded from fellowship. It would have been unthinkable for a person to join a home fellowship for purely social reasons as do many believers today.

The Bible has established criteria for God's people to have fellowship with each other. The Word also establishes a precedent that men and women are influenced for good or for evil by the close relationships they keep.

Study the following verses:

***"He who **walks with the wise** grows wise, but a **companion of fools** suffers harm"*** (Proverbs 13:20, emphasis added).

*“A violent man **entices his neighbor and leads him** down a path that is not good” (Proverbs 16:29, emphasis added).*

*“Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may **learn his ways and get yourself ensnared**” (Proverbs 22:24, emphasis added).*

*“Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also **may be tempted**” (Galatians 6:1, emphasis added).*

*“Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have **nothing to do with him**” (Titus 3:10, emphasis added).*

The right to separate from evildoers in order to uphold righteous standards is a biblical prerogative. Paul emphasized the importance of communal righteousness in his admonishment to the believers in Corinth: *“When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord”* (1 Corinthians 5:4,5).

Note: Because of the dualism so prevalent in the church today, it is difficult for many to believe that God would actually use Satan to perfect His people. The Scriptures demonstrate that God used Satan to test Job (see Job 1:6-2:10) and to sift Peter (Luke 22:31). God also uses him in the church to destroy the sin nature in His people when all other human elements fail. That is why Paul writes about believers who live close to the fringe of righteousness but still make it to heaven: *“He himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames”* (1 Corinthians 3:15).

***“The wicked man flees though no one pursues,  
but the righteous are as bold as a lion”*** (Proverbs 28:1).

Consider the importance of interpersonal influence as it may affect fellow believers in your home fellowship who prayerfully trust God in spiritual warfare:

*When you are about to go into battle, the priest shall come forward and address the army...He shall say: ‘Hear, O Israel, today you are going into battle against your enemies. Do not be **fainthearted or afraid**; do not be **terrified** or give way to **panic** before them.’ Then the officers shall add, ‘Is any man afraid or fainthearted? Let him **go home** so that his brothers will not become **disheartened** too’ (Deuteronomy 20:2,3,8, emphasis added).*

Right relationships can spur believers on to greater love, courage, and service for the Lord. Wrong relationships can deter His people from the valor and courage required to accomplish His purposes through them. Load-bearing in a neighborhood home fellowship enables Christians to support each other in a personal way so that they can carry out God’s purposes. Courage and valor are as highly esteemed in the Bible as they are



in Israel today. The Israeli military leaders of today are the ones whose wisdom and courage have won previous battles as they *led*, not sent, their men into the fray.

Biblical men of courage attracted one another. 1 Samuel 14 illustrates Jonathan's courage for the Lord at Micmash: "*Jonathan said to his young armor-bearer, 'Come, let's go over to the outpost of those uncircumcised fellows. Perhaps the Lord will act in our behalf. Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few'*" (1 Samuel 14:6). The same courageous regard for God's honor is displayed by David against Goliath: "*David said to the Philistine, 'You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied'*" (1 Samuel 17:45).

From the time they first met, these two valiant men were drawn to each other: "*And Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love for him, because he loved him as he loved himself*" (1 Samuel 20:17). Their courage produced a wonderful devotion that was eulogized by David: "*I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of women*" (1 Samuel 1:26).

People who are courageous for God attract other courageous people to themselves. The prophet Samuel describes the "men of valor" who joined David:

*These are the names of David's mighty men: Josheb-Basshebeth, a Tahkemonite, was chief of the Three; he **raised his spear** against eight hundred men, whom he killed in one encounter. Next to him was Eleazar son of Dodai the Ahohite. As one of the three mighty men, he was with David when they taunted the Philistines gathered at Pas Dammim for battle. Then the men of Israel retreated, but he **stood his ground** and struck down the Philistines till his hand grew tired and froze to the sword. The Lord brought about a great victory that day. The troops returned to Eleazar, but only to strip the dead. Next to him was Shammah son of Agee the Hararite. When the Philistines banded together at a place where there was a field full of lentils, Israel's troops fled from them. But Shammah **took his stand** in the middle of the field. He defended it and struck the Philistines down, and the Lord brought about a great victory (2 Samuel 23:8-12).*

These three were joined by thirty other mighty men who embodied courage beyond the average. Who are the ones in your life on whom you can count to come alongside you to stand firm in God's mighty power when trials and spiritual battles assail you?

Now consider the home fellowship of today in light of the early Church: Righteousness produces boldness. Think of the importance of courage. Valiant people attract other people of courage. Do you believe that your close relationships in the faith reflect you? If you do, look honestly at yourself and those to whom you are close. Do they exhibit the abiding presence of Jesus? Is He producing His fruit through each of you? (Ponder the vine and branches relationship of John 15:1-17.) The writer to the Hebrews described the importance of courage and encouragement to keep Christ-followers from sin's trap:

*But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we **hold on to our courage** and the hope of which we boast. See to it, brothers, that none*

*of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But **encourage one another daily**, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first (Hebrews 3:6,12-14, emphasis added).*

As you find yourself being pressured more and more by the ever-evolving standards of the world system, prayerfully immerse yourself in God's Word. Beseech Him to fill you with "all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (see Colossians 1:9). The Israelites of Jeremiah's time succumbed to the lure of deception and worldly gratification. Heed God's warning to them: "Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the **ancient paths**, ask where the **good way is**, and **walk in it**, and you will find **rest for your souls**" (Jeremiah 6:16, emphasis added). Does God's rest mean that your circumstances will improve, your trials subside, your temptations cease? Probably not, but your *soul*, your arena of emotional and decisional response, will find rest in the midst of the turmoil. God's "ancient paths" call for righteousness and trust. Let us spur each other on to walk in them.

## **The Home Fellowship: Load-bearing Relationships**

***"Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply from the heart"*** (1 Peter 1:22).

Remember that the Hebraic early Church was both spiritual and practical. The previous section explored the critical "vertical element" of the home fellowship, that is, the process by which believers in a home fellowship uphold a righteousness that leads to holy boldness for the sake of the Kingdom. Such believers attract others who are courageous for the Lord. This chapter addresses the "horizontal elements" of the early Church. These are the *enactments* of your faith because of your love for the Lord Jesus.

As with your forefathers in the early Church, only by His grace through the power of the Holy Spirit can you live out the biblical mandates. The keys to the horizontal element in the home fellowship are *mentoring* and *role modeling*. The seven-day-a-week commitment of those in the home fellowship is the avenue by which the wisdom of the older men and women can be incorporated into the lives of younger men and women. This is the means by which the *ish*, the mature man, and the *zaken*, the Hebraic elder, can have their most profound effect on the lives of the less mature.

Because of the intimacy grown and nurtured in the home fellowship, loving correction can be given to those who act foolishly in their responsibility toward God and toward others. As spiritual extended family you have an obligation of love to confront your brother or sister to help that person make Christlike changes in his or her walk (see 1 Thessalonians 5:14; 2 Thessalonians 3:15).

Just how important is the restoration of the wisdom and experience of older men and women in the church today? We can't emphasize it enough. Keep in mind that this loss is a post-World War II phenomenon. If the vitality of the early Church is to be fully recaptured, the wisdom of age and experience must once again be cherished by believers.

***“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and His love is made complete in us”*** (1 John 4:11,12).

In the Hebraic model of the neighborhood home fellowship, when your family joins together with other families and individuals for worship, sharing, and fellowship, these gatherings are special. They are time spent with friends who are *spiritual relatives*—family you look forward to being with, family with whom you are developing an ever-deepening, load-bearing relationship. If you don’t see these occasions as opportunities to share your life with kinfolk you care about, your gathering will turn impersonal. The activity, not the people, will become your priority. Instead of strengthening the quality of your relationships as you encourage each other through prayer and testimony that enhances trust in God, each gathering will in time become a duty, an obligation for you and your family. After awhile you’ll look at coming together as “attending a service.”

Many years ago our friend Karl taught us the concept of “load-bearing.” Sitting in our living room one afternoon, he pointed to an open beam that supported the ceiling. “That beam is continually carrying the weight of the roof;” he observed. “The roof depends on it. We need that kind of load-bearing relationship among believers today.” His words remind us of the intimacy that Paul must have had in mind: *“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn”* (Romans 12:10,15), and, *“Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others”* (Philippians 2:4).

When you get together with believers in a home fellowship, think of that gathering an extension of what you have already been doing in your home. The home fellowship should never compensate for what you’re not doing in your own home. Believers should never try to make up for what is lacking through irresponsibility in someone else’s family. It is appropriate to help others develop reliability, but never step in to take on responsibility that is rightly theirs. A number of church leaders have admitted to us that many programs in their churches were designed to compensate especially for undependable fathers. Irresponsibility becomes an increasing burden on others and perpetuates the sin that has fed it.

A home fellowship must support the *home* as the *basic building block* of spiritual development. If you are not leading the way in your own home by establishing some sort of regular spiritual focus with your family, don’t expect a home fellowship to provide a “Sunday school” program to do it for you! The times in a home gathering when children do share and receive ministry should not be the *only* occasion during the week when principles of godly living are discussed with them. Most parents are glad to share ideas of activities that they are doing at home to help their children to better love, serve, and experience God. Just ask! Your children really do need to see *you* as their primary spiritual authority, a principle that’s right out of Scripture!

If other families demonstrate good habits and practices that you would like to develop in your own home, ask for help until these qualities are part of your family life. For example, if you are frustrated by a strong-willed toddler’s incessant activity, ask for suggestions (and prayer!) from parents in your group who have learned from experience how to survive with victory. If your teenager suddenly seems uncommunicative or withdrawn, seek prayer and counsel from those who have gained insight through their own

experiences and investigation. God really does want you to raise godly children and has provided resources who can minister truth and wisdom to you.

One mother expressed her dismay over her thirteen-year-old daughter's occasional outbursts of tearful screaming. Another mom with a daughter the same age acknowledged that her daughter also had emotional flare-ups. This mother then shared counsel that had worked in her own situation. She said that during such tearful occasions with her daughter, she would wrap her arms around the girl to affirm that she understood the inner turmoil and pain and frustration. She would then firmly insist that screaming was an unacceptable way to vent these emotions.

This woman and her husband had already established pre-determined consequences for disobedience in this realm of behavior. When her daughter had calmed down, the mom reminded her of these, as well as the family goal of maintaining the home as a sanctuary of peace. In this way the girl was able to learn to take responsibility for her decision of whether or not to obey the family standards of behavior, for she was aware of the consequences. She was also presented opportunity to expand her awareness of the needs of others in her family for peace in the home, and to take her eyes off herself. This type of sharing encourages others to bear one another's burdens and to give glory to God for His wisdom and compassion.

The home fellowships in which the writers have participated have abided by two principles:

- The presence of Jesus in our midst must be the foremost consideration.
- Children must be welcomed as integral members of the body.

Consider this: If Jesus doesn't "show up" in your gathering, should you? In other words, true unity is really representative of your own ongoing fellowship with Jesus and your heavenly Father: *"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ"* (1 John 1:3). When your relationship with Jesus is intimate, your home fellowship gatherings will reflect that. The Lord Himself will guide your time together through His Spirit.

If your fellowship with God isn't personal, then something will be lacking in all of your other relationships. Without intimacy with God and others, you will in time try to create a false sense of "fellowship" in your gatherings. For example, you might use singing and music to "conjure up a mood" that makes people feel good. It provides a soulful high but doesn't restore lost fellowship with God. That can be done only through repentance and restoration.

Beware of another potential pitfall when small groups come together. No one individual should "sweat the outcome" of your gathering and try to control what happens. If this occurs, you have the return of the *sacerdotal*, someone attempting to mediate between you and Jesus. Be alert for heavy reliance on prepared materials as your primary reason to gather, rather than your love of Jesus and of each other. Do your leaders show a greater interest in Jesus and you than in trying to achieve a desired goal when you meet? Over years of ministry we have observed that when the sacerdotal shows up, the Holy Spirit is silent.

***“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of My Father in heaven”*** (Matthew 18:10).

Home fellowships should never treat children as “second-class citizens” of God’s kingdom. Jesus admonished His disciples to humble themselves and change to become like little children (see Matthew 18:3,4). This perspective can revolutionize your own view of yourself as a “child of God.” Are you able to humbly entrust yourself to Him the same way you desire your children to trust you?

Before you consider children a potential nuisance in your gatherings, ponder the Lord’s words about them. By encouraging them to share their insights and questions, you are reflecting the value you place on them. Even the elders permitted the twelve-year-old Jesus a forum in the temple to share *“His understanding and His answers”* (see Luke 2:47).

One home fellowship to which we were committed consisted of six family units totaling twelve children, ages one to seventeen, and eleven adults. Generally when we assembled as a group, the adults and older children sat in a circle while the little ones played with interlocking blocks, tiny cars, coloring books, and picture books in the middle in a designated area. (A colorful quilt could mark the boundaries of your play area.) The toys were set aside just for home fellowship times, so no one had “ownership” over them. Even the older children sometimes kept their hands busy with plastic blocks while their ears were tuned in!

Often one of the little ones would crawl into an empty lap for a quiet story or take an available hand for a drink in the kitchen while discussion was going on. The adults became aunts and uncles to these children, and the teens were regarded as big brothers and sisters. Thus, even though few in the group had extended family locally, relationships developed to a certain level of family intimacy.

On Sundays when our home fellowship gathered with other home fellowships in our congregation for praise and worship, we were often there an hour before the worship began. The children played together while the adults supervised and drank coffee, talked, and prayed. Our fellowship family sat together with the children during the praise and worship. Because of the extended love and care, you couldn’t tell to which adults the children belonged!

We have found that children who aren’t accustomed to quiet play gradually learn. When outright rebellion flares, the parent can accompany the offender to a bedroom to handle the situation in the manner he or she chooses. Consistent commitment by the adults and the example set by peers and older children help more active children settle in. However, we also have no unrealistic expectations that a two-year-old will sit quietly for an hour either! Parents are encouraged to allow others to help with child care and to discuss what they consider acceptable behavior parameters. This not only gives them a break but fosters trusting attachments between the children and adults in the fellowship. Anyone can wipe a nose or hold a little hand on a walk-break!

Spontaneous midweek gatherings strengthen these relationships. Barbecues, nature hikes, slide shows, home videos, picnics, impromptu prayer times, game nights—all are expressions that say “We care”. Not every person can make every get-together, and that’s all right. Each one knows that he or she is only a phone call away for praying,

rejoicing, and load-bearing. For single and divorced members, these relationships are especially vital as the love they share in the home fellowship may represent the most comforting source of family care that they are experiencing.

We've found that it is productive to occasionally break by gender into different areas of a home. Older children often enjoy participating in discussions with adults if they feel that they will be heard. Either gender can supervise the activity of the little ones. If the discussion seems inappropriate for young people, the older children can head outside for a break with the younger ones or for a snack in the kitchen. The keys are *flexibility* and *adaptability*. If you meet in a home that isn't normally "childproof", the hosts can move the untouchables out of reach and the parents can bring toys for their own children, confining their activities to a designated spot.

Some home fellowships alternate adults (both men and women) to supervise activities with the children for part of the time. The activity depends on the particular talents of the person in charge and the age of the children. Examples are songs, crafts, storytelling, baking, games. Because relational contact is maintained during the week through personal visits or by phone, the children feel as though they are with family. New additions can be lovingly incorporated into the fellowship. Both adults and children learn to carry on conversations with all age groups, a skill often undeveloped in this society and church culture that epitomize homogeneous groups.

If the children squabble with each other, provide an opportunity for them to resolve it (but not to the point of tantrums or belligerence!). We encourage parents not to step in too early nor to feel unduly embarrassed if their children's behavior is not letter-perfect. Disagreements can be learning opportunities for yielding rights and helping one another. Sometimes the older children can intervene in creative ways that encourage their sense of responsibility, too.

Some parents may seem oblivious to the disruptive behavior of their own children. This is a prime opportunity for the gray-haired mentors to take the parents aside to discuss appropriate "house rules" so that the apprehension levels of others can be diminished. Parents whose children have already graduated from that stage may be able to offer helpful recommendations based on their own previous experiences.

***"Therefore, as we have the opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers"*** (Galatians 6:10).

Seeking ways to bless the people around you, particularly those in your spiritual family, demonstrates a heart filled with gratefulness for all that God has done for you and in you and through you. It is in the fertile soil of loving relationships that you are able to truly *discern needs* that you can then fill. A single mother in our home fellowship had undergone a painful divorce and felt emotionally and physically drained. Her nine-year-old daughter was very special to us, and each family in the fellowship spent extra time including her in family activities: sledding, walking the dog, playing at others' homes. Both mother and child were able to regroup and continue with joy. In fact, this family has since moved out-of-state, and we *still* exchange calls and letters as "family."

Remember that the early Church came together *spiritually prepared* to encounter Jesus. It is imperative that you prepare yourself and your family before you gather to wor-

ship: *“When you come together, **everyone** has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All must be done for the **strengthening of the church**”* (1 Corinthians 14:26, emphasis added). Worshipers coming together should spiritually prepare themselves in advance, anticipating to participate as the Holy Spirit leads.

Don't wait for the scheduled gathering to roll around in the hope that whatever is ailing you will somehow be “fixed” when you meet for worship. Each day has its own troubles. As you face these with one another's help, you can focus on *God and His moving in the body* in your gatherings. Set aside the distracting worries and anxieties of what you may have to face when you get home. Concentrate instead on the majesty and sovereignty of God. He is aware of all you are going through. Worship Him!

***“Do not withhold good from those who deserve it, when it is in your power to act”*** (Proverbs 3:27).

There is a close connection between *caring* for someone and *sharing* with that person. Apperception of verses in the Hebrew Bible lay the groundwork for the New Testament. For example, Paul apperceived Proverbs 3:27, above, in these verses: *“But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also **excel in the grace of giving**...Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be **equality**”* (1 Corinthians 8:7,13, emphasis added).

Jesus recognized that people have material needs for which they work. His parable in Matthew 20:14,15 addresses the landowner and the hired workers in the vineyard: *“I want to give the man who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?”* If you are part of a home fellowship, ask yourself, “What benefit do others receive from me? Am I a gracious giver of myself to those whom I profess are spiritual family? Does my (sometimes sacrificial) availability reflect my appreciation for all that my Father has given to me?”

Financial responsibility to others in the faith is based on the Hebraic understanding that sees all things as God's. The early Church clearly recognized this: *“All the believers were **one** in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they **shared everything** they had”* (Acts 4:32, emphasis added). James reiterated responsibility for the well-being of others: *“Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, ‘Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not **accompanied by action**, is dead”* (James 2:15-17, emphasis added).

The Holy Spirit often prompts His people to meet the specific need of another. How often the authors have been the recipients of the exact dollar amount required at a certain time! For example, we had no sooner arrived at our destination a thousand miles from home when the car radiator failed. We had no funds for this unexpected glitch, but a family friend agreed to repair it for a certain amount. The following day two checks arrived totaling the whole amount of the repair. Neither donor knew of our specific need but had responded to the urging of the Holy Spirit to send help!

Good deeds of charity to meet genuine needs were a hallmark of Hebraic daily life. The *“righteousness [that] delivers from death”* (see Proverbs 10:2, 11:4) was no abstract

concept but a deliberate donation of material goods to meet real needs. The Hebrew word for righteousness means “**acts** of right or justice,” or what we would call “charity.” The attitude that God demanded toward a needy brother was this: “**Give generously to him and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be **openhanded** toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land**” (Deuteronomy 15:10,11, emphasis added). From a Hebraic standpoint, *to do that which was right* constituted worship of God. To love God was to love your fellow man in a way that met his needs.

A key Hebraic principle of the synagogue that was carried into early Church practice was the *economic well-being* of spiritual family members. Paul chastised the Thessalonians who were slack about working because providing for one’s family was key to maintaining a good witness for the Lord in their community. To train an individual in skills that would enable him to earn a living gave him dignity and provided him the means to help others in their need.

**“And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother”** (1 John 4:21).

Weigh this Hebraic view of a Christian life: The essence of the love that Jesus refers to lays not in what you say but in what you *do*. Jesus linked the final judgment with “*whatever you **did** for one of the least of these*” (see Matthew 25:40, emphasis added). Sheer hypocrisy is living in a manner that refutes your moral-sounding words: “*Even a child is known by his **actions**, by whether his **conduct** is pure and right*” (Proverbs 20:11, emphasis added). Paul exhorted Philemon, “*I pray that you may be **active** in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have **refreshed** the hearts of the saints*” (vv. 6,7).

The living witness of your faith testifies to your ability to fully fathom your manifold treasures in Jesus as you share them with others. As those you encounter see more of Christ’s love in action through you, they will begin to attribute more to Him working in you and less to you as a “good person.” Thus they will “*see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven*” (see Matthew 5:16).

James exhorts the faith community to “*show [your] faith by what [you] do*” (see 2:18). This outworking of a loving faith takes *time*, the commodity people seem to treasure most and have at their discretion the least. The choices to be made in the use of your daily twenty-four hours can seem staggering unless you ask yourself, “*What would Jesus have ME do?*”— then abide by the answer the Holy Spirit reveals.

Aside from your responsibilities to your family, strengthen those with whom you are growing in Jesus. As “*living stones*” (see 1 Peter 2:5) in God’s spiritual house, you are a reflection of Christ in you and are bound by the exhortation of Peter: “*Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your **good deeds** and **glorify God** on the day He visits us*” (1 Peter 2:12, emphasis added). Again, only intimate, load-bearing relationships will spur you on to actively expend your life for Jesus’s sake. Your acts of kindness in no way earn you salvation. They are the outpouring of Spirit-driven love that *evidences* the work of God in you.



In Israel we saw a wonderful living enactment of Paul's word to the Galatians, "*Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ*" (6:2). On buses younger people gladly and automatically got up to let the older folks sit down, fulfilling (perhaps unwittingly) the injunction, "*Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord*" (Leviticus 19:32). Passengers stepping off the bus to carry baby carriages onboard for mothers. People staggering on the rain-slippery floor immediately were met with a multitude of outstretched steadying hands. The list could go on... We were reminded of Jesus's teaching about the Samaritan when He was asked, "*Who is my neighbor?*" (see Luke 10:29-37). In essence, He answered that our neighbors are all those for whom, through the love of Jesus, we reach out to *bear their load*.

***"Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality"*** (Romans 12:13).

The Hebraic early Church excelled at hospitality, another tangible demonstration of love. Opening one's home to others was deeply engrained in Middle Eastern culture and was expected among Gentiles as well as Jews. Biblical hospitality is an entirely different phenomenon than what we in the United States regard as "inviting people over". Americans may love to entertain, but our gatherings are more oriented to the *activity* we do (barbecuing, playing cards, discussing a study book or video) rather than to the relational development with the guests themselves. For instance, many church programs involving a home setting use a Bible study or some prescribed curriculum as the focal point for gathering.

Program-based agendas often emphasize content conveyance rather than the *needs and concerns* of the participants. Consider the lasting impact the Word of God makes when biblical truths are addressed to current life situations; these become "living parables". How much likelier that God's truths will result in *changed lives*, particularly if those truths are shared with people who have a genuine concern for an individual as "family". Programmed studies may inform and interest the participants, but unless the information can be role-modeled and somehow applied, it will most likely be stored on the mind's back burner and probably forgotten.

Since much of the western Christian community has lost awareness of the importance of the home, hospitality from the heart has become scarce. The book of Hebrews reminds believers, "*Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it*" (Hebrews 13:2). Among the pastors and church leaders we have encountered, few have practiced the criterion of hospitality required in Titus 1:8 and 1 Timothy 3:2. At the retreat center, we found through survey that seldom are believers invited into the homes of others in the congregation just to deepen their relationships. Those who do share a closer-knit camaraderie often have points of contact outside the spiritual realm, such as children on the same sports team or carpool activity.

In Israel we were overwhelmed by the hospitality we encountered, a very deep warmth and regard for *people*. Hospitality was and is a basic function of the Jewish home. (We realize that open-hearted warmth also characterizes many European and Asian cultures in general.) This practice, as the Scriptures make plain, was central in the

Hebraic heritage of the early Church. Peter instructed God's people, "*Offer hospitality to one another*" (1 Peter 4:9). Certainly the weekly joyous celebration of the Sabbath is an avenue for reunion. But other spontaneous get-togethers offer insight into the desire for commitment and depth of relationship.

One afternoon as we walked around our Jerusalem suburb of Pisgat Zeev, we prayed to encounter an Israeli family that had been settled in "the land" for a long time. Suddenly, two German Shepherds bounded up to us, pursued by their shouting, laughing master. Rebuking them in Hebrew, he turned to us, extended his hand, and introduced himself as Yehuda. He added, "You are Americans staying with Schlossberg family? They good people!" We nodded eagerly, and shared with him some of our experiences and impressions of Israel. (We should note here that although English sometimes failed him, Yehuda spoke fluent French, and Sue was able to recall enough high school French to enable a fairly flowing conversation!) As he turned to leave, Yehuda said with a twinkle, "You come to my house soon."

Later, back at the Schlossbergs', we asked Bert if invitations like that were meant to be taken seriously. "Sure," he answered. "Just pin him down to a time." The next time we encountered Yehuda on a walk, we continued our conversation where we had left off. Again he stated, "You come to my house." Smiling, we asked, "When?" Grinning back, he responded, "Friday. Nine AM." Friday morning arrived and we climbed the flower-bedecked steps of Yehuda's home, greeted by the barking dogs. As we entered the airy, casually cluttered home, Yehuda's cheerful wife Berthe grabbed our hands and led us up to the kitchen. "Please, you sit here." Bustling about the kitchen, she asked, all at the same time, "Do you want coffee? We have juice too. How about soda? Yehuda, here, put these pastries out. I just got them—they're wonderful. I'll get some fruit for you too. Do you like the fruit in Israel?" Overwhelmed by the concern for our gastronomic well-being, we could only nod and smile and nod and smile. As we all dipped into the feast set before us, questions, comments, and responses flowed between us. We felt as welcomed as if we had known them for years!

Sharing family adventures (they have five children) and mutual concerns for the declining moral state of our respective cultures, we found so many planes of commonality between us. What sealed our care for each other, though, was our expression of love for the Bible. We had gleaned so much from the Hebrew Scriptures in the past weeks and were able to point time and again to verses that reiterated God's promises to His Jewish people. Finally, moved by the Spirit, Mike tearfully asked forgiveness from Berthe and Yehuda on behalf of his Polish ancestors for the atrocities committed against the Jews during the Holocaust. More tears flowed as we hugged one another. When it came time to leave, they both insisted, "Please, wait. Another pastry, more fruit. We must talk some more." (As we later commented, "When you prepare to leave an Israeli home, make sure you plan your departure ahead of time. It'll take you an hour to get out the door!")

Subsequent visits provided the same generosity and kindness. At one point Berthe stared at us wonderingly and asked, "Are there other Christians who believe like you do?" We had been sharing with them the love we felt for the Jewish people because God loves them, and avowed our beliefs from Romans 11 that He had a special plan to be fulfilled in and through them. We assured them that we were not alone in this. With what

sorrow we hugged each other good-bye the morning of our flight home! What had started out as hospitality had ended up in loving friendship.

We believe that the absence of biblical hospitality in the American Christian community today contributes to the shallowness of the relationships seen in so many churches. One friend noted that the depth of relationship in her congregation appeared to be a mile wide and an inch deep! Hebraic hospitality offers spontaneity so that friends feel free to drop in without prior arrangement. This openness to unannounced intrusion also makes it easy for them to turn to one another in their time of need. Our western scheduling of every church gathering and activity makes it that much more difficult to spontaneously turn to other believers when problems befall us. It is ironic how natural it was for us as children to stop by our friends' homes. Somehow cultural entrapments take over until what once seemed so natural during youth is later perceived as intrusive when we "mature."

One chilly Jerusalem night our hosts Bert and Exie realized that it had been weeks since they had seen their neighbors across the street. Around 9 PM, after we had retired to our room, they headed out and knocked on the neighbors' door. Eli and Rivka answered in their bathrobes, laughing with joy to see their friends. They immediately lit up the house, set out goodies, and filled the next three hours with animated conversation. You need the honesty in your relationships to welcome unplanned visits, or to express that the timing really is unsuitable. Just make sure that presuppositions of how others *might* react don't keep you from spontaneous care. Even a note on the door indicating that you stopped by when they were out demonstrates that they were on your mind!

If you examine the levels of relationship you have with the various people in your life, you might be shocked to find how shallow so many of them are. How many of your conversations ever get beyond *issues*: politics, the high cost of living, the decline of morals, crime, the alcohol and drug problems of young people nowadays? How many dig beneath to the things that pain you and hinder your walk with God? True load-bearers *"rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn"* (Romans 12:15). They pray and fast with each other to find God's answers to the painful or confusing situations afflicting them. They also have an open heart attitude that doesn't flinch at godly admonishment: *"Faithful are the wounds of a friend"* (Proverbs 27:6). Such wounds require deep commitment and compassion born out of times of shared sorrow and joy.

On several occasions we challenged retreaters and churchgoers:

- Name three people in your congregation to whom you would turn in time of deep trouble in your life.
- Name three people in your congregation with whom you would ask to do an activity.

When we compared and analyzed the results, the responses verified how shallow and uncommitted so many of the relationships were within those congregations. Few could come up with three names for each category (apart from the pastor's name, which appeared regularly under the "time of deep trouble" category. Seldom was the pastor a person with whom people shared social activity.) Of those who had listed six names, we investigated further. Many admitted they probably wouldn't in reality contact some of the names; these had just seemed like people who would be understanding or fun. In light of this data, Christian relationships that can "carry each other's burdens" are relatively few.

***“Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ says the LORD Almighty”*** (Zechariah 4:6).

One of the vertical/horizontal elements of the early Church was *decision making*. (“Vertical” refers to your relationship with God; “horizontal” to those in the earthly realm.) Hebraic believers were persistent in seeking God’s *rhema*, His revealed will or decision, rather than leaning on their own reasoning and understanding. The Greek philosophical influence in today’s church leans heavily on rationalization, employing a lot of “pro and con” discussion. With this type of human reasoning come elements of control and manipulation that tend to divide and estrange people.

An earnest devotion to seek God’s guidance testifies that Jesus Christ is the Head of His *“called-out ones”*. When God’s people long to restore intimacy with Him, a desire for His guidance is an early indicator: *“This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will yet come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, ‘Let us go **at once to entreat the Lord and seek the Lord Almighty. I myself am going**’”* (Zechariah 8:20,21, emphasis added). Pursuit of the Lord’s continuous guidance must first be a matter of priority in your *home*. When you refuse to listen to God’s guidance, Zechariah warns: *“When I called they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,’ says the Lord Almighty”* (7:13).

How detrimental to others in your home fellowship or even at the congregational level to expect God to manifest His power and presence in your midst when you neither seek Him nor uphold His holiness in your own home. A number of times when we have been with a group that was seeking God, the Spirit would quicken to us or to someone else in the group, *“The sin of Achan is present. God will not listen to your request.”* (See Joshua 7.) Achan had tried to hide his personal sin. God had held that sin against all of Israel by letting them be defeated by the people of Ai. When the sin was revealed and dealt with, Israel was able to conquer their enemy. So, be conscious of tolerating hidden sin that restrains God from guiding and acting on your behalf.

Again, the pattern of spiritual guidance and decision-making experienced in the home fellowship must be an extension of what is already practiced within the family. The Church of the New Testament relied solely on the Holy Spirit and His illumination of the Hebrew Scriptures to bring understanding to their walk with God. They had no access to the libraries and videos of today. As evangelist David DuPlessis wisely observed, *“They had to depend on the Holy Spirit and His teaching and guidance. They had no other option but to minister, to preach and to write under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.”* Seek the Holy Spirit. Do not proceed without the *rhema* of God, His guidance that brings with it the power for fulfillment: *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man **remains in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do **nothing****”* (John 15:5, emphasis added).

***“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts’”*** (Isaiah 55:8,9).

From the Hebrew Bible the early Church was able to apperceive God’s sovereignty in decision making: *“The Lord works out everything for His **own ends**...In his heart a*

*man plans his course, but the **Lord determines his steps***" (Proverbs 16:4,9, emphasis added). Decision making is a crucial facet of relationships that are *committed* to one another and *dependent* on reliant trust in God. Worldly methods or processes that are used in decision making can cause tension among friends if they feel that bad counsel was given or good counsel not acted upon. Both in the home and in the home fellowship, be sure to follow decision processes that God has ordained. Biblical examples of decision making include, but are not limited to, the examples that follow.

When the disciples replaced Judas with another man to complete the Twelve, they followed the principle of Proverbs 16:33: "*The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord*", and, Proverbs 18:18, "*Casting the lot settles disputes and keeps strong opponents apart.*" Two disciples had been proposed to fill the void left by Judas. Instead of taking a popularity poll or vote that could have left some still wondering later if the decision had been correct, they "*drew lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the apostles*" (Acts 1:26). By employing this method any time a potential dispute might arise, further controversy is diffused: "*Every decision is from the Lord.*"

Early believers recognized that their hearts were deceptive beyond measure. "*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*" (Jeremiah 17:9). Since childhood they had been nurtured on Proverbs 3:5,6, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight.*" The deceit of Ananias and Sapphira (see Acts 5) and its consequences certainly had warned them about deceiving the Spirit: "*Then Peter said, 'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land?'...When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened*" (Acts 5:3,5).

God's protection method to keep His people from being deceived by their own personal desires included the confirmation of two or three persons. Autocratic decision making by individuals was foreign to them. Rather, the early Church's process of decision making was apperceived from the Hebrew Bible: "*A matter must be established by the testimony of **two or three witnesses***" (Deuteronomy 19:5, emphasis added). The teaching of Jesus reaffirmed this: "*Again, I tell you that if **two of you agree** on earth about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by My Father in heaven*" (Matthew 18:19, emphasis added). Paul reiterated the same principle: "*Every matter must be established by the testimony of **two or three witnesses***" (2 Corinthians 13:1, emphasis added).

The church at Antioch used the witness of spiritual gifts, prayer, worshiping, and fasting to set aside Paul and Barnabas for ministry: "*In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers...While they were **worshiping** the Lord and **fasting**, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'* So after they had **fasted and prayed**, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:1-3, emphasis added).

Fasting had been a component of spiritual life for centuries. Denying the flesh to focus on spiritual matters signified a wholehearted dependence on God for the answers sought. One present-day congregation of three hundred home fellowships in Guatemala encourages two believers from each fellowship to fast one day a week so that each day is bathed in fasting and prayer by a minimum of six hundred believers. They are seeing

mighty interventions of God in their midst! Jesus Himself said, "**When** you fast" (see Matthew 6:16), not *if* you fast. When believers humbly seek to minister to one another through prayerful fasting before His throne, our compassionate Father responds.

God has not left His people to struggle alone to discern His will. Christians are fellow believers committed to seeking God's best for each of His children so that they will be equipped to obey their Lord. Like Paul, earnestly ask God on behalf of one another to "*fill you with the knowledge of His will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding*" (Colossians 1:9). Come before Him in your prayer closet and diligently study His Word for *rhema*. As you entrust yourself to your Lord, He will use your spouse and/or faith family to confirm His plans for you. Walk in assurance that His care for you is constant!