

Should we worry about being agreed?

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By Dixon Cartwright

BIG SANDY, Texas—It's been almost 13 years since *THE JOURNAL* began, in February 1997. How have the churches fared during that moment of time?

Each of us will think of a different answer to that question.

Thirteen years ago certain matters were more important to many people than they are now, and 13 years ago several considerations were much less important to many of those same people.

Who's in charge?

An example concerns doctrine and the entities you choose to be your interpreters of God's will. It has to do with the notion of who's in charge of your life and the way you allow something or someone to shape the most deeply felt and realized bits of your earthly existence.

Thirteen years ago many Church of God folks were still inclined to let something or someone outside themselves have its or his way in those matters.

Now quite a few believe that the only way for us to successfully navigate our lives' twisty passages (whether different or the same as everyone else's) is to control those aspects ourselves. (Philippians 2:12, which advises working out your own salvation, applies here.)

This does not mean that we suddenly, or gradually, come to resent people or things we thought were our superiors in a pecking order.

Quite the contrary. Many Church of God people are more relaxed about those things than they were.

Nowadays if someone believes he is in charge of my life or parts of it, I in effect say let him have his fun. It makes no difference. At least in my case, it doesn't affect the way things really are. (Philippians 2:12 again, except maybe the fear-and-trembling part.)

This is not to suggest that anyone should remain in an abusive or otherwise untenable situation. This is to say that some of us have come to realize we have much more say-so over ourselves, wherever we physically reside, than we realized 10, 20 or 30 years ago.

Cosmic soap bubbles

Looking at these 13 years as one might view a television soap opera, we might be tempted to remember them as populated with quite a few people who in some significant way were emotionally or even mentally challenged.

Our cosmic soap opera is awash with people who, in the name of God, in the process of worshiping God, seem to dislike each other for the subtlest of reasons.

I maintain that this is not really the case, however. I believe there are significant numbers of Church of God folks who do not hate each other.

It only seems that way because so many are prone to mark and disfellowship each other and figuratively stab each other in the back or, a little more kindly, look down their noses at each other and politely refuse to give each other the time of day.

Shunning out of love

The reason I don't think they hate each other is that, in most cases, when they act out their fantasies of disfellowship, shunning and spiritual cold-shoulderism, they really believe they are doing what God wants them to do and that to lovingly shun a fellow believer is sometimes in his best interests.

They do not avoid and disfellowship based on a natural feeling of animosity. They're doing those things because they believe God wants them to.

More than once I have received E-mails or phone calls over these 13 years from people who were planning to travel across the country and inquired if *THE JOURNAL* might know of Sabbath-observing Church of God fellowships along their planned course of travel.

"Do you know of any Church of God in [say] the Nashville, Tenn., area that keeps the early-14th Passover?" a lady asked.

"So you'll be in that area for Passover?" I inquired.

"No, this will be in January. My family and I would like to attend Sabbath services with some of the brethren."

"So why would it make any difference whether the group keeps the early-14th or late-14th Passover if you'll be in that area in January?"

"Well, we want to meet with people who are obeying God."

The woman on the other end of that call sincerely wanted to do whatever it was that God wanted her to do. That was her life. She loved God and was willing to go wherever her love of God might take her.

A legalistic approach

Is there anything wrong with this approach? Many *JOURNAL* readers will say there is, and they will comment that the problem is legalism.

A legalistic approach can indeed be a part of the problem. Yet the situation is more complicated than simply concluding that if a Christian is legalistic he needs to get over his regard for law-keeping.

As many Church of God people realize, the legalistic underpinnings of their belief can be quite logical, based on the premise that God has certain rules, whether they are listed in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 or in “sin lists” someone has discovered in the New Testament.

Even the commands to believe, repent and be baptized are commands to *do* something, and doing something is the definition of a “work.”

If you believe God has a requirement (Old or New Covenant or both) that you must do something if you want to gain salvation, then, by definition, you are a legalist on some level—and so, of course, is God.

Learning to disagree and like it

So what’s the problem?

The problem is not that we must stamp out legalism so we can gracefully walk together in blissful agreement.

And the problem is not that we must stamp out approaches we think are the opposite of legalism so we can cheerfully march alongside each other.

In other words, the problem is *not* how do we learn to agree with each other so we can live in peace with each other.

The problem, rather, is how do we learn to live with each other when we disagree with each other?

Shouldn’t translations make sense?

You know about Amos 3:3, which says in the King James, “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?”

The implication, colored by our filtering of the KJV wording through minds programmed by our understanding of modern English, is that no one in his right mind can expect two people to walk together peacefully unless they agree on every important matter.

A Church of God member cannot be expected to, and should never try to, cooperate, dine, fellowship, even converse with someone who differs with himself on certain test-case points of doctrine and belief.

But have you ever heard anyone say that Amos 3:3 is not a good translation, that Amos 3:3 doesn’t really say that in the original Hebrew?

Other versions of the Bible translate it differently. An example: "Can two walk together except they agree to walk together?" (see the NIV, RSV and Young's Literal Translation).

That's a much better translation, not just because it may be a better rendering of a particular verse. It's also a better translation because it makes more sense.

Things could go better

How have the churches fared over the last 13 years?

A related question is how will they handle the next 13 years?

Things could go much better for us if in this lifetime we could learn to remember to act as if we're civilized when we disagree.