

Friendship — A Lost Art in the Church of God?

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Has friendship become a lost art in the Church of God today? I have heard many stories of people who have left the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) to stand up for what they believe to be the truth of God, who have lamented how they lost so many friends, or none of their friends kept in contact with them at all after they left that church. Has this happened to you?

This happened to myself. Only one good friend made any effort to keep in touch with me after I had left the WCG. Even when I was in the WCG, when they kept the doctrines which I still believe, very few people would ever make the effort to ask me over for dinner, give me a social call on the phone or be the one to come over to start a conversation with me at church. I found myself initiating contact with my friends, who I had great many of, the vast majority of time. I'm sure this experience is the same for many of you out there. How many people have thought of not attending for a while just to see if anybody would care if they were missed? Why do people feel this way?

The situation I mentioned before about no one keeping in contact with you after you left your former church works both ways. My good friend back in Worldwide who still keeps in touch with me, along with others in WCG, have lamented much the same thing—how few of those who have left Global, United, and other places have kept in touch with them. I have been guilty of this myself. There are a number of friends whom I have not seen or spoken to in 4 or 5 years since I left the WCG that I am in the process of reaching out to again. Does this apply to you?

What Priority Are Friends?

Jesus Christ made this profound statement in the Sermon on the Mount: “For where your treasure is (what you prioritize with your money, time, and resources), there your heart will be also” (Matt 6:21). Could this be why friendship—real, outgoing friendship—is such a lost art in the church of God today—because we just don't devote our time, money and resources to it?

Alan Loy McGinnis in his excellent book “The Friendship Factor” makes the following comments about how we prioritize friendship:

As I've watched those who are deeply loved, I've noticed they all believe that people are the basic source of happiness. Their companions are very important to them, and no matter how busy their schedule, they have developed a lifestyle and a way of dispensing their time that allows them to have several profound relationships with people.

On the other hand, in talking with lonely people, I often discover that, though they lament their lack of close companions, they actually place little emphasis on the cultivation of friends... Deep friendship requires cultivation over the years—evenings before the fire, long walks together, and lots of time for talk. It requires keeping the television off so that the two of you can log in with each other...

Why do we seldom relate at such a deep level? Why is there such a shortage of friendship? One simple reason: we do not devote ourselves sufficiently to it. If our relationships are the most valuable commodity we can own in this world, one would expect that everyone everywhere would assign friendship highest priority. But for many, it does not even figure in their list of goals. They apparently assume that love will 'just happen'.

But of course, few of the valuable things in life 'just happen'. When they happen, it is because we recognize their importance and devote ourselves to them. You can have almost anything you want if you want it badly enough. If you want to run the Boston Marathon badly enough you probably can do it. And if you want love you can have that too. It is simply a matter of priorities. Significant

relationships come to those who assign them enough importance to cultivate them. So... assign top priority to your relationships" (*The Friendship Factor*, p 21–22, 24–25).

How important is this subject to God? Let's look at something else that Jesus Christ said during His ministry here on earth. When confronted with the question of which is the greatest commandment, Christ answered the lawyer by not just giving him one commandment. He actually gave him two commands emphasizing just how closely related these two commandments are. He told us to love God with all our heart, mind and soul and then to love one another as ourselves (Matt 22:35–40). How much time and resources do we devote to looking after ourselves and reaching our own goals in life? How much time on the other hand do we devote to cultivate our relationships with others? How do they compare in our lives? The degree to which we devote ourselves to the latter compared to the former is a good measure of how much the fruit of God's Holy Spirit we know as love is a part of our life. How do you rate?

A History to Overcome

I was recently impressed by an excellent historical paper by Alan Ruth on the Trials and Triumphs of the many groups who have sprung from the WCG. In his paper, he makes these fascinating comments.

Going to a Bible bookstore was (and still is) a memorable experience for me. Like a kid in a candy store, I would browse through the many Bible reference aids, Bible helps, commentaries and other Bible study tools in the bookstore. Inevitably I would find my way to the 'cult' section of the bookstore where books were kept on Satanists, new-agers, and groups which the 'Christian world' considered cults. This is where books about 'cults' such as the Worldwide Church of God were. I would thumb through these books and shake my head in disagreement over their view of 'Armstrongism'... There was one topic in these books I particularly disagreed with. I did not like the fact that some authors labeled the WCG as a cult because it supposedly taught salvation by works, a salvation based on law rather than grace... I wondered how writers could say such things about us...

Before I studied the splits, I would have said that the above view of the old WCG (and by extension the splits of today) was unjustified and totally false. In my studies, however, I have found a few grains of truth in these statements. We in the splits do place a strong emphasis on certain doctrines. We can give the impression that we believe we are saved by works of the law (legalistic) although we do not believe this. As some say we seem to 'major in the minors' by focusing a great deal of our attention on certain subjects or behaviors more than others.

It is one thing to be labeled a cult for doctrine. It is another thing to act cultic. We sometimes give the impression that we are cultic or not Christian by our attitude and demeanor toward others. On a personal level, we in the splits may treat others (especially our brethren) coolly or distantly, lacking in warmth of love and concern that is to be our hallmark as Christians. There are members in the splits who have a great deal of understanding and knowledge about many Bible subjects. They are able to show others why they believe what they believe and are strong in explaining doctrines. Yet some of them can be the most distant, aloof, impersonal brethren in the church. They have a mind for doctrines, but they lack very important relationship skills...

One of the biggest problems in the splits is our struggles with relationships between brethren and especially between lay members and church leaders. Our actions speak louder than our words. What we need is some balance, an adjusting of our mental scales to place more weight on relationship skills and the mercy and love of God. In a confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus chided them for meticulously tithing while neglecting the weightier matters of the law, such as justice, mercy and faith (Matt 23:23). They were straining out a doctrinal gnat, but swallowing a camel (v 24).

Could this be what our critics see, that we weigh heavily on some laws and not on other doctrines such as love, forgiveness, and compassion?" (*The Worldwide Church of God Splits: Their Triumphs and Troubles*, p. 29–31)

Better Relationships Still Needed Today

I couldn't agree more with Alan that we need to focus on relationship skills in the church of God today. One thing that I still find in the church today, is the lack of good, detailed material in sermons, in particular, and church

literature on relationship skills. Christian living is the particular area that I am most interested when it comes to God's truth, though I also have a great love for doctrine, prophecy and Bible history. There is so much Christian living material out there which is fantastic that could be used in helping brethren relate to others better and develop stronger marriages and families that the church hardly touches on that I have purchased from Christian bookstores.

To illustrate what I mean, out of the average 60 odd sermons you would hear in your church organization in a year, how many of those were devoted to marriage, how many to childrearing, how many to relationship skills? Now compare that to the number of sermons on doctrinal subjects and those on prophecy and those which are more head-knowledge sermons rather than those which have material on relationship skills which you can practically apply in your life. I find that there are lots of general, overview sermons that encourage us to keep the standards but few that go into genuine detail on what those standards are.

When you look through the material on Christian living in any good Christian bookstore discussing subjects like how to build and maintain friendships, communications skills, marriage and how to raise children in great detail, counseling skills and helping those who need help in life, you begin to comprehend some of the superficiality that is there in what the church provides on Christian living that I hope can be reversed in time. There's only so much that can be covered at a time in sermons and church literature coupled with other subjects that the church has to address, but I hope in time the church can provide more material in this vital area of life. I would like to challenge the ministry in all branches of God's church to devote more of their sermons to detailed material on relationship skills. The gospels and the epistles of Paul, in particular, and the many books written on relationship skills that one can pick up in Christian bookstores have so much to offer us on God's way of life that we can and should learn from.

To Love and Be Loved

The secret to happiness is best summed up in the old saying, "To love and to be loved". When we have a cause in our life, when we are devoted to something that is bigger than ourselves that is good, such as God's calling of supporting His work and giving and making people happy, we shall not lack happiness in our lives. Christ said it is more blessed to give than to receive and its only through living the "way of give" that we will be truly happy.

Also, we need to be loved, to have good close friends who aren't just fair-weather friends. We also yearn for a sense of belonging, to have friends who make us feel like we belong. We all want a wide variety of casual friends and acquaintances of both sexes our own age and different age groups as well as a number of friends who we can spend regular time with and who also seek our company even when the chips are down. Being loved more often than not is a direct by product of loving others.

Whenever we lack in any of these areas, of loving others or being loved through friendship, there will be a certain emptiness there. There is a lot of loneliness out there, even in the church, and we have a responsibility as Christians to extend our hands in friendship to those we can help and do our little bit in adding to their sense of belonging. We really can be like a strong family in the church, but its up to all of us to individually, as a committee of one, to do our part in helping add to that sense of community in the church, not to mention helping people we meet in all walks of life. We read in Galatians 6:10, "As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good to all men, especially to those who are of the household of faith".

From a kind word, an encouraging note, a thoughtful gesture, an ear to listen, or an expression of appreciation, to a sacrifice of time, energy or convenience, love is a way of life. And it is a way of life that is not out for recognition. It does what it does because it feels it. And it feels it because it believes in it, and is led by God's Spirit that comes from the God who is love.

Some people seem oblivious to the needs of others. They bypass signals that reveal if a friend is depressed, fatigued, troubled, fearful, or irritated. On the other hand, they may be nonchalant when a friend experiences some achievement or success. Insensitivity is behaving towards friends with indifference, unconcern, a lack of feeling in our response and calloused attitudes. The Bible prophecy in Matt 24:12 about the love of many growing cold has certainly come true in our day and sadly in the church also. Perhaps it was to people like this whom the Apostle Paul offered the advice, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn" (Rom 12:15). God wants us to be alert and caring about our friends and tuned in to their feelings, their needs and those things that they are particularly interested in.

A good friend strives to make friends feel special, to be alert during their time together and to be thinking about them during their time apart. A friend needs to feel they are one chosen among many and that your friendship with them really means something to you.

Overcoming the Obstacles

There are many obstacles to building meaningful friendships in the church today. Being caught up in the cares of the world (Matt 13:22) is one of the most typical. This world presents us so many choices of things to do to occupy our time compared to yesteryear that we can easily take on too much and more than we really need to that we don't spend the time we should with our families and reaching out to those who would appreciate our friendship.

These past few years have been somewhat traumatic for most of us in the church with what has happened in the church. As well as the doctrinal crisis, we have also seen a moral crisis in the church today. Many of our friends who seemed more spiritual when the former association which many of us belonged to upheld the standards and law of God, have since changed dramatically. There used to be a positive peer pressure back then where those who were only superficially converted appeared more spiritual than they really were.

Once that church no longer upheld the standards and kept on emphasizing that we are fully saved now by grace only, there was no longer any external pressure to keep those standards. As a result, the morality that members showed was purely dependent upon the internal discipline that they had or lack thereof. Because of that, we have seen the lives of so many people go off the rails. This has led to a great many broken relationships, divorces, and broken families. A great many of us, who have internalized and held onto those standards, have been affected and hurt by their actions and lost many good friendships as a result. Many of us are still healing.

There are many stages in that healing process but the final stage and one of the most important ones is to once again become outwardly focused on reaching out to others and take a personal interest in the lives and concern of others in the right way. When we are in recovery mode, we can be overwhelmed by our own concerns and problems that we no longer feel very sociable. It's hard to reach out and help out others when we need help ourselves. In time, as we work through those stages, we must reach out for that stage where we can reach out to others and be a generous and caring friend to those who could really be helped by our friendship.

Replace Focus on Self with Focus on Others

Despite all of what has happened in these past few years, we need to move beyond focusing mostly on our own lives and concerns and focus on reaching out and helping our brethren in the church. The preaching of God's truth and way of life in the church by the ministry is the visible part of the feeding the flock commission that the church has. Do you realize that all of us have a part in that commission? Our encouragement, kindly advice, the good times that we give to others and our friendship play a vital role in that commission. Our positive, friendly influence and giving others the spiritual and emotional needs that they have are all a part what others need to reach "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph 4:13). Sometimes our friendship may be all that keeps someone in the church. The way we make it into God's kingdom is to help others make it too!

Our giving should not just be limited to our own in the church. We all should be zealous and enthusiastic about reaching out to the world with God's truth. We are making a difference in people's lives with the way of life and the truths of God we are collectively teaching through preaching the Gospel to the world. We do this out of love for them and because we care for them individually that they would be spared the misery of life without God by mending their ways, turning back to God and living the wonderful way of life that we sometimes take for granted.

Friendship Is All About Giving

In closing this article, I'd like to quote from a sermon given over 10 years ago by Mr. Carn Catherwood called *The Way of Giving* that still to this day is my all-time favorite sermon. This quote emphasizes the main point that I have been driving at that will help us become more of a family in the church of God today and solve the problem of the lack of deep, meaningful friendships that we have in the church. That point is, that following, developing a strong relationship with our Creator, whose Spirit gives us the ability to love others, that we must assign top priority in our life to building our relationships and friendships with others and that we have to plan our giving in order to be the givers that God wants us to be in our lives. Mr. Catherwood makes these excellent comments:

God gives us so many things and He has a measuring stick that He employs in many of those decisions He has to make from time to time when things are to be given to us.

In Luke 6:38, it simply says 'give', *you* the subject, *give* the verb. You give, and what happens if you do, 'and it shall be given unto you'... You always remember the givers, don't you? The interesting thing is God also remembers the givers. Are you a giver? Does God remember you? Do you have His attention? Another point is that the example of the givers is in what creates in many

ways the greatest impression on those who are new and they remember the givers. You offer food, you offer conversation, you offer the warmth of your home to somebody and it builds a bond. It binds us together and us to God because God is the giver of every good and perfect gift and wants us to become givers. God is very sensitive to giving and He responds in dramatic ways...

The two broad ways in the Bible [can be simply summarized] as the way of 'give' and the way of 'get'. How do we move from the way of 'get' to the way of 'give'?

Point one is to ask God to place in you 'goodness' or generosity, the specific fruit of God's Spirit (Gal 5:22) that will eliminate the get motive and desire to be open-hearted, giving and serving.

Point two is to plan your giving. That is, sit down and make an active plan for giving, opportunities, occasions, and situations where you intend to live the way of give. Put some pressure on yourself! Plan it! Don't sort of stumble haphazardly into giving. You can't and you won't! Plan it, organize it, think about it and set it in motion consciously. Isa 32:8 says, 'The generous devise generous things and by generous things do they stand.' Yeah, you have to have a plan!

Plan regular opportunities to give hospitality. They're giving experiences that we need. Maybe once a month, maybe more often. Plan things in your prayer time, especially plenty of intercessory prayer for others. When you ask God to bless someone who is sick, who is weak, who is depressed, you have given them time. It's a reflection of the way of give.

Plan to see those who are sick or elderly. Plan to talk to new members, visitors or those who need someone to talk to or someone whom you haven't talked to for a while. If you're a single man, have an active plan for giving in dating. Plan to use your resources, your money or whatever to give to others. Finally, plan your offerings which you add to your tithes in advance. Plan to increase your Holy Day offerings as time goes by.

In Psalm 37:21, David wrote, 'The righteous shows mercy and gives.' Is that a description of you? '(Your name) shows mercy and gives.' Let's determine to give as we've never given before. To give our lives to God in submission to His will first and foremost so that He can place in us those spiritual gifts and fruits that will enable us to give and to give even more than we ever have before and God's blessings will be upon us and the work of God as a result."