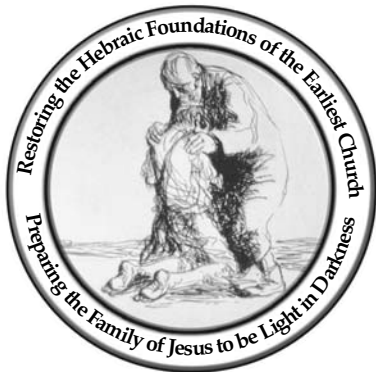


Prodigal Church

MIKE & SUE DOWGIEWICZ



Restoration Ministries International

Mike and Sue Dowgiewicz
Web: www.Restorationministries.org

PRODIGAL CHURCH

by Mike & Sue Dowgiewicz

PRODIGAL CHURCH How You Can Restore the Power and Intimacy Shared by Early Christians

Prodigal Church is a condensation of *Restoring the Early Church* by Mike and Sue Dowgiewicz.

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Brace Yourself for a Pleasant Surprise: God Is Restoring the Early Church

If you could encounter a church gathering fifty years from now, your head would spin.

You'd see a church transformed by the most powerful changes in its history, even stronger than those brought by Luther in 1517.

But you won't have to wait fifty years. The changes have already begun. In a nutshell, *God is rebuilding His family*. He is healing us of the vast damage brought by the *rationalistic, Greek-based philosophies* that invaded the church after AD 70. And He is bringing back the *close-knit, relational model and eager, Spirit-driven participation* that made the New Testament church so powerful.

In short, we're starting to see a megashift from the cold and harmful Greek model to the warm and helpful Hebrew model that Jesus and the apostles would have felt at home with. And as soon as you and those close to you in Christ catch on and shift back to the original Biblical principles, you'll see a whole new dimension added to your life.

For a thumbnail sketch of some of the differences you'll experience, take a glance at the back cover. We expect this paradigm shift to bring a "YES!!" transformation in followers of Jesus. In any case, we guarantee it'll warm *your heart!*

What's behind all this?

Why are these things happening now?

Because God keeps His promises. On time! And time's up for a promise He gave in 487 BC:

I will rouse your sons, O Zion, against your sons, O Greece, and make you like a warrior's sword.

—Zechariah 9:13

We first heard this verse explained when Lance Lambert shared it at a prayer conference in Jerusalem in January of 1994. His prophetic explanation of the verse was that God was now pouring forth a *Hebraic understanding* of the Bible to undo what the *Greek spirit* has done to the church for centuries.

Initially, this had no meaning for either of us. But over the next two months during our stay in Jerusalem, God opened up a clear understanding through our research and through spiritual revelation to show us what He's doing throughout the world.

We then realized that the Holy Spirit is restoring to followers of Jesus Christ a biblically correct, Hebraic understanding of their relationship with God and with the significant people in their lives. In other words...

The foundation is being restored!

This restoration is part of a matched set of three major events unfolding before your very eyes.

First, God is fulfilling His promises to the Jewish people by restoring them to Israel:

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: "I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again" (Ezekiel 11:17).

It's happening! The return to Israel is possibly the biggest political/military news story of our time. Did you know that nearly one million Russian Jews have fled to Israel from the former USSR, drawn by God from "the land of the north"? And that 15,000 Ethiopian Jews have come from the south as well? Jeremiah 31 is being fulfilled before our eyes!

Wars come and wars go, but the conflict between Israel and her belligerent neighbors continues to escalate, decade after decade, even moment by moment. This agitation confirms the "ancient hostility" against the Jews spoken of in Ezekiel 25:15 and 35:5. Many Christians have rallied to Israel's support, strengthening its resolve in the face of worldwide criticism.

This is dimension #1 of God's new outreach to His people.

Second, God is bringing more and more Jews into His Kingdom. Around the world, we're seeing more of them turning to their Messiah than in any time in the last 1,900 years. We've never seen such openness.

Out of six million Jews here in the US, over 250,000 are now followers of Messiah Jesus. That's one out of 24. They're on a roll.

This is dimension #2 of God's new outreach to His people.

Third, God is restoring the *Hebraic roots* of the Christian church. Faith communities are beginning to adopt the relational models and participatory patterns that powered the early church.

In addition, most of today's major Christian movements are being driven by varieties of Hebraic visions. In the American past, the major source of action was the denominations—all of them defined by their creedal dis-

tinctives, not by factors like character formation, spiritual maturity, intimacy in fellowship, leadership by example, or opportunities for sharing and open worship.

Now, however, we have movements that owe their existence to the adoption of perspectives that would have made Jesus and the apostles feel right at home!

THE GATHERING OF ISRAEL, THE TURNING OF JEWS TO THEIR MESSIAH, AND THE RESTORATION OF THE BIBLICAL/HEBRAIC CHURCH ARE THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF GOD'S NEW OUTREACH TO THE WHOLE WORLD. AND IN THE MIND OF GOD, THEY'RE ALL INTERCONNECTED.

Hebraic Foundations of the Early Church

The early Christians weren't like us.

Until about AD 70 (the fall of Jerusalem and the beginnings of the schism between Christians and Jews), even the Gentile believers related to the Lord through a Hebraic framework. The special understanding of God and His Word passed along by the Jewish believers was the foundation underlying the intimacy and awesome spiritual power you see all through the Book of Acts and the epistles.

The Holy Spirit built His church powerfully — on the bedrock of the customs and practices of God-fearing Jews. That's why the "Acts of the Apostles" might more properly be called the "Acts of the Holy Spirit." This would focus less on the men and more on God! God's Spirit built His church powerfully — on the lives of "Older Testament Jews" who heartily accepted the promised

Messiah. As they began their new lives together with joy, *the furthest thing from their minds was renouncing the heritage they'd received from Abraham, their Hebrew ancestor.*

In fact, the 100% Jewish nature of the earliest church is a primary proof of the continuity of the Older Covenant and the Newer. Many Christians today mistakenly think that the Older Testament is a sacred but totally irrelevant text. Not so! There is a straight red line running from Abraham through ancient Israel to the modern Gentile church, and it is drawn by the blood of Christ.

We'll discuss this more below, but first, the Lord wants to know...

Are you paying attention?

Modern Israel is God's wake-up call.

The Older Testament, or what is more accurately called the *Tanakh* (tah-nock'), the Hebrew Bible, proclaims that as God starts restoring the Jewish people to Israel, He will use this event as a *signpost* to the Gentile nations. In other words, God is saying, "*Pay attention* to what I, the LORD, am doing!"

Also, Jeremiah stresses the faithfulness of God to keep His promises to the Jews:

This is what the LORD says... "Only if these decrees vanish from my sight," declares the LORD, "will the descendants of Israel ever cease to be a nation before me." This is what the LORD says: "Only if the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth below be searched out will I reject all the descendants of Israel because of all they have done," declares the LORD (Jeremiah 31:35-37).

Many denominations and churches teach that God has forever rejected the Jews. Yet Paul agrees with Jeremiah as he passionately asks in Romans 11, *"Did God reject his people?"* His reply, *"By no means! ...There will always be a remnant chosen by grace ...Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious."* Paul then warns us Gentiles, *"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in."*

The Church has been arrogant and conceited toward the Jews for centuries, inflicting tremendous atrocities on them. God declares in Genesis 12:3, when He speaks of the Jewish people, *"I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

In order for the Church to receive the full blessing promised to those who bless the Jews, we must undo our past harm. During the last few decades, God has been changing the hearts of Christians toward the Jews. Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, and others have begun asking the Jewish people for forgiveness for the atrocities committed against them in past generations.

For instance, at the Jerusalem prayer conference, a young Polish Jewish woman was chatting with Mike. At that moment he felt compelled by the Spirit to seek her forgiveness on behalf of all the Gentile Polish people for the atrocities they had committed against the Jews there. As they tearfully embraced, she responded, "Much more of this

forgiveness is needed." Even the top authorities in the reconciliation movement concur that, yes, "much more is needed." And sooner rather than later.

Many of us today think that the customs, practices, even the organization of the church date from the time of Jesus and the apostles. Yet history shows that anti-Semitism and vested interests over the centuries *radically revised* the mindset of the early Church, handing down to us something far different from what our Lord intended.

How far we've departed from our Hebraic roots! Jesus was Jewish—born of a Jewish mother into a Jewish framework of practice based upon the Hebrew Scriptures. Most of the early believers were Jewish. So how did we Christians ever lose our wonderful Hebraic heritage?

How We Blew It

It started mostly with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

During the time of Jesus, the Romans ruled their subjects by fear and intimidation. The penalty for rebellion was death, often by crucifixion.

The Sanhedrin, or Jewish ruling party, feared that Jesus would "rock the boat" of their orderly little world. Far better, as Caiaphas had said, that one man die for the people than the whole nation perish. If this "Messiah" led enough followers into believing that they would be freed from Roman oppression by his kingship, then all the Jews would suffer the consequences.

Out of His loving care, Jesus had forewarned the people in advance, *"When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that*

its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city" (Luke 21:20,21).

Jesus again warned His disciples in Luke 21:24, *"They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled."*

Within four decades after the ascension of Jesus, the Zealots, a sect of militaristic Jews, revolted against the Roman army. Unable to hold out for long against the military power of Rome, Jerusalem fell in AD 70. The Temple—the heart of Judaism for worship of God and atonement for sin—was destroyed, fulfilling Jesus' words, *"I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down"* (Matthew 24:2). An estimated 100,000 Jews were killed, starved, or enslaved.

Counted among the dead were few followers of Jesus, however. Perhaps remembering Jesus' words, *"Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains"* (Matthew 24:16), the Jewish believers headed out of town, finding safety in the Pella region about 60 miles northeast of Jerusalem. The Zealots and other Jews who had opted to stay and fight viewed the Messianic Jews as traitors, widening the gulf between the two groups.

Sixty years later, Simon "Bar Kochba," called the "second messiah," deepened the division further. Bar Kochba believed that he had been raised up to crush the Roman armies, but this Second Revolt also ended in disaster for the Jewish people. A half million were slaughtered, and Jerusalem was leveled—while the followers of Jesus rejected any other Messiah except the Lord and fled

Israel.

Within thirty years after the second revolt, the church had become predominantly Gentile, with a mostly non-Jewish leadership. The Hebraic roots from which it had sprung began to disappear rapidly. During the second and third centuries, many Greek philosophers converted to Christianity. Today we refer to these men as the "Church Fathers." Yet many of them were virulently anti-Semitic in their writings, intensifying hatred of the Jews.

For instance, about AD 160, Justin Martyr, one of the most respected of all the Church Fathers, wrote *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*. In it he claimed that the Jews richly deserved to be destroyed. He said that God was through with Jews for good, and His promises to Israel now applied only to Christians; His curses applied only to Jews. Ignored was the fact that *our sins* hung Jesus on the cross.

Such abuse from the pens of our most spiritual and revered leaders opened the floodgates of vitriol and hate. Ordinary Christians began to feel that the guilt of the Jews in AD 29 extended for all time, making despicable criminals out of every Jew forever, and thus justifying all the discrimination and violence that would soon be heaped upon them. It was a horrible spirit at the heart of Christianity, one that took hold very quickly.

By the fourth century, Christian leaders were sounding like Hitler, only worse. John Chrysostom, the gentle and enormously talented bishop who invented the sermon concept, wrote:

"The synagogue is worse than a brothel ... it is the den of scoundrels and the repair of wild beasts ... the temple of demons devoted to idolatrous cults ... the refuge of brigands

and debauchees, and the cavern of devils. [It is] a place of meeting for the assassins of Christ ... a den of thieves; a house of ill fame, a dwelling of iniquity, the refuge of devils, a gulf and abyss of perdition.

It is worth noting that Chrysostom was one of history's greatest pioneers of replacing Hebraic practices with Greek thought. *Hebraic thought* emphasized the heart relationship to God that was evidenced in service to others. Intimate relationships with other believers and mentoring through leaders of good character transformed the Scriptures into a way of life.

Greek thought appealed to the intellect. Those who had studied the most and could speak the most skillfully were the ones most esteemed in their faith communities. Believers who isolated themselves from worldly concerns and involvement were deemed the holiest. And thus we have the clash between the Hebraic foundations and ...

The Influence of Greek Philosophers

Besides the anti-Semitism of the Church Fathers, the Older Testament itself became suspect in many circles. The converted Greek philosophers brought with them an emphasis on *rationalism and reasoning* rather than a trusting faith in the God of Israel. Instead of basing their writings on both testaments of the Bible, these theologians concentrated on reconciling the teachings of Plato with Christianity.

Humanism, increasingly influential in the church today, is a direct result of the Greek philosophical spirit. To the humanist, man—not God—is the measure of all things; there are no God-given standards or absolutes. With humanism, every-

thing changes and evolves. Ethics and morality are based on the whims of man, not on the holy will of God.

Plato postulated that life was divided into two components, the spiritual realm of eternal truths and the temporal realm of the physical. This concept of *dualism* deemed the spiritual realm "good" and the physical world "evil."

Dualism was incorporated into the teachings of the church through the writings of the Church Fathers. The dualist concept generated the myriad of church rituals in which believers must pray over things to make them *holy*.

For instance, "Christian dualism" eventually did away with communion in homes. No longer could a group of believers simply share in the breaking of bread and passing of the cup. Dualism viewed bread and wine as too "earthly" to represent the body and blood of Jesus; the physical elements had to be *spiritualized* by someone ordained for that purpose.

In contrast, Hebraic prayer focused on *blessing God*, the Creator and Provider of all needs. Because of God's words at creation, "*It is good*," the Hebrews viewed the world as good and desirable. Even though sin had come into it, the universe had been created by a God who had humanity's best interests at heart.

Church Fathers like Origen, Justin, and Clement had been powerfully swayed by Hellenistic thought. They emphasized withdrawal from worldly concerns in order to focus on spiritual matters. The "higher call" of people in ministry became a central belief in the Church as a result of their writings.

Besides the elevation of a clergy class in the church, the dualistic influence caused many to seek pietistic withdrawal into abbeys, convents, monasteries, and desert

retreats. Personal withdrawal contradicted the *full-community participation* that exemplified the Hebraic outworking of faith.

Some became ascetics, hoping that by vigorously subduing the flesh, they could free themselves from the evil they perceived in the physical realm and draw closer to spiritual perfection. Paul warned Timothy against asceticism as a means to holiness: "*Such activities indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence*" (Colossians 12:23). Have you run into churchgoers today who pride themselves on what they *refrain* from doing and *despise* those who are caught up in overt sins?

A rabbi was esteemed first of all for the godly way he lived. His *personal character* and *obedience to God* were more important than his teachings. In today's vernacular, did he walk his talk? The Hebraic approach tells us to weigh a man's life fruit before we follow his instruction: "*Consider the outcome of a man's life before you listen to his teaching. And then you can imitate his faith*" (Hebrews 13:7).

But the Greek philosophers brought a *theoretical* approach to studying God, an emphasis on education and knowledge acquisition. The Bible warns that "*knowledge puffs up.*" The Hebraic response would put *virtue* before knowledge. As II Peter 1:5 says, "*...add to your faith, virtue, and to your virtue, knowledge...*"

Through the influence of Chrysostom, Greek oratory became the main teaching pattern in the church. Modern seminaries teach Greek homiletics, Greek hermeneutics, and Greek oratory—all the related fields that today's pulpits depend on.

These find their origins not in the first century Church but in the Greek teaching tradition.

Paul emphasized the need to rely on God's power rather than man's oratory: "*My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power*" (I Corinthians 2:2-5).

Examine the important differences between the Hebraic and Greek approaches to learning. These are listed from *most* effective for retention to *least* effective.

HEBRAIC Learning

Direct Participation

Student learns by doing.

Contrived/Dramatized Experiences

Role-play, discussion, skits, simulations.

Demonstrations

Watching someone show "how to do it." Spontaneous response to a situation.

GREEK Learning

Audio-Visual Combination

TV, movies, slides.

Audio or Visual Presentation

Record, radio, or tape; display or bulletin board.

Verbal-Visual Portrayal

Diagrams, reading a book, hearing a lecture or sermon.

A person retains **90%** of what he sees, hears, *and* demonstrates but only **10-20%** of what he hears. Do these statistics show you the difference between *Hebraic mentoring* and *Greek knowledge acquisition*?

Ponder one especially devastating effect that the Greek spirit has on our society today. Because it was man-centered, the Greek civilization was also utilitarian. So if a person—infant or elderly—was considered incapable of achieving a certain standard of success, he should not be allowed to become a burden on society. Therefore, euthanasia, abortion, and infanticide were rampant.

Without a belief in the intrinsic worth of an individual to guarantee his right to existence, a society will work to eliminate those who are imperfect or unproductive. That is the crossroads facing America today.

At the retreat center in New England where we taught for over 10 years, Mike ministered as a counselor to church leaders. He was burdened by the lack of cooperation among the churches in different communities. *Doctrinal division* always seemed to separate God's people.

For instance, one of the area's largest employers, an insurance company, instituted mandatory classes in Eastern mysticism for people aspiring to upper management. Rather than rallying together in prayer against this threat to those working at the company, church leaders refused to cooperate with each other.

Lack of cooperation can be attributed to the *Greek philosophical spirit* that divides and separates when agreement can't be reached. It's a spirit that insists *you* must be wrong if we can't agree. As the grasp of the Greek spirit on the church wanes, much of the church's prejudicial division will disappear with it. The Hebraic understanding of the Bible will increase our unity and cooperation, particularly when the dark days of chastisement arrive.

Influence of the Roman Empire

The Greek philosophical influence was not alone in wooing believers away from their Hebraic foundations. The siren call of friendship with Rome truly finished off the Church that Peter and Paul had known.

Originally, Roman persecution had caused the Church to grow in numbers. But in AD 313 Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which ended that. Endorsed from the throne, Christianity very shortly became so identified with the Empire that everyone born in it was automatically considered "Christian."

Membership in the church became attractive for worldly reasons. And as a direct result of the influence of the Romans upon the Church, Europe entered into the period of history we now call the Dark Ages.

Following the traditions of the pagan religions at that time, Constantine built temples for the Christians to meet in. Plato's influence again loomed in the use of stained glass windows, lofty steeples, and high vaulted church ceilings. All of these were designed to reach toward the presence of the "unknowable" God.

A paid professional clergy arose during this time. The clergy-lay distinction so predominant today was officially sanctioned by the fourth century church. The biblical mandate for the priesthood of all believers was ignored. Christians became *spectators*, lulled into allowing professionals to approach the Almighty on their behalf. The Dark Ages fell upon them quickly.

The Restoration, A Continuation of the Reformation

And it was very dark. For a very long time.

For instance, contemporary Christians fail to grasp the powerful control the church exercised for 1,100 years by keeping the Bible in Latin. As late as 1517, in Coventry, England, five men and two women were burned at the stake for the heresy of teaching their children the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English!

But even before Martin Luther launched the Reformation that same year, God had been at work to pierce the darkness. John Hus and William Tyndale had paid with their lives for putting the Word of God into the language of their countrymen.

Start to think of the Reformation as the beginning of the Restoration. With the Bible in the language of the people, profound changes began to occur among 16th century believers. The *Hebraic focus* on salvation by faith was restored, the supremacy of grace was restored, and the unique importance of applying the Bible to all facets of life was restored.

Regrettably, the church structure and patterns stayed about the same—minus the Pope. In particular, Luther soon came to believe that the vast gulf between clergy and laity status needed to continue because laymen were “not ready” to assume any meaningful responsibility in the church.

Over the centuries God has continued to restore the biblical emphasis and understanding of His Word. The difficulty for us today is that with each restoration, people throw up denominations around their one restorative truth! What's worse, these same groups are usually

opposed to restorations of further truths that emerge after them.

The Important Foundation of the Hebrew Bible

The Apostle Paul wrote about half the books in the Newer Testament, so he easily qualifies as the foremost literary figure bridging the Older Testament and the Newer.

And what did he think of the Older Testament? Was it really just a dead canon that left Israel condemned under its Law and without hope? Here's what Paul said: "*For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope*" (Romans 15:4).

Yes! The Hebrew Bible was and is a giant reservoir of hope for the Jews, the source text for their walk with God, and the fount of knowledge of Who He is and what pleases Him.

The Newer Testament writers repeatedly referred to those Scriptures. Without referring to them, how can believers today ever grasp such concepts as the atonement sacrifice?... the high priestly mediation of Jesus between His Father and His people?... the priesthood of believers and the spiritual responsibilities and privileges that that entails? Even the Messiahship of the Lord was founded in the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible!

Many believers think of the Older Testament as legalistic and only for the Jewish people. Yet God lays the same relational requirement in both Testaments; that is, to *love Him*. If we try to keep God's commands without loving Him, we'll become proud and get caught up in what we do for Him. Paul tells us in I Corinthians 13 that "*without love, we are nothing.*" Living

out God's commands because of our love for Him keeps us *humbly dependent* on Him and *contrite* when we fail.

The foundation of love is found in Deuteronomy 6:4,5: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.*" The Hebrew word for love, *ahav* (ah-hahv'), means to be filled with desire and delight and passion for the one you love. *Ahav* describes the wonderful, tender mercies of God and conveys an intense desire to be in your loved one's presence.

The heart-cry of God throughout the Hebrew Bible is a longing for a love relationship with His people. The Ten Commandments tell us that God promises to show His love to a thousand generations of those who *love Him* and *keep His commandments*.

Jesus quoted from that Deuteronomy passage when He gave us the greatest commandment: "*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.*" This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second [which He quotes from Leviticus] is like it, '*Love your neighbor as yourself.*' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:37-40). The Greek word *agape* (ah-gah'-pay) is used for love here and its meaning is similar to the Hebrew *ahav*.

To summarize the priority of loving God: *Everything* in our Christian life—everything about knowing God and *experiencing Him*, everything about knowing and *doing His will*—depends on the quality of our *love relationship with Jesus*. If our love relationship with Jesus is not right, nothing in our life will be right.

The Restoration Diagram that follows illustrates the *relational priorities* of the Hebraic early Church. If it were three-dimensional, it would look like a wedding cake with five layers.

The Restoration Diagram



The *top and most important layer* is your relationship with Jesus.

The *second layer* is your **home**.

The *third* is your neighborhood home fellowship of extended **spiritual family**.

The *fourth* is the **congregation of home fellowships**.

The *fifth* is **congregations throughout a town or city**.

The Restoration Diagram prioritizes a loving intimacy with Jesus, then with your covenant marriage partner and family, and then with relational load-bearers in a neighborhood home fellowship. On a less intimate level are relationships within a congregation and with other congregations throughout your town.

The early church parallels the *relational priorities* of the Jewish people in the Hebrew Bible:

Jewish People, BC

- individual
- family
- clan
- tribe
- nation

Early Church

- individual
- family
- home fellowship
- congregation of home fellowships
- congregations throughout a city

Jesus is the Foundation and Cornerstone of our covenant relationship.

Marriage is a key means of developing Christ's likeness in us, and is a physical representation of our spiritual union with God.

The *family* is where we learn how to pass along sacrificial love in Jesus.

The *home fellowship* provides the communal support needed by the family and individual to uphold righteousness and to develop their spiritual gifts and spur on one another.

The *congregation* is the gathering point for worship and further exercise of spiritual gifts on a corporate level, as well as for personal edification and glorification of the Lord.

The Hebrew Bible: Basis for the Gospel of Jesus

The early Gospel was more comprehensive than we in the church have currently understood.

Many today have been told an incomplete or even counterfeit gospel. The Bible stipulates *one true Gospel* as the way to eternal life.

Jesus told his Jewish listeners, "*Whoever trusts in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him*" (John 7:38,39). The streams of living water refer to the evidential work of the Holy Spirit. The only Scripture in existence when Jesus spoke these words was the Hebrew Bible. Believers today who want to trust Jesus "*as the Scripture has said*" must study the Hebrew Bible to discern the complete Gospel.

Our acceptance by God our Father through Jesus really was the central issue in the early Church. The Gospel that is based on the Hebrew Bible and understood by the early Jewish church was *not* man accepting Jesus as his Savior, but *God accepting the Lord Jesus as the only Savior*.

Christ fulfilled the reconciliation requirements of God. Jesus' payment was complete, and a new covenant was established through His blood. The resurrection of Jesus was our Father's sign that the sacrifice for our sins had been accepted by Him. God was, and forever will be, satisfied. We who follow Jesus are justified by trusting in His blood as payment for our sins.

Many believers are not aware that even before the coming of Jesus a number of rabbis taught that a person must experience a *spiritual birth*, a response to God's call on his life. Conversion equaled rebirth; in other words, being "born from above" was a shift from following the letter of the law to abiding in loving obedience with God.

Being born again was the point at which you put your *full trust and reliance* in the Lord. It was already *the* basic salvation move of any Jew's life. That's why Jesus was so surprised when Nicodemus professed

ignorance of being born again: "*Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?*" (John 3:10).

The Hebrew word for "faith" does not mean just *belief*, but **trust** in God. This is an emotional and responsive term emanating from the heart, not a cognitive one assented to by the brain. It doesn't merely acknowledge that God exists; that's already a given! The Book of James says that "*even the demons believe and yet they shudder*" (see James 2:19). Following Jesus means *submitting in trust-filled obedience* to His authority, not just agreeing that He's God's Son. Submission to Jesus brings big changes to your life!

We must always be on guard against a *counterfeit* gospel. Even the Apostle Paul warned the Galatians to beware of a perverted gospel: "*Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!*" (Galatians 1:8). Any so-called 'gospel' of today that differs materially from the Gospel understood by the earliest followers of Jesus is a path to hell. Satan is shrewd. He doesn't care *how* you don't get to heaven, just as long as you don't get there!

The early Church understood salvation as a process based upon *repentance* and a *loving trust* in Jesus. And in the Hebrew Scriptures, God expressed His heart's desire for a love relationship with His chosen people. The two agree. But many of the Israelite leaders perverted this love into a series of rules and obligations designed to earn salvation only if precisely followed. This is called "legalistic perversion."

Let's review three of the key elements of conversion in both Older Testament Israel and the Hebraic church — repentance, *ahav* love, and trust:

1. Salvation requires our Repentance

Because of their knowledge of the Hebrew Scriptures, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Peter at Pentecost all affirmed *repentance* as the first step of salvation.

Biblical repentance always demands a *turning away from sin* and a *turning to God*. Do you see these two distinctives? *Turning from sin* and *turning to God*.

That's the vital message in this verse:

[Peter] answered them, 'Turn from your sin, return to God, and each of you be immersed on the authority of Yeshua the Messiah into forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2:38).

Repentance grieves you that you have grieved God; you hunger for the forgiveness, cleansing, and restoration that only He can give. That grief is the "*godly sorrow [that] brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret*" (II Corinthians 7:10).

2. Salvation requires our agape Love

In the early church, there was an *intensity* of loving response in accepting the Gospel message that is often lacking today.

God desires a love relationship with His people. This love is wonderfully manifested by those who know the Gospel of the Hebrew Scriptures and understand the *depth of their own depravity*. For them it is easy to see God's grace in the atonement and to appreciate the sacrifice of Jesus on their behalf.

Trevor McIlwain of New Tribes Missions has gotten a phenomenal response by teaching natives the Bible in chronological order, from

Genesis to Revelation. When they complete the Old Testament, they see the depth of their own sin. Then when they hear about Jesus, they are grateful and delighted to respond in love to His sacrifice on the cross.

3. Salvation is incomplete without our Trust

The unwavering trust that God requires of His children is the fabric woven throughout the Hebrew Bible and the Newer Testament. Look at some of God's promises to those who trust Him to take care of things:

*"Many are the woes of the wicked, but the LORD's **unfailing love surrounds** the man who trusts in him" (Psalm 32:10).*

*"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**" (Proverbs 3:5,6).*

*"So this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'The one who trusts will **never be dismayed**'" (Isaiah 28:16).*

Do you see anything in those verses about qualifying to be in God's presence by sacrificing X number of bulls and sheep per year? No, because salvation for the Jews was based on a **loving trust in God**: *"Abraham trusted God, and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6).*

Accepting the Gospel: Forceful Conviction Required

One of the more perplexing verses for some is Matthew 11:12: *"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been force-*

fully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it."

In light of the military examples in the Hebrew Bible, picture this illustration of that verse: Around a military fortification such as the walls of Jerusalem, "killing zones" are established to concentrate weapon fire for maximum killing effectiveness. Those who attack the fort must first courageously battle their way through the killing zone. Because of the strong likelihood that they might be killed in the attack, these individuals have to "be dead" to everything beforehand in order to fully focus on their objective.

Such forceful determination was the standard for those who gave their lives to follow Jesus. This essence is captured in Matthew 13:44-46: *"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure **hidden** in a field. When a man **found** it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and **sold all he had** and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant **looking for fine pearls**. When he **found** one of great value, he went away and **sold everything he had** and bought it." It takes tremendous certainty to give up everything you've got in order to lay hold on what God is offering you.*

Accepting the Gospel: Accepting the Covenant

The early Jewish followers of Jesus clearly understood the significance of covenants. Today we understand dimly at best.

God had established covenants with His people through Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Jeremiah had prophesied that the Jews could expect yet another covenant. God is the initiator of the covenants between Himself and His people.

Each covenant carries with it *God's promises and man's responsibilities* if he accepts God's terms.

Paul reminded the Gentiles about covenants as part of the heritage received from the Jewish people: "**Theirs** is the adoption as sons; **theirs** the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises" (Romans 9:4). The writer to the Hebrews builds the foundation of the Messiahship of Jesus on the institution of a new covenant: "*To Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*" (Hebrews 12:24).

These words sound quaint and very antique to us in the postmodern West. But what a thundering impact Jesus' words must have had on the Jewish ears who first heard them: "*This is my **blood of the covenant**, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins*" (Matthew 26:28). Suddenly in that upper room that evening, it was a new ball game on earth. The rules were changing, and a new covenant was transcending the old.

But the new covenant did *not* eradicate the old. The old became the enduring foundation for the new. The old is still there as the historical basis. And today, we cannot adequately appreciate the new unless we have a heart-knowledge of the old, as the early Jewish Christians did.

No Salvation Without Forgiveness

God knows us well. He anticipated that we would not always be able to keep the conditions of the covenant, so He provided for confession and repentance on our part to reestablish the fellowship.

One truth in particular startles many believers. Jesus declared, "*If*

you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:15). The question for us is, Can we be forgiven of *anything* by our heavenly Father if we do *not forgive* others who have violated us?

The early Church understood that our Lord will not consummate a relationship with an unforgiving person. Why? Because His Father refuses to forgive him. That's a *relational fact*, something fairly obvious to early believers—but not so obvious to those of us steeped in *doctrinal facts*.

Our forgiveness opens the way for the Holy Spirit to take up His residence in us. Richard Wurmbrand, a Jewish believer who suffered for his faith for fourteen years in a Romanian prison, teaches a profound and correct interpretation of the Lord's Prayer. He says that "*Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors*" should be translated, "*Forgive us our debts as we have **already forgiven** others their debts.*" After what Jesus has done for us in the depth of our transgressions, how can any of us ever feel justified in clinging to bitterness and unforgiveness?

God knows that we *will* be hurt and betrayed by those close to us at one time or another. A wise friend told us years ago, "You can never walk in the fullness of Jesus until you can wash the feet of Judas."

Rarely can human effort or strength ever wipe away the hurt you feel from what others have done to you in the past. Only through loving trust in Jesus and the power of His grace can you forgive the "Judases" in your life. To the ancient Hebrews, God was *Yahweh-Rapha*, the LORD our healer. Our trust and reliance in Jesus releases His power to remove the sting of those painful memories.

The Indwelling Holy Spirit: Caring For the Needs of Others

The Jewish people at the time of Jesus' birth had been anticipating the Messiah for centuries. In Matthew chapter 11, John the Baptist, who was then in prison, sent his disciples to Jesus to ask, "*Are you the one who was to come?*"

Jesus sent them back to John, responding with six things that the Jews knew from the prophet Isaiah would identify the Messiah when He came: The blind receive sight; the lame walk; those who have leprosy are cured; the deaf hear; the dead are raised; and the good news is preached to the poor. The Messiah was to be recognized by *His care for others*, a theme repeatedly emphasized for all God's people throughout both the Hebrew Bible and the Newer Testament.

Hebraic faith required *action* on the part of the individual. In this light, Jesus Himself reveals what He will demand as a sign of our faith at the final judgment: "*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me*" (Matthew 25: 40).

Each of us needs to consider seriously our covenant responsibilities. If your faith has *not* caused you to care for others, then you have *no* faith. James reaffirms this critical Hebraic truth: "*Faith without deeds is dead*" (James 2:26). This is a far cry from the contemporary faith that goes forward at a meeting, then settles back into a comfortable, self-gratified lifestyle and stays at a so-called "Baby Christian" level forever after.

The consummation of the covenant between Jesus and His follower shows noticeable change in

the follower's life. When he is sealed with the Holy Spirit, those changes begin to pour out like "living water."

The Home

Marriage: A Pilgrimage Together

As you saw in the Restoration Diagram, the next priority after Jesus is the home. Do people today look at the home in a different way from the early Jewish Christians? Tragically, yes.

Most of us see *church activities* as the #1 most important factor in spiritual development. But in the first century, the *family* was the basic unit of society and the main force in spiritual growth. A big difference!

Marriage was considered a gift from God. In fact, Proverbs 18:22 tells us, "*He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the LORD.*" Since both man and woman are created in God's image and yet are so uniquely different, the marriage relationship implicitly creates a fuller picture of the image of God. Those gender differences were designed by God to complement one another, not provoke frustrated anger!

On the day you say "I do" to your spouse, you're forsaking all other opportunities for intimacy with anyone else. You're committing yourself in a *covenant* to one person for life. You're vowing to forsake all other relationships that might hinder the bond with your spouse.

Marital intimacy satisfies longings that might otherwise be a source of temptation. The physical union was designed by God to enhance the emotional bonding to one another. Many rabbis in Jesus' day taught that

a

man should get a wife and then study God's Word. The Hebraic early Church also understood that a wife was more than a helpmate. Her husband was to *draw strength* from her.

Viewed within a Hebraic framework, marriage is a *pilgrimage together*, an individual and collective growth in the character of Jesus. The quality of the *agape* love within your marriage is a physical representation of your spiritual relationship with Jesus. I John 4:12 may be the hallmark of a godly marriage: "*No one has ever seen God; but if we sacrificially love each other [agape], God lives in us and his [agape] love is made complete in us.*" This is the covenant that God intended marriage to be!

Rhema and Halakhah Applied

The Bible commands a married man to apply the truths of Scripture to his family members: "*Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word*" (Ephesians 5:25,26). The term used for "word" here, *rhema* (**ray'muh**), means more than quoting Bible verses to your spouse. It tells you to seek out God's guidance for you and your family.

In the Newer Testament, two Greek words, *logos* and *rhema*, mean "word" when translated into English. *Logos* represents God's ways and thoughts, forever unchangeable. The Bible is a part of God's *logos* written down for man. *Rhema* is that specific word spoken directly and individually from God to the believer. Through a *rhema* the Holy Spirit reveals God's specific will for a person or family.

Waiting for the *rhema* of the Holy Spirit is humbling to our sinful, self-

confident nature. Seeking the *rhema* of God is to us what gathering manna was for the Israelites: "*He gave them manna to eat in the desert...to humble and to test them so that in the end it might go well with them*" (Deuteronomy 8:16). Their obedience brought victory, which is why King David sought God's specific guidance for each of his battles.

After we were in Israel two months, we were seeking God's will whether we should stay there or return to the US. One morning as Mike was reading the story of Jesus delivering the legion of demons from the man at the Gadarenes, he noticed, "*Go home to your family and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you*" (Mark 5:19). Mike had a prompting from the Holy Spirit that God might be sending us home.

A week later while reading the Bible he came upon, "*O God of my father Abraham, God of my father Isaac, O LORD, who said to me, 'Go back to your country and your relatives, and I will make you prosper'*" (Genesis 32:9). He had the same prompting. Later that day friends told us, "We've been praying about whether you should stay in Israel or return to the US, and God has impressed on our spirits that you are to go home." Thus we had our *rhema*, and confirmation besides!

Closely related to *rhema* is the importance of establishing *halakhahs* (**hah'luh-kuz**) for our lives. The word is derived from the Hebrew *halak*, meaning "to walk." This word appears repeatedly in such verses as "Walk in all his ways;" "Walk before me in integrity of heart;" and "He whose walk is blameless." A *halakhah* is the **way** God's word was interpreted and **applied** consistently to a particular situation. The emphasis was

not on interpretation alone but on correct application, hence the "walking out" part.

Jesus referred to Himself as "the Way." In the book of Acts, the early Christians were known as followers of "the Way." The use of the word "way" had a very important meaning to the early Church—and a very distinct Hebraic importance.

Many Christians today have *halakhahs* without being conscious of it. If you have prayerfully established with your spouse a biblical understanding of television viewing for your family, or have made your decision before God to educate your children in a public school, Christian school, or home school, you have in fact established a *halakhah* for your family. You have explored the Word of God and sought the understanding of the Holy Spirit in order to apply God's will for yourselves.

Halakhahs require you to apply biblical truths to all realms of your life, whether to education, finances, ethical decisions, or religious practices. A *halakhah* was not intended to be just a code of rules telling you what to do, nor does it put you in a position of telling others what they should do. *Halakhahs* in your home evidence your love relationship with God and your passion to pass your "walk" along to your children.

Marital Stress: The Need for Mentors

Among our Hebraic ancestors, divorce was rare because marriages had rich input from the larger family and the community. The sacrificial devotion and patience exemplified by God toward His wife Israel was their standard of committed, covenant love.

No longer. Satan has now focused special attention on preventing Christian marriages from reproducing the loving radiance of Jesus.

People seem so disconnected from each other. Even a husband and wife can resemble two parallel railroad tracks—always nearby, but never meeting. A few common concerns, such as the children, pets, or maintenance chores, may act as rail ties that connect a couple's lives. The enemy has kept wives and husbands from the support of older people who could mentor them. His tactic? Pressure on couples to make it *on their own*.

Mentoring by older Christians is one of the greatest needs in the church today. So many younger couples and singles need to hear the wisdom of older people. They need the one-on-one, the life experience, the realism of what life was like for the older men and women at that same age. Without this mentoring, they will either "go it alone" or go it with peers who don't know what they're doing, either!

Satan also knows that men are changed far more through personal contact with role models than through impersonal learning methods, such as books and sermons. He will do everything to keep younger men away from the sages so that they do not receive the encouragement and admonition they need.

Many congregations today are subdivided into age-related groupings, like singles groups, seniors, youth, career people. Regrettably, these shield the generations from close contact with each other. Younger men and women have little or no informal contact with older mentors, and so are conformed to the culture's independent isolationism. The system isn't working.

The Home: Family Nurturing Ground

The Lord wants our families to be *abundantly different* from the average families all around us. Sadly, we usually don't interact wisely enough to stand out at all. In fact, with the pressures of work and overstuffed schedules, the *only* interaction some families experience is in the car on the way to some activity.

The significance of the permanent marriage covenant is emphasized so strongly in the Word because God has *special plans and purposes* that go beyond personal fulfillment and companionship. Consider marriage from the Hebraic perspective: "*She is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the LORD made them one? And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring*" (Malachi 2:15).

Think about God's command for the *home* as the primary site for demonstrating God's love and instilling God's truths in your children: "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments which I give to you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up*" (Deuteronomy 6:4-7). That pretty much sums up your entire day!

Paul was probably thinking of Deuteronomy 6 when he exhorted fathers, "*Do not exasperate [or, bring to a point of frustration] your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord*" (Ephesians 6:4). How evident is the power of generational influence as God directs His commands to "*you, your children and their children after*

them" in order that the blessing would be upon them all. Sobering, isn't it? How *you* train up your children will impact how *they* train up your grandchildren! No wonder God is so explicit in His directions for bringing up offspring! The "careful obedience" to which parents are exhorted has in the Hebrew a sense of guarding as a watchman; preserving; building a hedge around as with thorns.

We really do need to guard those times with our children. Passing along a living relationship with God to our children indicates His preeminence to us. The priorities with which you live determine how you spend your daily twenty-four hours and with whom. It doesn't take long for children to recognize when your words don't match your actions.

If you're always reminding your kids to spend time in the Word and in prayer yet are on the run yourself from sunrise to sundown, they will see that your words are empty. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "God is of **no** importance unless He is of **supreme** importance."

Harmony in the home, or *shalom bayit* in Hebrew, is a critical goal to work toward. God planned for the home to be a refuge and sanctuary for its members. The home is also the crucible in which your sin nature is confronted, and where the fruit of the Spirit has opportunity to come forth. Harmony does not come naturally. It must be nurtured, modeled, and reinforced daily.

Many parents today have fallen into the trap of letting the "professionals," like the pastoral staff, youth workers, and Christian School teachers, replace them as the primary source of spiritual truth for their children. How tragic to see this

disregard for God's admonition in Deuteronomy for *parents* to impress these things on their own children.

Think about the hours, however many or few, that you and your children are together. How do you spend most of them? In front of the TV? Putting out sibling brush fires? Frustratedly responding to a jangling phone? How about when you are literally "along the road"? Do you take the time to stroll along paths and sidewalks to capture their hearts with His wonders?

Do you incorporate God's principles into your car trips together? Or are you so intent on meeting yet another obligation or activity to "benefit" your child or yourself that praising God doesn't even occur to you? Sports, piano lessons, and ballet may be good, but *not* if you are robbed of the parental interaction that God knows you and your child need.

In Jewish communities, young men know that at age thirteen they will become *spiritually responsible* to go before God to determine His will. Their parents, of course, will continue to counsel and guide, but the young man will then be recognized as a "man" in the synagogue community.

There is an important principle behind this. Our children, too, need to be nurtured toward a specific point in time when they can be expected to "hear from God" themselves.

Pray as a family to determine when that special time of spiritual passage will be for your sons and daughters. It will vary from family to family. You know better than anyone their level of spiritual maturity and their personal inclination to serve God.

If you sense this is good counsel for you and your household, use those months before your child's spiritual "launching" to earnestly

guide him or her into *searching the Scriptures diligently* for God's answers and *following through in obedience* to what He tells them. Have them prepare a prayer journal to indicate that they are learning to come before His throne with praise, petitions, and thanksgiving. Anticipate with excitement this time of preparation!

The Home Fellowship

The Support Source

The third layer of priority is home fellowships of extended spiritual family. Gathering in homes for spiritual support occurred in Acts 2 almost immediately after Peter finished his Pentecost sermon: "*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*" (vv. 45,46).

Each communal gathering of Jews was a grass-roots, autonomous entity. Judaism was the opposite of a denomination with its top-down structural controls. Home fellowships were a *cluster of families and singles*, an outgrowth of their robust home life. They did *not* originate as an artificial program of a congregation or a nifty organizational move to inject spiritual life and intimacy into families lacking in both.

Any gathering of ten Jewish men formed a *minyan* (**min'yahn**), or quorum, to represent (along with their families) a synagogue before God. Within the synagogue there were no paid professionals performing religious duties and services. The rabbi

was what we today would call a "layperson," having no more special duties or offices during worship than any thirteen-year-old boy. A learned teacher, the rabbi served as a "quality control" person to ensure that all that was said agreed with Scripture. He helped others to *apply* the Word of God to their daily lives. The synagogue was the forerunner for the practices of the early Church, which was the model for the Christ-centered church of today.

There are so few descriptions and instructions about church gatherings in the Newer Testament because the apostles didn't have to explain what was so very well known to the Jewish believers who made up the earliest Church. The synagogue model for congregational gatherings provided the freedom of participation that Paul calls for in I Corinthians 14:26: "*When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of God's people.*"

Each person was expected to take part in worship and thus be edified (built up). The manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the believers' individual and communal lives demonstrated God's continuous presence and concern for His people.

Many today aren't aware that apostles and evangelists were already functioning in the synagogues prior to the time of Christ. Within the synagogue, elders and deacons oversaw the gatherings and collected and distributed alms for the needy.

Their activities were not new developments beginning with the Church age. The church adapted them from the synagogue. Unfortunately, the church has now almost eliminated the role of apostles, prophets, and evangelists, preferring

to subordinate all ministries to the pastorate.

Paul *specifically* greeted the followers of Jesus who met in one another's homes. In I Corinthians he writes, "*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.*" He concludes his letter to the Colossians with: "*Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.*"

The earliest believers experienced fellowship in homes for spiritual growth. Neighborhood home gatherings were an extension of the individual home. These believing families filled the role of an extended family in a spiritual as well as practical sense for those had no family. Today, this is where single, divorced, and widowed people can find "family" with whom to share their lives intimately in the Lord. By living near one another they increase their chances for the spontaneous encounters that personify "family."

Home fellowships in the early Church represented a *seven-day-a-week commitment* of the followers of Jesus to one another. It wasn't just a scheduled meeting. As an extension of the home, the home fellowship was the *relational network* that upheld *personal righteousness*.

In many congregations today, "care groups" or "cells" are viewed as scheduled meetings of small groups of individuals whose interest is primarily themselves or a special focus of study. Unlike today's culture, Hebraic relationships weren't segmented into categories of activities, appointments, and scheduled programmed events.

The focus of the early Church was spiritual growth in righteousness

through *load-bearing relationships*—those that bore each other's burdens and joys. They engaged in spontaneous, unplanned interactions that encompassed the needs of the whole person: spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical.

Righteousness and Answered Prayer

Our Hebraic forefathers approached God to worship Him and to have their prayers answered. The Hebrew Bible presents the conditions of righteousness required to approach God—and *holiness* was most certainly a characteristic of the very early Hebraic church. They wanted to be available for their Lord's purposes, and walking in obedient trust grounded in His love was their preparation.

The Hebrew believers were not just interested in prayer as a religious ritual. They also wanted their prayers *answered* by God. And it was answered prayer that got the early Church noticed—*big time*.

The book of Acts begins with a small band of disciples: "*They all joined together constantly in prayer*" (1:14). Three thousand converts were birthed in one day! When Peter and John were released from the Sanhedrin's capture, they went directly to a home fellowship: "*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 was a direct result of prayer that moved God to send an angel to free him.

But then as now, *righteousness* was

central to answered prayer. James 5:16 parallels Proverbs 15:29:

"The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous."

"The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective."

Because of the vital importance of walking in righteousness Peter also reiterates the same message by proclaiming Psalm 34:17:

"For the LORD keeps His eyes on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayers; but the face of the LORD is against those who do evil things" (1Peter 3:12).

And in Hebrews 5:8 we are told that Jesus' prayers were heard "*because of his godliness [righteousness]*."

The Hebraic early church was conscious of *communal* as well as personal righteousness. They were aware that in the Hebrew Scriptures God had prevented the *entire nation* of Israel from conquering the city of Ai because of the *hidden sin of one man*, Achan. God had upheld this same standard of righteousness for the fledgling Church by taking the lives of Ananias and Sapphira for deceiving His Spirit.

Partaking of communion in the early Church was a serious matter. The Jewish disciples took Jesus at His word when He said, "*This is my body*" and "*This is my blood*." They believed Him by faith without the question of transubstantiation that would be raised centuries later by the Greek logicians. Paul warned: "*Anyone who eats and drinks [i.e., takes communion] 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" (I Corinthians 11:29-31).

Just as all heaven was swept away during the Passover feast, so too all sin was to be left behind before sharing the Lord's Supper. James, recognizing the importance of repentance and confession, tells us to "*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).* You can see in this passage the relationship of confession, righteousness, and answered prayer.

Communal righteousness starts at the grass-roots, home fellowship level, where the give-and-take of interaction allows us to deal intensively with problems. In the Book of Matthew, Jesus addresses communal righteousness, emphasizing the goal of restoration of the repentant: "*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" (Matthew 18:15-17).

The Hebrew Scriptures clearly established that God could not be approached in just any sinful, haphazard manner without severe consequences. Some today continue in their sin and believe that God will just excuse it "by grace." Few congregations indeed show as much concern for communal righteousness as did the early Church.

Prayer Was Spiritual Warfare

The early Church understood that prayer was spiritual warfare.

Daniel persevered in prayer for twenty-one days until the angel broke through the opposition. And Jesus voiced the parable of the persistent widow to encourage His followers to *pray without ceasing*.

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 home fellowship is critical to encourage each other to persist in prayer.

The Influence of Relationships

Home gatherings were the place where a new believer engaged in fellowship. And if his sins ever became a major problem, it was the place where he was shut out. It would have been unthinkable for people to join their lives with others in a home fellowship without any concern for God's standards of holiness.

The followers of Jesus really did want God to answer their prayers. Thus they recognized the influence that people have on each other. Look at a few verses that address this:

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

"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).

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

The right to separate from evildoers in order to uphold righteous standards is a biblical prerogative. Paul emphasized the importance of communal righteousness in the Church in his admonishment to the Corinthians: *"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"* (I Corinthians 5:5). That may seem like harsh counsel, but not when you examine it from the eternal perspective.

On the other hand, understand that right relationships can spur believers on to greater love, courage, and service for the Lord. *Load-bearing* in a home fellowship enables us to support each other in a positive way so we can carry out God's purposes. We're talking *Christian extended family* here.

For instance, think about some Hebraic ancestors of the early Church. Biblical men of courage attracted one another. I Samuel 14 illustrates Jonathan's courage for the Lord at Micmash as he and his armor-bearer routed the Philistines against all odds. The same valiant regard for God's honor was displayed by David against Goliath. So from the time they first met, David and Jonathan were drawn to each other. Their courage produced a wonderful devotion and extra strength.

People who are courageous for God attract other courageous people to them. The prophet Samuel describes the "men of valor" who joined David. Each of us needs *people*

of courage in our lives—people we can count on to come alongside us and stand firm in God's mighty power when trials and spiritual battles assail us. Righteousness produces this kind of boldness.

If your walk with Jesus is not growing more loving and bolder, pray that you can find others who will spur you on.

Intimacy vs. Activities

While we were in Israel, some Jewish believers 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 affected by their question—and the fact that we didn't have much of an answer.

It seems we Americans love to entertain, but our gatherings are more oriented to an activity (barbecuing, playing cards, watching a video) rather than to development of friendships with our guests. In fact, many church programs involve a home setting, but feel compelled to use a Bible study or some prescribed curriculum as their focal point.

This is where your *halakhah* of maintaining a "spiritual family" comes in. In the Hebraic model of home fellowship, your family joins together with other families and individuals for worship, sharing, and fellowship. These gatherings are special. These are the brothers and sisters that Paul so frequently refers to: your *spiritual kin*! These are memories in the making 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 become impersonal. That's why the verbs "*Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality*" in Romans 12:13 are in a continuing grammatical tense. We *need* to do these over and over in our relationships to grow in the relational responsibility God requires of us.

Support on the Home Front

Your gathering with believers in a home fellowship is an extension of what you've already been doing in your home with your family. The home fellowship should never deteriorate into a compensation for some *relational deficiency* under your own roof.

Likewise, don't try to make up for what is lacking through irresponsibility in someone else's family. Irresponsibility in a home becomes an increasing burden on others and perpetuates the sin that has fed it. It's appropriate to help others develop reliability, but never step in to take on responsibility that is rightly theirs.

Followers of Jesus need to be encouraged to come prepared each time with a *spiritual offering* to share with others: a special song that blessed you during the week; a verse you or your child have memorized; a testimony of some opportunity at work orchestrated by God; a petition that has been weighing heavily on your heart.

And don't feel that you need to save these up for a scheduled time, either. Sharing something special is only a phone call, e-mail, or stop-by away! Encouraging, comforting or exhorting one another "as long as today is called today" spurs us all to jump into those divine appointments our Father orchestrates daily for His glory!

A home fellowship of extended spiritual family must support the home as the basic building block of spiritual development. If you aren't 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 do it for you!

If other families demonstrate good habits and practices that you would like to develop in your own home, ask them for help until these qualities are part of your family life. For instance, if you are frustrated by your 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, ask for 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. And while it is perhaps humbling to ask someone to fast and pray with you about a very special need, your home fellowship "family" are the ones to seek out first!

True unity in a home fellowship is based on your ongoing fellowship with Jesus and your heavenly Father. 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. *No one individual needs to "sweat the outcome" of your gathering and try to control what happens.*

One other important criterion of our home fellowships has been to never treat children as "second class citizens" of God's kingdom. Jesus admonishes us: "*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).

We found that recognizing the importance of children really blessed our gatherings. If we were gathered together to share, their input was considered, too. If some of the younger ones were ready for a story, any one of the older children or adults gathered the little ones and quietly read.

Because of the frequency and variety of contacts, the children began to see the adults as aunts and uncles! This is especially important in situations where single parents need a source of adult companionship and some time away from their kids, or where singles can sense that vital closeness when relatives are far away.

Congregations of Home Fellowships and Congregations Throughout a City

On the Restoration diagram, the fourth and fifth layers represent the congregation of neighborhood home fellowships and congregations throughout a city.

When several home fellowships congregate together, there should still be the same atmosphere of participation as in the gatherings in homes. At no gathering of God's people should they be relegated to spectatorship.

Leadership at the congregation level is one of administration, facilitating the coordination and outreach of the neighborhood home fellowships. *Reaching the lost* for our Father is still His main priority! But control over the home fellowships or insistence on specific doctrinal issues would be going beyond the Word. Remember, the synagogues that preceded the gatherings of Hebraic believers were very loosely affiliated. And so were the Hebraic churches.

Several congregations of home fellowships can use the same facility as a gathering point if size demands extra space. When we worshiped corporately in Jerusalem, five separate congregations used the same building at different times. Congregations working together in previously unheard-of cooperation is part of God's plan for the restoration.

The Greek philosophical spirit will continue to be exposed for the prejudicial division it creates. It is this spirit that has resulted in the myriad of man-made doctrines that now keep believers from cooperating together to fulfill Jesus' plan for the gospel.

As the Greek spirit loses its control over our faith communities, we will be able to cooperate more effectively on a city-wide basis, recovering and holding on to our cities for Jesus. And when we combine our gifting and resources, we can impact our nation and the world as well!

We Must Repent for the Sins of Our Fathers

When the Jewish people of the Hebrew Bible repented, they received God's merciful forgiveness. We need to keep in mind the example of Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah: *"They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers"* (Nehemiah 9:2). Daniel confessed the ancestral sins that had brought defeat and captivity to the Jews. Turning to God in earnest prayer, he confessed the sins of the whole nation for generations as if they were his own iniquities. Daniel recognized that the *"good hand of the Lord"* would not be with his people until those sins were confessed and their effect was repudiated.

God is waiting for believers today

to be the generation that will repent for the sins of past generations who failed to love Him. We followers of Jesus must repent for the centuries-long sins of the church for turning away from the direct rule of God's Spirit to embrace the spirits of Greece and Rome. And where possible, we

must continue to ask forgiveness for the atrocities the church has inflicted on the Jewish people over the centuries. With God's forgiveness and grace, we can then fully cooperate with Jesus in fulfilling His words: "**I Will Build My Church.**"

Which Church Model Do You Like Best?

GREEK

Cognitive: appeals to the intellect

Program Oriented

- Heavy program emphasis
- Emphasizes education
- Relies on speaking skills, oratory, program materials, information conveyance
- Personal relationships optional
- Leadership by organizational structures
- Leader's personal life not crucial

Biblical Application

- Belief without cost to self
- Bible as data to be taught
- A focus on rules—do's and don'ts
- Emphasizes theological systems and denominational distinctives

Fruit

- Shallow friendships at church
- "What you know" vital
- Trained professionals hired
- Led by logic
- Produces spectators

HEBRAIC

Active: appeals to the heart

Process Oriented

- Emphasizes direct participation
- Emphasizes age and wisdom
- Role modeling, mentoring, discipleship indispensable
- Personal relationships essential
- Leadership by personal example
- Character of leader essential

Biblical Application

- Doers of the Word
- Bible as reality that must be confronted
- Goal—to develop Christlikeness
- Emphasizes unity with freedom of thought

Fruit

- Love, acceptance, forgiveness
- "How you serve" vital
- Each believer trained to serve
- Led by the Holy Spirit
- Produces mature believers