

Ecclesial Study

Fellowship Practice of Central Ecclesias

This article provides a brief overview of the fellowship principles and practices of the Central¹ community. It discusses our basis of fellowship, ecclesial-based practices, and autonomy issues. As will be apparent, this overview depends heavily on Scripture, and the sound advice of the *Ecclesial Guide* and of others who have helped navigate our community through transitions in the past. These sources provide consistent patterns that guide us in determining our proper course today. They also highlight the fact that extreme black-and-white positions can be shortsighted and may inaccurately represent true fundamental principles.

Basis of Fellowship

The Ecclesial Guide

The *Ecclesial Guide*, by Robert Roberts, is the fundamental document defining Central fellowship policy and practices. Our community has enjoyed the blessings of its wisdom for more than a century. Following its Scripture-based advice has enabled us to grow to the size we are today, to the honor of our heavenly Father and His Son. As its full title indicates, *The Ecclesial Guide: A Guide to the formation and conduct of Christadelphian ecclesias* provides guidance for the setting up and running of a Christadelphian ecclesia, and for the interacting of ecclesias with one another.

The *Ecclesial Guide* introduces the important concept of “a basis of fellowship” (we use small caps throughout this article to focus attention on the points being emphasized):

“34 – Basis of Fellowship

“Examination [for baptism] implies A RECOGNISED BASIS OF FELLOWSHIP; that is, a definition of the doctrines that are recognised as the Truth... The question for

1. The term “Central” originally referred to the Birmingham Christadelphian ecclesia that relocated from Temperance Hall to the Midland Institute in the center of Birmingham, England. This ecclesia was called the Birmingham (Central) Ecclesia in part to distinguish it from the Birmingham (Suffolk Street) Ecclesia. The Birmingham (Central) Ecclesia had earlier established the *Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith (BASF)* as its summary of Scriptural doctrines and precepts, thus defining its basis of fellowship. Ecclesias in the Central community were originally those in fellowship with the Birmingham (Central) Ecclesia.

applicants is, do they believe what the Scriptures teach? To test this, the teaching requires definition. This definition agreed to forms THE BASIS OF FELLOWSHIP among believers whether expressed in spoken or written words...

“Such A BASIS OF FAITH will be found at the end of this book. ...

“A System of Rules embodying the Foregoing Suggestions [a pattern for ecclesial constitutions]

1 – That we are a Christadelphian ecclesia.

2 – That we accept and profess the doctrines and precepts of Christ, as taught in the apostolic writings, and defined in the annexed *Statement of Faith* and *Epitome of the Commandments of Christ*.

3 – That we recognise as brethren, and welcome to our fellowship, all who have been immersed (by whomsoever) after their acceptance of the same doctrines and precepts. ...

“A Statement of the Faith forming our BASIS OF FELLOWSHIP [the so-called BASF]: The Foundation... Truth to be Received... Doctrines to be Rejected... The Commandments of Christ...”

As Bro. Roberts emphasizes, the BASF defines “the DOCTRINES AND PRECEPTS of Christ, as taught in the apostolic writings.” It is the “DOCTRINES AND PRECEPTS” that are essential, rather than the specific wording used to define them. There are many acceptable statements in use today in the worldwide Christadelphian community, each of which summarizes the same doctrines and precepts. Of course, there would be justifiable concern if anyone were to emphasize too strongly any differences between their preferred wording and the BASF.

Even though an ecclesia may adopt its own statement of faith, to avoid ambiguity it is common to declare the basis of inter-ecclesial fellowship to be the gospel as defined in the BASF. Such a declaration establishes that the principles summarized in the ecclesia’s statement of faith are the same as those summarized in the BASF.

This emphasis on Scriptural principles being the basis of fellowship, which are outlined in the BASF, and equivalently in other statements, is a recurring theme in past unity agreements.

1957 Central-Suffolk Street (United Kingdom) Final Statement

“GENERAL BELIEFS

“(1) We agree that the doctrines to be believed and taught by us, without reservation, are the First Principles of the One Faith as revealed in the scriptures, of which the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith (with positive and negative clauses, and the Commandments of Christ) gives a true definition. It is agreed however, that ecclesias in both fellowships may continue to use such statements as are current among them, supplementing them where necessary with the Clauses herein set out.”

1958 Australian Unity Agreement

“Basis of Fellowship

“1. GENERAL BELIEFS

- (a) We agree that the doctrines to be believed and taught by us, without reservation, are the first principles of the One Faith as revealed in the Scriptures, of which the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith (with positive and negative clauses and the Commandments of Christ) gives a true definition. Clauses 5 and 12 are understood in harmony with the explanations provided by Brethren Carter and Cooper, reading: ...
- (b) Acceptance of this basis would not preclude the use of any other adequate Statement of Faith by an ecclesia, provided this is in harmony with the B.A.S.F., understood in Clause 1 (a) above.”

2003 NASU

The *North American Statement of Understanding (NASU)* follows this same pattern (p. 9):

“Fellowship/Statement of Faith

“It is understood and agreed that the doctrines to be believed and taught by us are the first principles of the One Faith as revealed in the Scriptures. The two principal statements of faith, *The Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith (BASF)* and *The Birmingham Unamended Statement of Faith (BUSF)*, as set forth herein, (including the *Doctrines to Be Rejected* and *The Commandments of Christ*) understood as expressed in this document represent a true and common definition of the One Faith.

“Inter-Ecclesial Fellowship Practice

“We agree to conduct our inter-ecclesial fellowship at the memorial table of the Lord with North American Christadelphian ecclesias that agree with this understanding, and as set out in principle in *A Guide to the Formation and Conduct of Christadelphian Ecclesias* (commonly referred to as “*The Ecclesial Guide*”, R. Roberts). It is recognized that the basis of inter-ecclesial fellowship outside North America remains the *BASF*. Visitors in good standing from these ecclesias outside North America are welcome at the memorial table.”

CGAF-Central Fellowship Points of Agreement

The *CGAF-Central Fellowship Points of Agreement* is currently being considered as part of the unity effort between congregations of the Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith and the Amended community in North America. It follows the same pattern as earlier unity agreements by declaring the *BASF* to be a faithful synopsis of the first principles of the one faith as revealed in the Scriptures:

“Statement of Faith and Basis of Belief

“The following Biblical principles will be used as the basis of our belief, teaching, and fellowship:

“I. It is agreed that the doctrines and precepts to be believed and taught by us without reservation are the first principles of the one faith as revealed in the Scriptures. The Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith (with *Doctrines to be Rejected* and the *Commandments of Christ*) is a faithful synopsis of these principles.”

Another pattern is apparent from these quotations: it has been our standard practice to use statements of understanding to clarify issues that had previously

been the causes of division:

- *BASF*: The amendment clarifies our understanding of “resurrectional responsibility.”
- *Central-Suffolk Street*: The Final Statement clarifies our common understanding on several issues that had been the source of division in the UK. These clarifications are referred to in the phrase “supplementing them where necessary WITH THE CLAUSES HEREIN SET OUT.”
- *Australian Unity Agreement*: “Clauses 5 and 12 are UNDERSTOOD IN HARMONY WITH THE EXPLANATIONS PROVIDED BY BROTHERS CARTER AND COOPER, reading: ...” This refers to the Carter-Cooper addendum defining the common understanding on issues that had divided brethren in Australia.
- *NASU*: Some have said that the *NASU* declares the *BASF* and *BUSF* to be equivalent. This conclusion is oversimplified and inaccurate. Following the pattern of past unity efforts, the *NASU* clarifies our common understanding on several key issues that have caused division in North America. It clearly states that the *BASF* and *BUSF* “UNDERSTOOD AS EXPRESSED IN THIS DOCUMENT represent a true and common definition of the One Faith.” The distinction is critical. The *NASU*’s expression of our common understanding on fundamental issues is essential.

One final point needs to be addressed concerning the basis of fellowship. There are some today who take a “*BASF* Only” position; these brethren would like to mandate that the *BASF* be the only acceptable statement of faith, hence the only basis of fellowship for all Christadelphians. While well-meaning, this position is clearly out of harmony with our historical emphasis that it is the inspired doctrines of the Bible that form the basis of fellowship. It also gives unwarranted authority to a single man-made expression of those principles.

In addition, such a position denies the reality of the current situation. It is simply a fact that many Central ecclesias use statements of faith other than the *BASF*. This circumstance should not cause concern. Instead, the very existence of a variety of acceptable statements of faith emphasizes that our fellowship is indeed based on the Biblical principles themselves rather than the particular statements of faith used to define those principles. If this were not the case, we might lose touch with our true foundation, and fall into the trap of following men rather than God.

Brethren who push for this “*BASF* Only” position need to be cautious, because they can, without any intention to do so, come dangerously close to denying the Foundation Clause of the *BASF*, which states: “That the book currently known as the Bible... is the only source of knowledge concerning God and His purposes at present extant or available in the earth...” As valuable as the *BASF* has proven to be as an accurate summary of the One Faith, we must never give it the same authority as the Bible. To quote the *Ecclesial Guide*, “So long as it is understood that the written definition is not an authority, but merely the written expression of our identical convictions, there is not only no disadvantage, but the reverse, in reducing the faith to a form that shuts the door against misunderstanding.”

Inclusion and Exclusion

In its role as a basis of fellowship, the *BASF* functions in two ways:

On the one hand...	On the other hand...
It includes those who agree with the basis of fellowship.	It excludes those who do not agree with it.
Differences are not allowed on the agreed essential principles , what they are or what they mean. We must agree to all the principles and cannot selectively “overlook” any of them (e.g., resurrectional responsibility) as if they were not included in our “test of fellowship.”	Friendly, brotherly differences are allowed on issues that are not covered, because we have deemed them to be non-essential (e.g., Who wrote Hebrews? When was Revelation written? Where will the judgment be?).
We insist that others who are in fellowship agree to uphold the same principles. It is not sufficient merely to agree personally with them, but rather we must uphold the principles <i>and</i> be willing to insist that our brothers and sisters do likewise. (Otherwise, we would have to accept a Baptist who happened to agree with us.)	We cannot impose additional tests of fellowship, making them incumbent on our brethren (e.g., specific views of prophecy, the age of the earth, specific divorce and remarriage criteria).

1952 Berean-Central (North American) Reunion

The Berean-Central Reunion Agreement (“The Jersey City Resolution”) highlights the importance of both the inclusion of those who accept and the exclusion of those who depart from the basis of fellowship:

- “1. That we agree that the doctrines set forth in the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith are a true exposition of the first principles of the oracles of God as set forth in the teachings of Jesus Christ and his apostles, and that therefore these doctrines are to be believed and taught by us without reservation: the doctrine of the Scriptures on sin and its effects and God’s salvation from sin and death in Christ Jesus being defined in the clauses three to twelve of the Statement of Faith.
- “2. That we recognize as brethren and welcome to our fellowship all who have been immersed by whomsoever after their acceptance of the same doctrines and precepts, and that any brother departing from any element of the one Faith as defined in the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith is to be dealt with according to apostolic precept.
- “3. If an ecclesia is known to persist in teaching false doctrines, or to retain in fellowship those who do, other ecclesias can only avoid being involved by disclaiming fellowship” (See *The Christadelphian*, 1952, p. 376).

1957 Central-Suffolk Street Reunion

The Central-Suffolk Street Final Statement has the same inclusion-exclusion

pattern:

“FELLOWSHIP: (2) We agree that Baptism into the Saving Name of Jesus, as commonly understood by us, creates a relationship between the Father, the Son and the individual believer which is indissoluble save by the final declaration of God through Jesus. The conduct and teaching of brethren and sisters may be sometimes unworthy of this relationship; we agree that such unworthiness will be righteously assessed by the judgment of God. We agree that a process of disciplinary action (which may involve withdrawal) may be called for in accordance with the general principles laid down in the Scriptures (e.g. Matt. 18:15-17) or as conveniently set forth in paragraphs 32, 41 and 42 of the *Ecclesial Guide*. We agree also that when such disciplinary action has been taken by any ecclesia, other ecclesias should conform to it, subject to the qualifications defined in these paragraphs. Should any depart from any element of the One Faith, withdrawal shall take place after the procedure required by Titus 3:10, 11 has been followed. If an ecclesia is known to persist in teaching false doctrine, it is the duty of other ecclesias to dissociate themselves from such an ecclesia.”

1958 Australian Unity

The Australian Unity Agreement makes the same point:

“2. FELLOWSHIP

“It is affirmed that:

- (a) Where any brethren depart from any element of the One Faith, either in doctrine or practice, they shall be dealt with according to Apostolic precept and that extreme action would be ecclesial disfellowship of the offender. (Matt. 18:15-17; Titus 3:10-11.)
- (b) If it is established that an ecclesia sets itself out by design to preach and propagate at large, false doctrine, then it would become necessary to dissociate from such an ecclesia.

“The course of action necessitated by the above clauses (a) and (b), will be regulated by the principles of Scripture and follow the spirit of the *Ecclesial Guide*, Sections 32, 41 and 42.”

2003 NASU

In like manner, the *NASU* clearly addresses both sides of fellowship practice:

“**Fellowship Discipline**...Should any member depart from the One Faith...withdrawal shall take place only after the procedure required by Titus 3:10-11 has been followed.

“**Ecclesial Autonomy**...However, when an ecclesia officially renounces any of the first principles of the One Faith and persists in teaching false doctrine, it shall by its own action separate itself from the reunited community and the community shall so regard it as outside the community. In these circumstances, it is the duty of faithful members to absent themselves from such an ecclesia.” (*NASU*, p. 9)

Occasionally there are some brethren who focus only on the positive, inclusive side of fellowship. While this may be pleasant to our humanitarian sensibilities, this approach is flawed. To be unwilling to separate from those who do not hold to all aspects of our basis of fellowship is to put everyone in jeopardy, the ecclesia with

the open policy as well as the one who believes or teaches false ideas. Ironically, such a policy will not achieve its objective anyway. We are not divided because of the things we agree on. Emphasizing our common beliefs without addressing the root causes and implications of our differences cannot bring harmony or unity.

Ecclesial-Based Fellowship

In the current age, fellowship authority is vested in the ecclesia. There are some who argue that individual believers have authority to determine fellowship boundaries. On the contrary, Scripture makes plain that, until Christ returns to judge the just and unjust, “final” fellowship authority is the duty of the ecclesia.

Jesus taught this principle:

“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. AND IF HE SHALL NEGLECT TO HEAR THEM, TELL IT UNTO THE ECCLESIA: BUT IF HE NEGLECT TO HEAR THE ECCLESIA, LET HIM BE UNTO THEE AS AN HEATHEN MAN AND A PUBLICAN. VERILY I SAY UNTO YOU, WHATSOEVER YE SHALL BIND ON EARTH SHALL BE BOUND IN HEAVEN: AND WHATSOEVER YE SHALL LOOSE ON EARTH SHALL BE LOOSED IN HEAVEN” (Matt 18:15-18).

The ecclesia has the final say, and the ecclesia’s ruling is binding.

Paul wrote to ecclesias (Romans, Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians) and their leaders (Timothy and Titus), and Jesus wrote (through John) to the seven ecclesias in Revelation. In each of these cases the ecclesia was expected to take corrective action with respect to certain of its members.

Paul emphasizes that individual believers are part of the body and BELONG to the other members of that body:

“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member BELONGS to all the others” (Rom 12:4,5 NIV).

In Christ, we all BELONG to the one body, we are all part of the one family of God, members of the one Church of God. Having a common set of beliefs is necessary but not sufficient. We must also BELONG to the same community. We are joined to those of like faith. And as members of the one body we cannot accept into our common fellowship those who *do not* BELONG to that body, those who do not share our accepted faith and way of life. We must remain separate from them. Paul highlights the importance of this principle by repeating it in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 4:2-6; and Colossians 3:12-15.

John also teaches the same principle of the one body:

“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ...If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light,

as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1Jn 1:3,6,7).

Our fellowship is with the Father, His Son, and with fellow believers who make up the one body of Christ.

So what does "ecclesial-based fellowship" mean in practice? There are three criteria that form the general policy for an ecclesia to be part of the Central fellowship:

- (1) The ecclesia declares itself to be in the Central community, and represents itself in ways that confirm this declaration. For example, following the pattern in the *Ecclesial Guide*, the ecclesia's constitution, if it has one, states that it is a Christadelphian ecclesia, and that it accepts and professes the first principles of the One Faith as revealed in the Scriptures. As such, its ecclesial statement of faith, which forms its basis of fellowship, summarizes the same principles as those defined in the *BASF* (or any equivalent statement of faith). This is the means by which Central ecclesias associate themselves with "The One Body."
- (2) The ecclesia restricts fellowship (i.e., the partaking of the emblems) to those with the same basis of fellowship, that is, to members in good standing of Central Christadelphian ecclesias. In other words, Central ecclesias practice a "closed" fellowship, as taught in the Scriptures.
- (3) The ecclesia is recognized and accepted as being in the Central community by neighboring ecclesias. The size of the Central community, in which it is essentially impossible to "know everyone," depends on this local recognition criteria as a pragmatic and preferable alternative to the establishment of a centralized governing authority determining the fellowship status of ecclesias. The publishing policies of the two primary Central fraternal magazines (*The Christadelphian* and *The Tidings*) both require local recognition before ecclesial news is accepted for publication. By following this policy, the magazines do not determine fellowship status; rather, they report it based on the judgment of the consensus of the surrounding ecclesias.

These three actions form the established practice of the Central Christadelphian community. If any one of them is in question, the standing of the ecclesia within the Central community will be in doubt.

Moreover, "ecclesial-based fellowship" means that individual believers belong to the Lord's body as members in good standing of ecclesias. The ecclesia provides the environment for the believer's discipleship. The believer's ecclesia is their spiritual home, their immediate family of fellow brothers and sisters. Each ecclesia is responsible for correcting its members when necessary. Consequently, membership in an ecclesia is critical. This is why we write letters of commendation when members transfer from one ecclesia to another, a practice that is based on New Testament precedent.

In addition to publishing their news and notices of events in the fraternal magazines of the Central community (i.e., *The Christadelphian* and/or *The Tidings*), it is common for the ecclesia to appear in lists of Central ecclesias (e.g., the *CALS Diary* and the address lists of North American Central ecclesias).

Ecclesial Autonomy

Christadelphians have long emphasized the importance of ecclesial autonomy, as indicated by these extended quotations from the *Ecclesial Guide*:

“42 – Ecclesias in Relation One to Another

...THERE OUGHT TO BE NO INTERFERENCE OF ONE ECCLESIA WITH ANOTHER. AT THE SAME TIME, THEY HAVE RECIPROCAL RIGHTS. ECCLESIAL INDEPENDENCE IS A PRINCIPLE ESSENTIAL TO BE MAINTAINED. But it is no part of THAT INDEPENDENCE to say that no ecclesia shall consider a matter that another has decided upon, if that matter comes before the first ecclesia, and challenges their judgement, and, in fact, requires a decision. In the example already discussed, if a brother withdrawn from by one ecclesia applies for the fellowship of another, that other ecclesia is bound to consider the application, and it is no infringement of THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE FIRST ECCLESIA that it should be so, subject to the rules and attitudes indicated. It would, in fact, be a renunciation of ITS OWN INDEPENDENCE, were it to refuse to do so. Respect for the first ecclesia requires that it accept its decision until it sees grounds for a different view; and in the investigation of these grounds it ought to invite its cooperation, as already indicated. But the mere fact of the application imposes upon it the obligation to consider and investigate the matter, if there are prima facie grounds for doing so. The other ecclesia would make a mistake if it considered such a procedure an infringement of ITS INDEPENDENCE. Such a view would, in reality, be a trammelling of THE INDEPENDENCE OF EVERY ASSEMBLY; FOR IT WOULD THEN AMOUNT TO THIS, THAT NO ASSEMBLY HAD THE RIGHT TO JUDGE A CASE COMING BEFORE THEM IF THAT CASE HAPPEN TO HAVE ALREADY BEEN ADJUDICATED UPON BY ANOTHER ECCLESIA. THE JUDGEMENT OF ONE WOULD THUS BE SET UP AS A RULE FOR ALL. AN ECCLESIA HAS NO RIGHT TO JUDGE EXCEPT FOR ITSELF.

“THIS IS THE INDEPENDENCE NOT TO BE INTERFERED WITH; BUT A SIMILAR RIGHT TO JUDGE MUST BE CONCEDED TO ALL, AND THE EXERCISE OF IT, IF TEMPERED WITH A RESPECTFUL AND PROPER PROCEDURE, WOULD NEVER OFFEND AN ENLIGHTENED BODY ANYWHERE. In the majority of cases the withdrawal of one ecclesia is practically the withdrawal of all, since all will respect it till set aside, and since, in most cases, a concurrent investigation would lead to its ratification. But there may be cases where a reasonable doubt exists, and where a second ecclesia will come to a different conclusion from the rest.”

Similarly:

“44 – Fraternal Gatherings from Various Places

These are beneficial when restricted to purely spiritual objects (i.e., let the brethren assemble anywhere from anywhere, and exhort, or worship, or have social intercourse together); but they become sources of evil if allowed to acquire a legislative character in the least degree. ECCLESIAL INDEPENDENCE SHOULD BE GUARDED WITH GREAT JEALOUSY, WITH THE QUALIFICATIONS INDICATED IN THE FOREGOING SECTIONS. To form ‘unions’ or ‘societies’ of ecclesias, in which delegates should frame laws for the individual ecclesias, would be to lay the foundation of a collective despotism which would interfere with the free growth and the true objects

of ecclesial life. Such collective machineries create fictitious importances, which tend to suffocate the truth. All ecclesiastical history illustrates this.”

This principle of ecclesial autonomy is the reason each ecclesia must be allowed to choose its own statement of faith, as indicated by the following quotations from *The Christadelphian* magazine.

“Brother R.W. asks us to countenance the movement at the antipodes to ‘give up the word “Birmingham” and substitute “Christadelphian.”’ Our answer must be as before: We have no authority to do so. Neither has anyone else. THE BIRMINGHAM ECCLESIA CAN ONLY SPEAK FOR ITSELF; AND IT IS SO WITH EVERY OTHER ECCLESIA...THE PRINCIPLE OF ECCLESIAL INDEPENDENCE MUST BE JEALOUSLY GUARDED, and it is the beginnings of things that have to be watched. There is no desire on the part of the Birmingham ecclesia to impose its form of words on any ecclesia; but there can be no valid objection to any ecclesia adopting it if it sees fit. But to adopt this statement and give it a universal title that the Birmingham ecclesia conscientiously refrains from giving it, does not seem right at all...” (C.C. Walker, March, 1904, p. 113).

“There is one matter on which considerable misunderstanding exists abroad. It concerns the proposed liberty for an ecclesia to retain its own Statement of Faith, while accepting the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith as a correct definition of the First Principles to be believed. The existence of different Statements has come as a surprise to some, but the history of the Truth’s revival makes it plain... The majority of ecclesias thus use the Birmingham Amended Statement of Faith and this in increasing proportion as new ecclesias adopt it. Some would insist on all ecclesias using the same Statement. There may be good arguments for this, but they are not conclusive. For one thing, WE CANNOT MAINTAIN ECCLESIAL AUTONOMY AND AT THE SAME TIME DEMAND THE ADOPTION OF A PARTICULAR STATEMENT. In any case, who has the right to demand it? Again and again in *The Christadelphian* it has been pointed out that ‘The Christadelphian Statement’ does not exist; there is no universal Statement” (John Carter, November, 1955, pp. 425, 426).

Fellowship Practice

As for ongoing fellowship practice, there are two keys based on general management principles:

1. We must manage our fellowship by establishing an acceptable general policy to cover practically all cases, and without institutionalizing exceptional behavior as if it were an essential part of that general policy. This general policy represents the community standard.
2. We must recognize that exceptional circumstances can arise and, as such, these unique situations must necessarily be dealt with on the merits of the individual cases without establishing a general standard by which to judge these or other exceptional circumstances. Ecclesial autonomy allows us to deal appropriately with these special cases.

As for the first of these principles, the *Ecclesial Guide* defines the essentials of the

general policy. The discussions above highlight some of the important features of this Scripture-based policy.

As for the second principle, ecclesial autonomy dictates that the ecclesia involved should be trusted to handle its own situations as it sees fit. The ecclesia must balance its freedom to judge with care and concern for the wellbeing of the community. On the other hand, all else being equal, the community should accept the judgment of the ecclesia. There are rare occasions in which ecclesias, after a joint examination of the facts, come to different conclusions concerning a given case. The *Ecclesial Guide* carefully applies Scriptural principles to outline how ecclesias ought to behave in such circumstances.

With reference to this balance between autonomy and responsibility, Bro. Harry Tennant wrote, “We have responsibilities to our brethren elsewhere since we claim their fellowship and wish to exercise ours in their midst. We cannot therefore claim autonomy without also bearing responsibility. We should not seek to exercise the one without regard to the other” (*The Christadelphian*, May 2006, p. 164). To which Bro. Ken Sommerville added, “Each ecclesia is free to govern its own affairs up to the limits set forth in the scriptural principles summarized in our *BASF*, to which we have all given our willing assent” (*The Christadelphian*, June 2006, p. 204).

Exceptions to the general policy should be kept to a minimum. If they are not limited to truly unique and exceptional cases, then unity will be at risk.

Applying the Commandments of Christ

The *Ecclesial Guide* gives excellent guidance concerning ecclesias who differ in their recognition of individual brethren, with all interactions guided by Christ’s “golden rule”:

“41 – Involved in another Ecclesia’s Trouble

“An ecclesia may be at peace in itself, but may get involved in the troubles of another ecclesia, through an incorrect mode of action. THE SIMPLE LAW OF CHRIST, TO DO TO OTHERS AS WE WOULD BE DONE BY, WILL GREATLY HELP US TO TAKE THE RIGHT AND WHOLESOME COURSE.”

See all of Section 41 for Bro. Roberts’ application of this principle to every step of the process.

In all things concerning fellowship, we should be gracious and caring for one another, following our Lord and obeying his commands. We must manifest the fruit of the Spirit: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance” (Gal 5:22, 23).

It seems fitting to close this article with the following quotation from the *Ecclesial Guide*:

“43 – The True Secret of Success

“This lies in the rich indwelling of the word of Christ in each individual member of an ecclesia—a state to be attained in our day only by the daily and systematic reading of the Scriptures. When every mind is influenced by the Word, the worst rules work smoothly. When it is otherwise, the best will miscarry... When the

commandments of Christ are remembered and acted on (and Jesus says none who fail to do so are his brethren), it will be easy to carry out any system of rules. In fact, a small company where Christ is in the heart ascendant can get on best without set rules. It is only because this is not universal, and when members increase, that rules become necessary.”

In this way, we show ourselves to be true brothers and sisters in Christ, reflecting the image of our heavenly Father, filled with His word, doing His will, loving one another even as He and His Son have loved us.

Christadelphian Tidings Publishing Committee