

## **Fellowship Across The Miles**

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Chess enthusiasts have a unique method of sharpening their playing skills: They play the game by correspondence. All experienced chess players are familiar with chess notation, a method of indicating space by space each location on a chess board. With this simple notation, they can carry on a chess game by mail, scribbling a few characters on a postcard and dropping it in the mailbox.

This kind of chess match is usually conducted between serious players who suffer the misfortune of being removed from better-caliber players who can effectively challenge their skills in this intricate game. Some chess aficionados have been known to carry on single matches like this for months or years. These same chess buffs also play several matches at the same time! Such long-distance matches provide a worthwhile alternative to playing against computerized chess partners that lack the human element of the game.

These chess players and members of God's church have something in common. To some extent we feel a sense of isolation and loneliness because of the separations that have occurred in the past decade. Being alone in the church is difficult; we miss the "iron sharpen[ing] iron" (Proverbs 27:17) that we once took for granted in the larger congregations. By using the same method that chess players use, though, we can avail ourselves of a unique opportunity to have genuine fellowship with other scattered brethren.

All we need is pen, paper, envelopes and stamps!

### **Long-Distance Fellowship**

The writer of Hebrews understood the need of church members to fellowship: ". . . not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25). Though we normally think of this scripture in light of fellowshiping face-to-face, we can apply its principle to the present scattered condition of the church. If we cannot converse in person, we can do it by letter!

Fellowshipping by correspondence affords God's people a chance to encourage and buoy one another up in spirit throughout the entirety of the year. Though we may live hundreds or thousands of miles apart, we do not have to limit our fellowship to the eight days we spend attending the Feast. A good, two-way correspondence can benefit us anytime, anyplace!

We all know how hard it is to get around to everyone at the Feast of Tabernacles! Even with just a few hundred people in attendance, we cannot spend sufficient time with each person—there are only so many services, meals and activities. The best-laid plans to get in touch with our many friends at the Feast often go awry, and sadly, we sometimes miss each other in the hubbub of our busy and tight schedules.

But, even if that happens, we do not have to put our fellowship on hold until next year! If we take advantage of corresponding by mail, we can move our long-distance friendship from the back burner to the front. Throughout the year, we can cement our relationships with our brethren and anticipate a happy reunion when we get together again.

Letter writing offers us opportunities to get to know each other the way we really should. It gives us a chance to share our backgrounds, experiences and individual characteristics in a way that verbal dialogue does not. Correspondence provides a vehicle for achieving positive, uplifting relationships with those whom God has called as our brothers and sisters in His Family.

If we are willing to risk exposing our personality to others, we can—with very little effort on our part—participate in a relationship that can grow strong and close-knit. In a way, it can make us feel a real kinship with our pen pals. All it takes is a desire to reach out and share the self with others in an attitude of camaraderie.

After all, to be one as God desires us to be with Him and with the brethren of His church has to start somewhere! If we wait around for true brotherly friendships to develop by themselves, we will wait forever. Just a little bit of fellowship can lead to a long—eternal—relationship. Great things can come from the tiniest of beginnings, resulting in an eternity of joyous experiences!

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## **Help in Growth**

A unique aspect of one-on-one correspondence is that it helps people to express themselves—to overcome reticence that they may have in direct conversation. Many of us came out of medium- to large-sized congregations where we could hide in the crowd. At times, some were hesitant to "open up"—others were downright afraid to show their true colors in public.

In a more open environment as we enjoy now, we are almost forced to have closer fellowship with other members. Rather than look upon this fearfully, we should look at it as a chance to develop parts of our character and grow personally. We can overcome shyness and fear, and we will probably find that many of our new friends have the same anxieties that we do. One-on-one correspondence can promote reciprocity in sharing life's experiences, which help to edify the other both mentally and spiritually. By writing to each other, we can help each other grow!

Beyond offering uplifting fellowship, the togetherness that pen pals soon develop will eventually provide opportunities for good works. Living in these perilous times of trial and difficulty, many of us fall into various distresses now and again. Most, if not all, of us go through periods when we are down or spiritually weak. Pen pals have the opportunity to help each other during these bad times, offering encouragement, advice, prayers and other services depending on the situation.

Letter writing can give us the satisfaction of knowing we have shared the lives of others. In fact, this "sharing" is part of the definition of the word (*koinonia*) the writers of the New Testament used for fellowship. It means communion, participation, communication, sharing. This sharing of ourselves and participating in others' lives promotes being

joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, caus[ing] growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love. (Ephesians 4:16)

God called each of us to experience spiritual growth, and writing to each other can help us all. Since we are so scattered over the globe, regular letter writing can open to us a whole new world of proper, uplifting fellowship!

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### **An Apostle's Fellowship**

In I John 1:3-4, 7, the aged apostle uses this method of fellowship with us—*across nearly two millennia!*

That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, *that you also may have fellowship with us*; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write that your joy may be full. . . . But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, *we have fellowship with one another*, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Though he is long dead, we can have fellowship with him through our mutual Spirit of God. By this means, John can fill our minds with a real vision of who and what Christ is. He can describe to us the love that flowed from Him to those who spent so much time in His presence. What a great work God has done to make this fellowship possible!

Now think of the advantage two correspondents have in a similar context if they are contemporaries! We can begin and build long-lasting and mutually exhilarating relationships just by writing to one another. When one writes to another and he responds, we begin a bond of fellowship. And just as John has done, we can encourage and edify each other as we progress toward God's Kingdom.

Most of us have little involvement with the people in the world around us, those who live their lives according to ways far from our own. As the times get more evil, we will have less and less in common with them. In God's church, however, there are people who know and are endeavoring to live the way of God just like us. We have this way of life in common. We are not alone!

Not all of us are powerful speakers. We cannot all sing beautiful solos or give eloquent prayers. Most of us are just ordinary people. Yet we are people to whom God has given gifts. What if one of the gifts He has given us is an ability to correspond effectively with others? We could be missing out on a chance to use one of God's gifts in a way that would delight Him!

Consider finding pen pals in the church. Think of ways to express trials, tragedies and triumphs so they can learn and grow from your experiences. Remember how God has worked in your life and share it with them. Write to them about your blessings and your set backs. Allow your pen pals know you and encourage them to let you get to know them.

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