The Apostolic Christian Church has maintained a custom during its worship service that is very beneficial, although somewhat uncommon in contemporary society. This is a seating arrangement whereby men are seated on one side of the assembly, and women on the other.

This seating procedure was adopted when the denomination was formed and has been practiced successfully for many years. It is a custom that is appreciated by the brotherhood as a whole, and it has proven to be a blessing during worship.

Since most church denominations no longer observe this practice it's possible that questions may arise in the minds of those who are unfamiliar with it, or who do not entirely understand it. Obviously, the church has considered this custom to be worthy of retention, and indeed feels it to be - not only meritorious - but workable, and beneficial for worship.

In holding to this policy for the past 140 years (in view of trends to the contrary), the church has been quick to concede that there is no specific Biblical teaching regarding a worship seating arrangement. It holds, however, that the Bible does contain concise directives that allude to an atmosphere of godliness, reverence, order, and good fellowship in the household of faith.

Separated seating, while tending to provide for a more orderly worship service, also allows for greater and more comprehensive fellowship among the believers and friends. It encourages the outflow of more love and compassion than otherwise might be the case. This will be explained as the topic is developed.

To obtain a better understanding of this practice, it is necessary to examine historical precedents. Although, in a relative sense, historical data on this topic is somewhat sparse, sufficient documentation does exist which substantiates the existence of this practice in the past, even as far back as the early church, and also in the time before Christ. Moreover, it has been found that this practice is still in existence today in various other denominations.

Many theological historians write that this custom was practiced in the first century Christian churches. In a book entitled The Early Christian Church by Mr. J. D. Davies a brief description is given: "The sexes were strictly separated, with either the men in front, and the women behind; or the men on the right, and the women on the left."1

In another book, Studies in the Life of the Early Church by Mr. F. J. Doakes-Jackson, it is explained that men and women were separated during the worship service. It is rather interestingly pointed out that doorkeepers looked after the men, and deaconesses after the women to insure quietness and attentiveness.2

Mr. Edwin Voight, in his book Methodist Worship in the Church Universal, also refers to the existence of this practice in the early church. The explanation given is that the early church needed sufficient procedural order so they could practice the holy kiss. This valued practice was
observed during their actual worship service, so it was necessary and prudent to seat the sexes separately.  

*The Antiquities of the Christian Church* by Mr. Lyman Coleman points out: "The rules of the primitive churches required the separation of the sexes in the church, and this was generally observed. The men occupied the left of the alter on the south side of the church, and the women on the right, on the north. They were separated from one another by a veil or lattice. In the Eastern churches, the women occupied the galleries above, while the men sat below".

Yet another book entitled, *A History of the Early Church to A. D. 500* by Mr. J. W. C. Wand, refers to this practice: "Within the church was the holy table behind which facing the people, and with his presbyters on either hand, sat the bishop. Men and women sat apart".

Also, in *The Church in History* by Mr. B. K. Kuipper, pictorial sketches show the practice of separated seating.

The Encyclopedia Judaica makes reference to the "mehizah" which is a Hebrew word for partition or fence. This reference book explains that as far back as Temple times men and women were separated during the worship service by a partition which consisted of a non-transparent curtain or some type of latticework.

The reasons the Jews give for applying this practice had to do with the matters of frivolity and convenience. It seems that early worship assemblies were plagued somewhat with frivolity and lack of attention when men and women sat together.

Also, in those early times, it was necessary for many women to leave the service early, either to prepare food or to care for infants. By seating women apart from men this reduced distraction, and made their departure less obvious, and more convenient.

This seating plan was practiced for many centuries among the Jewish people and is still a custom of Orthodox Jewish gatherings today. An article in the New York Times (September 10, 1973) referred to worship services among the Orthodox branch of Judaism. It said, "According to 2,000-year old tradition, women are separated from men in religious worship".

In Christian circles, this plan is still practiced today among the Greek, Russian, and Bulgarian Orthodox churches in this country. Also, for the most part, it is still practiced by the Apostolic Christian Church (Nazarene) and by other sister churches in the United States and overseas.

It is interesting to note that in past centuries, and even today, religious bodies have considered it wise to separate men and women during worship services. This practice has been considered beneficial in maintaining an orderly atmosphere during a worship service. The Bible unmistakably refers to the matter of good order. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Let all things be done decently and in order" (I Corinthians 14:40).
The Apostolic Christian Church, too, believes in the maintenance of godly order, and has found this practice to be a viable means to this end - and it has proven to be a great blessing as well.

The brethren, both past and present, have felt that when believers gather in the house of the Lord for public worship all cares and general matters pertaining to earthly life should be shut out, or relegated to the background as much as possible. All attention and thought should be focused entirely on the holy things of God. In such an atmosphere God's children can truly feel they are "sitting together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:6).

In this frame of reference, a seating arrangement in which husbands are not sitting next to their wives, and other single men and women are not sitting mixed, is without question very helpful in curbing the human tendencies of becoming - distracted or unduly reminded of earthly matters - such as the husband and wife relationship, or perhaps a lingering romantic relationship between two unmarried individuals. By sitting separately, the chance for freedom from this realm of earthly care or distraction is increased. In Christ, we are neither male nor female (Galatians 3:28), and during the worship service it is well to have such an attitude.

When believers reach the heavenly kingdom, the marriage state will no longer exist (Luke 20:34-36 and Mark 12:25). The blessed and God-sanctioned institution of marriage is nevertheless only an earthly union. Thus, separated seating during a worship service tends to symbolize the future state that will ultimately prevail in heaven for the true and faithful - when they actually do sit together in heavenly places.

Further, although God joins men and women together in holy matrimony and they "twain become one flesh" (Matthew 19:5), and each serves to assist the other in spiritual matters, it remains that each partner is accountable individually before God concerning his or her soul. Each person - whether married or not - must stand before God entirely on an individual basis. To a large extent, sitting separately during worship tends to acknowledge this fact.

Surely, by being separated from the opposite sex, one can more readily concentrate on the spiritual matters at hand. Distraction is markedly reduced.

**GREATER FELLOWSHIP**

When a family unit attends church on Sunday morning, rather than remaining in their own tight circle and sitting together, separated seating allows them opportunity to enjoy wider fellowship with the brethren. By sitting apart from family (men together and women together), the individual is more exposed to, and learns to know more of the brethren on a more intimate basis. As a result, deeper and more comprehensive relationships result. This, in turn, contributes toward greater unity and oneness in a body of believers.

The fact that a husband, wife, and children do not sit together during worship in church does not drive a wedge between them, or threaten to weaken their unity. In fact, aside from two hours of separation in church, they have the opportunity to be together for the balance of the week. And certainly plenty of opportunity exists during the week for family devotional periods...
such as reading God's word, singing, and praying together. Really, if a family's unity is dependent on where they sit in church, then it's probably on shaky ground to begin with.

The question arises, how does separated seating provide freedom for greater fellowship? Consider this scenario: On a Sunday morning as a family comes to church they are not obligated, by custom or habit, to stay together. Rather, each family member is free to move about the halls and meet and greet more of their fellow believers. And by doing so, their mobility allows them to more easily render comfort and love to the older believers, the lonely, those who bear burdens, and those who come to church alone. One is more free to sit with, and associate with, those who are perhaps in need of special love and attention. In this way a deeper and more permanent bond of Christian love and brotherhood can be established, nourished, and maintained.

It is a beautiful and warming experience to see a young teenage sister greet an older, and perhaps frail sister, and then proceed into the assembly with her to sing, pray, and listen to the sermon. Their age difference is obliterated as they commune and fellowship in Christ. This is a rich blessing for the church. The chances of this happening would be less probable if the teenage girl was accustomed to sitting with her parents each Sunday.

RESPECT FOR WIDOWS

There exists another logical reason for this seating plan, and again this involves the important matters of love and compassion. Separated seating is a vehicle which assists in perpetuating the love of God, particularly with respect to the widows, widowers, the unmarried, and those who are alone in life. The church mercifully recognizes that, for the most part, many persons are alone during the week, and perhaps have to contend with isolation and its frustrations all week long. Many are burdened by their aloneness and are deeply sensitive about it.

Yet, when these persons come into the house of the Lord for worship and the opportunity is provided for women to sit with women, and men to sit with men, their isolation and aloneness immediately disappears as they are blended in with the balance of the congregation. They are no longer prone to be reminded of their situation in life - whether being alone, or single, or whatever - and it becomes indistinguishable as to who is married and who is not. All are as one, and are as brothers and sisters in Christ. If the seating arrangement was mixed, the lonely, the single, and those without families or relatives would continue to bear the weight of their particular situation.

Thus, by employing separated seating, the church as a whole shows great compassion and love for those parishioners who are alone in life. The church does what it can to subdue an individual's feeling of "aloneness", and is gladly willing to provide an atmosphere of togetherness as one in Christ.

CONGREGATIONAL SINGING

Another reason for this seating arrangement concerns the matter of congregational singing. The church considers singing a very important part of the believer's life. As a result, singing is a prime part of the worship liturgy.
For this reason - individual participation in hymn singing - the church employs no musical instruments during the worship service. It is felt that a piano or organ tends to somewhat diminish audience participation (especially in large assemblies) as a congregation tends to "lean" on them for assistance in the progression of the songs, and "from the heart" singing is often markedly reduced. Decreased audience participation curbs personal edification.

Thus, to proceed with reverent and praiseworthy congregational singing, it is beneficial to have all women sitting together and all men sitting together. In this way, a beautiful four-part harmony (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass), which is impressive in its simple beauty and dignity, is accomplished as the entire church joins together in lifting their voices in praise to God. The church is deeply impressed with the serene, natural, and calm beauty of "a capella" singing, and feels its peaceful quality is a treasured part of the worship liturgy.

Songbooks used during the worship service are written in four-part harmony and singing is a top priority, and a real blessing in the church. And the seating arrangement is a helpful means to this end.

**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

The custom of seating men and women separately has indeed worked very well for the Apostolic Christian Church. It has proved to be a policy of wisdom and compassion. It is regarded as good because:

1. It contributes to order in the church.
2. It provides for more intimate and comprehensive fellowship.
3. It allows for compassion toward the widows, the lonely, and other single persons.
4. It contributes to reverent singing.

And in conjunction with these four reasons, it must be reiterated that it is a practice which has historical precedence all the way back to the early Christian church.

The Bible encourages believers to "cleave to that which is good" (Romans 12:9), and certainly this practice has been good and beneficial to the church.

Also, the Apostle Paul advised the early believers to "stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word or our epistle" (II Thessalonians 2:15). This seating practice is in accordance with this wise scriptural advice, and in a more general sense, is in sufficient alignment with the Biblical themes of order, unity, mercy, and compassion.

Separation of the sexes during worship service is not an oddity, but a mark of distinction. The Apostolic Christian Church, in recognizing the need for a godly and reverent atmosphere during worship (and one that reduces distraction) has retained an early church practice that the modern world, for the most part, has discarded. It has stood forthrightly beside a church practice that obviously is an asset to a worship service, and was recognized as such by Christianity as a whole up until about seventy or eighty years ago.
It is indeed reassuring that the Apostolic Christian Church has adhered to this time-honored tradition that has provided for sound worship service. The church has not maintained this custom merely for the sake of custom, but because it has worked. The church forefathers in the 19th century (as well as those in the 1st century) found that separated seating was beneficial.

This practice can best be understood when it is actually experienced over a period of time. Many brethren, both now and in generations past, have testified of the blessings found in coming into church - men sitting on the "men's side", and women on the "women's side" - taking a Zion's Harp songbook, and joining the brotherhood in singing praises to God in perfect unity.

There is a favorite hymn that is often sung in Apostolic Christian assemblies. It goes:

"Our lot is found in pleasant places,
A goodly heritage is ours . . . ."

May this wonderful heritage be sustained as long as the Lord tarries.

FOOTNOTES
1. Davies, J. D.; The Early Christian Church; Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
4. Coleman, Lyman; Antiquities Of The Christian Church; Baker and Scribner, page 184.
5. Wand, J. W. C.; A History Of The Early Church To A. D. 500; Methuen and Company, page 92.
6. Kuipper, B. K.; The Church In History; National Union of Christian Schools, pages 278 and 349.