

The Church: God's Fellowship

Text:

I John 1:1-10

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-- the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us-- that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”

In the text that we have just read the word “fellowship” is repeated four times. What image came to your mind as you heard it read? Associating the right image with that word is the goal of the present discussion. When you hear, or use, the word “fellowship” are you associating it with the same thing the New Testament writers associated it with? Let us begin with the English word and break it down a bit. In English when we create a noun by adding the suffix “ship” it implies the act of doing whatever is implied in the noun to which we affix the “ship”. For example “workmanship” refers to that which is produced by a workman, and “scholarship” to that which is produced by a scholar. Both may be of good or bad quality, implying that there are established standards which a workman or a scholar are expected to fulfill. This being the case, “fellowship” is what is produced by fellows. Now we best understand the meaning of a fellow by adding another word; “fellow man”, or “fellow worker”, or more precisely in our case, “Fellow Christian”. Fellowship can then be, in the Christian sense, either the thing that is produced by being a fellow to other Christians, or the actual body of individuals that comes into existence by their common adherence to the Christian faith. In the first case fellowship represents the interaction that exists between fellow Christians, and in the second case it a synonym for the church.

The root idea of a fellow is that there is something that is shared, a common ground. We can speak in the broadest sense of all humanity as our “fellow man” because there is within human nature a common ground, a common human experience. We can relate to the joys and sorrows of other humans, even though they may be geographically distant and culturally different from us, simply because they are human beings, and all human beings share a common human experience. The more common ground we share with another human being

the greater the possibility of fellowship. A common language for instance overcomes the major barrier of communication and allows us to establish a relationship that would be impossible otherwise. Common relationships and common interests are other things that enhance the potential of connecting with another person. For example you might encounter someone from your home state that you don't know at all in a foreign country. What you have in common might not seem great or important if you were at home, but the strangeness of the foreign country will enhance the common ground between you, and you may enjoy one another's company in that foreign land in a way that you never would at home.

Now when we think about Christian fellowship we are thinking about at least three things:

- The common ground that exists between God and the believer enabling us to know God and to have a relationship with him. This is what John means when he says: "Our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ."
- The common ground that exists between believers because of their common relationship with God through Jesus Christ. This is what John is referring to when he says: "we have fellowship one with another."
- The fruit of these relationships, what is produced or results from our being related to one another because of our common relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

In the text John says that one of the reasons he is writing this Epistle is so that we might have fellowship both with God and with one another. In the remainder of the book he will develop themes that are essential to this fellowship. We cannot cover all that he says, but it will be helpful for us to see that our fellowship with God and with one another flow from three things we hold in common:

- A common faith
- A common hope
- A common love

I. Our Common Faith

John would say first of all that our fellowship, the bond that exists between God's people, believers in Christ, is our common faith. He begins this letter in a way that immediately makes us think of the beginning of his Gospel. He speaks of that which was from the beginning, which he and the other apostles had seen and heard and touched with their hands. This "word of life" which was manifested to them and that they have proclaimed to us was of course Jesus Christ, God incarnate, who came into the world to teach us the way of life, and to give us eternal life. Our common faith is in Jesus Christ. This common faith produces a common experience, and all those who have experience the forgiveness of sins and the renewal of spiritual life through the knowledge of God through Jesus Christ share the deepest and most important reality of life. It is this common faith that creates a common relationship with God that is the basis of our relationship with one another. In the world we may relate to people on the basis of many

common grounds; family, interests, profession, etc., but in the Church we relate to one another on the basis of a common faith in Jesus Christ.

It is for this reason that later in the letter John makes it clear that without this common faith in Christ, Christian fellowship is impossible. This fellowship can only exist between those who share a common faith in Christ and in the revelation that God has given in Christ. To reject Christ and his revelation is to destroy the common ground. This is the reason John writes later in the letter in chapter 4 verses 1- 7:

“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.”

On the other hand, Christian fellowship is immediate and spontaneous between those who share this common faith. This is the reason Jesus said: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst” (Matt. 18:19). However great the differences may be between two people socially, economically, or culturally, their common bond of faith creates a fellowship that immediately transcends these things.

II. Our Common Hope

Our common faith in Jesus Christ gives us a common hope; the hope of eternal life. Those who share that hope have a bond between them that could never exist outside of their shared hope. John writes of this hope in 3:1 -3:

“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.”

Notice how he teaches in this passage that our hope modifies our behavior. We have a common hope and that hope leads us to live in a certain way. We are a people who encourage one another with the common hope of eternal life, but who also exhort one another to reject sin and to purify ourselves and live righteous lives because of the hope of the Gospel.

III. Our Common Love

Finally John tells us that Christian fellowship produces a common love among believers. He writes for example in 2:7-11:

“Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”

The bond of a common faith in Christ, and a common hope of eternal life, is completed by a common love for one another. This love is the result of the love of God that we have experienced in Jesus Christ that has now been communicated to us through the Holy Spirit. John makes it clear that it is a practical love that manifests itself through service to one another in the community. Thus he writes in 3:16-19:

“By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him.”

By a common faith in Jesus Christ and a common hope of eternal life we have been bound together in a fellowship of love where we serve one another after the pattern that Christ demonstrated to us in his life and in his death. The one commandment he left us that is to be the foundation of our community is the commandment that we cited earlier, the commandment that Jesus gave us on the night he was betrayed and arrested, the commandment he demonstrated to us by washing the disciples' feet; that we love one another in the same way that he loved us.

Dr. John Fawcett was the pastor of a small church at Wainsgate, England and was called from there to a larger church in London in 1772. He accepted the call and preached his farewell sermon. The wagons were loaded with his books and furniture, and all was ready for the departure, when his parishioners gathered around him, and with tears in their eyes begged of him to stay. His wife said, “Oh John, John, I cannot bear this.” “Neither can I,” exclaimed the good pastor, and we will not go. Unload the wagons and put everything as it was before.” His decision was hailed with great joy by his people, and he wrote the words of the hymn, “Blest be the Tie

that Binds”, in commemoration of the event. The fellowship that he describes in this hymn is the same fellowship that John is speaking of in this text.

Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

Before our Father’s throne
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fears, our hopes, our aims are one
Our comforts and our cares.

We share each other’s woes,
Our mutual burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.

When we asunder part,
It gives us inward pain;
But we shall still be joined in heart,
And hope to meet again.

This glorious hope revives
Our courage by the way;
While each in expectation lives,
And longs to see the day.

From sorrow, toil and pain,
And sin, we shall be free,
And perfect love and friendship reign
Through all eternity.
