

THE WONDER OF FELLOWSHIP

The teaching of Christ and the Apostles on the principles of fellowship that should exist between believers. The need for the unity of the spirit (Eph. 4:3) and the special privileges experienced by those who enjoy such a wonderful fellowship.

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When 3,000 were converted and baptised on that wondrous Pentecost Day the very next verse says, “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship...” (Acts 2:42) So the Apostle’s teaching was the foundation of their faith and they practised a “fellowship” that drew them together and they became the first church.

Immediately others were attracted to join and the chapter ends with the words, “And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.” The church continued to be “added to”: they became a special fellowship of people. Peter wrote that they were “a chosen generation ... his own special people” praising “Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

Soon this “special people” were a target of envy and then of persecution. (Acts 8:1; 9:1,13) This only drew them closer together. It produced appeals in the letters of Paul, Peter and John encouraging them to remember they were a special people and that as such “what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14)

As the “temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16) they were a chosen generation who had been “called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord” (1 Cor. 1:9). This was the fulfilment of the prayer of Jesus not long before his arrest, “I do not pray for these alone but also for those who will believe in me through their word: that they all may be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I in You; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me ... that they may be one just as we are one: I in them and you in me, that they may be made perfect in one...” (John 17:20-23)

What a beautiful picture of fellowship here, a harmony that those who do not know Christ cannot appreciate. A harmony which can be spoilt by those who do not fully appreciate the wonder and the privilege of the fellowship into which they have entered. But let us look at the ideal first before we consider that which is less than the ideal.

Fellowship does not start with ourselves

John takes up the theme in his epistle, “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His son Jesus Christ. “ (1 John 1:3) John is saying that fellowship starts with us having a true relationship with the Father and His Son. As a result of each individual achieving that relationship they then have fellowship with one another. Unless we have established that true relationship with our Saviour and His Father we cannot have true fellowship with one another.

There can be no communion between light and darkness, Paul had said. To this, John adds, “If we say we have fellowship with Him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in 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.” (1 John 1: 6,7) We can walk in darkness in two ways. We can walk in darkness by practicing the works of darkness, returning to the attitudes and behaviour of the men and women of the world. We can also walk in darkness by not seeing “the light of the glorious gospel of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4 AV), instead, following a “different gospel”, a perversion of the true Gospel. (Gal. 1:6,7)

The central point of fellowship is when believers meet together to remember their Lord to break bread and drink wine as a symbol of his body and blood given for them. Think of the words Paul uses to describe a memorial meeting of this nature, “we being many, are one bread and one body, for we all partake of that one bread.” (1 Cor. 10:16-17) Such believers become identified as one together, members of the body of Christ. “The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?” If we speak of taking communion, which some churches do, do we achieve common-union? What is the situation if we join with them in that communion? It cannot be a union of a common belief, the belief of the first century followers of Christ – bound together by one hope and one faith based on that hope? (see Eph. 4:4-6) If it were based on such a common belief we should be all together as one, having regular fellowship together. Such unity would demonstrate we were all of one mind, it is the heart of fellowship.

Can there be fellowship between *different* churches?

We can see that the churches of which we read in the New Testament were focused on the teaching of the Apostles. Departures from that faith were condemned. (2 Tim 2:18) Heretics were to be rejected. (Titus 3:10) But as the centuries passed churches divided and multiplied until today we have such a multitude of churches in some countries that the whole Christian movement is discredited in the eyes of unbelievers. If there is one God and He has caused one Bible to be written why are there so many different and competing churches, especially when there was one church at the beginning.

Dedicated Bible students know the answer to that. The Bible itself foretells the breakdown of the church. The apostle Paul said, "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves." (Acts 20: 29,30) Thus the splitting up of the flock was foreseen. Paul writes as though it had to be, "for there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognised among you." (1 Cor. 11:19) While we might wish otherwise, it is not God's will that there should be one huge universal church with lots of comfortable pews for everyone to occupy. In the days of the Old Testament men of God men, such as Elijah, thought they were the only true believers left (but there were 7,000 others – see 1 Kings 19:18). God allowed the same situation to develop in the church. There is one Bible – and with the aid of God's holy book, everyone who is a seeker is able to search out that which is true.

The apostle John was having the same experience as he contended with wrong believers. He says of those who left his community, as he stood firm for truth, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us." (1 John 2:19)

Can two walk together unless they are agreed?

Centuries earlier God had said to Israel through the prophet Amos, "Can two walk together unless they are agreed?" (Amos 3:3) The prophets message was to ask if Israel, God's people, was really walking together with Him? They were not and they were to be forsaken (Amos 3:14,15; 4: 11,12; 6:8) God's principle still applies, unless two are in agreement, they cannot walk together. And walking together with God means having fellowship, because fellowship, as we saw, begins by having a true relationship with God.

Can two (or more) meet together in fellowship unless they both have a true relationship with God? Their acceptance of the same original gospel, hope and faith creates the basis for their meeting together. Can God accept any that deny the need for agreement together? The answer is obvious, He does not.

Our quotation on the front page is most significant. Ephesians 4 commences with an appeal to "walk worthy of the calling with which you were called." (v.1) "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." To Corinthians Paul had written about "the communion (or fellowship) of the Spirit be with you all." (2 Cor. 13:14) meaning that God was always present with them, the spirit watched over them now that they were related to God. (see Psalm 139:1-8; 1 Cor. 6:19-20) God through his Spirit knows whether we have unity of heart and mind in serving Him – or not! (Note Romans 8:26) He must be aware when we try to have unity of "light" and "darkness" by seeking, in a spirit of perverse human wisdom, to try to establish some basis of imagined "unity" between the original Gospel of Jesus and the "different Gospel" that Paul condemned.

Many different Gospels

It is true there have been many "different Gospels" over the centuries. False teachers began by trying to embrace the Law of Moses within the Gospel, but this Law had been "nailed to his cross" (Col. 2:14) They continued by trying to teach that if Jesus had been the Son of God he could not have come in the flesh as an ordinary human being (1 John 4:3; 2 John 7) This way of thinking grew until, 300 years later, the main church was teaching that Jesus was "very God" himself and part of a triune Godhead. The "different gospel" (see also 2 Cor. 11:3-4) was stated to be such a perversion (Gal. 1:7-9) that anyone who preached it or received it would surely be "accursed", as Paul stated. Different "Gospels," humanly created, now abounded,

especially the concept of an immortal soul and the continuation of existence after death, teachings totally foreign to the message of Jesus and His followers – and to anything written in the Old Testament.

Darkness had set in after Jesus had brought light into the world, yet the light still flickered in the darkness for those who were seeking to see. It has flickered ever since – and even a little light, as long as it is not hidden under a bushel, can be seen a long way off by those who are looking for it. God sees to that. But if the light in a person is actually darkness (see what Jesus said in Matthew 6: 22-23) how great is that darkness!

Paul wrote, “Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them.” (Eph. 5:11) He would not have said this if there had not been a temptation to do just that! Human nature is ever ready to compromise, and in some situations God is willing to allow for that – but He certainly does not allow it when it comes to fellowship, walking together as one with those with whom there is no “unity in spirit.”

What attitude must we take?

What are we to do then when we feel attracted to have an association with people with whom we have some things in common? Note, “some things” – yet there are other things with which we are not in agreement.

Paul says, “I show you a more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31) and surely this is the spirit of our approach to all people, to show them the best way, which is the only way, to understand, believe and save their lives. This is the only way that leads to fellowship with God and with Christ. It is God’s will that we should save others, yet if we have fellowship with those who do not yet understand the true revelation and will of God, will they not think that they are “saved” – even as we are?

Will we not also be putting our own salvation in jeopardy by associating fully with them as though we are all one together in fellowship with Christ and with God? Will we not be in danger of incurring God’s displeasure, as Israel did in Old Testament times when they formed liaisons with some of the surrounding nations?

It may be more appropriate in some of the situations that occur to compare the relationship of the southern and northern kingdoms of Israel that became established after the death of King Solomon. The northern kingdom set up alternative places of worship to Jerusalem and none of their kings served God properly. The kings in the south were largely righteous yet those which sought to have liaison with the north and go to war jointly with them were vigorously condemned by the prophets God sent to them, all too often they got involved with the false worship of the surrounding nations. When the righteous kings from the southern kingdom got involved with their fellow Israelites in the north to support them and, in a sense, have fellowship with them, they were rebuked by God’s prophets for giving help and showing love to them. (see 2 Chron. 19:2)

The northern kingdom were sent into captivity for their sinfulness and there is no evidence that they ever returned. We see the parallel here, a principle for us to observe. There would have been some temptation for people to visit the north and join in their worship of God at their places of worship set up at Bethel and Dan as a rival to Jerusalem. (1 Kings 12:27-30) “Now this thing became a sin,” the record says. The worship of God is a very precious privilege. Let us exercise that privilege with care.

Worshipping God in Spirit and in Truth

Jesus had an interesting encounter with a Samaritan woman (read John 4: 19-24) in which he declared, “But the hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him” (v.23) And to emphasize the point this is repeated in the next verse, “... those who worship him must worship him in spirit and truth.”

The point about worshipping him in spirit is that worship of the true unseen God has to be an exercise of the mind. It was the idols that were worshipped by touching and by the worshipper prostrating themselves before the image. The practice of some Christians of making the sign of the cross on themselves has no basis in the Bible. The wearing of signs and symbols is evidence of that which is wrong, the evidence of human

imagination. It is significant that the making of a physical mark or sign is only mentioned in God's word in relation to those who will be rejected by God. (Ezek. 9:4-6; Rev. 13:16; 14: 9.11)

The Bible makes it very plain that God is concerned about the condition and attitude of our heart (Isa. 66: 2; Psa. 33:18-22), the spirit in which we come before him in the Name of His Son to say our prayers and worship privately or together.

But the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman about worshipping God included another significant word, the word "truth." How is God worshipped in truth? The opposite to truth is a lie! If our worship involves a lie, what kind of worship is that? Jeremiah was sent to rebuke those who "have spoken lying words in my name which I have not commanded them. Indeed I know and am a witness, says the LORD." (29:23)

When do we speak in God's name? Whenever we talk about the teachings of God in His book the Bible to others. We are passing on to others what God's message to human beings is. This is just the same as if we have a human employer and he sends us out to speak about the firm's products, we speak in our employer's name. If we are distorting or changing what the Bible actually says, we are misrepresenting God. If we are coming to worship him, and where that is does not matter, if our attitude is all wrong, or if we think that God is some kind of Trinity of 3 persons, then we are not worshipping Him in "Truth".

Serve God in sincerity and truth

The Father seeks human beings to worship him in sincerity and in truth. That was the message of Joshua to the people of Israel after Moses died. They crossed the Jordan into the promised land. Many had died in the wilderness because they had lost faith in the One true God despite seeing many mighty miracles. Joshua gives them a stirring exhortation, "Now therefore fear the LORD, serve him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the Gods which your fathers served on the other side of the river and in Egypt. Serve the LORD!" (Josh. 24:14)

There must be sincerity and truth in our worship. We do not make idols today, not the kind they made in those days, but we can try to bring God down to our own dimension of thinking. History shows there has always been an inclination to believe what we want to believe rather than what God has revealed. Thus there is always a danger that we will create our own God as an "idol" in our mind. The antidote to this is to read God's word every day and meditate on what we read.

Those who make it their aim to worship God in total sincerity and truth, rejecting all the man made distortions and lies about Him, then face the problem as to what is their relationship with those other believers in God who have not applied their minds to worship him in the same degree of sincerity. The question becomes particularly critical when it is evident they misunderstand "the truth" about God. It is more difficult to know how to answer in those countries where Christianity is in a small minority, especially where it is an oppressed minority. There is pressure to ignore differences. But how can you when those differences are seen to be significant in the way God views the way we worship Him and the way God has revealed a true Gospel which He requires believers to accept?

The Gospel by which you are saved

The apostle Paul wrote, "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached – unless you believed in vain." (1 Cor. 15:1-2) Consider those words. You received and believed the Gospel – and it saved you – because you accepted it and obeyed the command to be baptised and set out to live a Christ-like life. But what did you believe?

You believed the Gospel as set out in the pages of the Bible; that Jesus is your Saviour, dying for you and He is coming again to set up God's Kingdom over all the earth. At the same time he will raise the dead and those who have kept the faith will receive immortality. That very briefly is the central core of the Gospel. This true Gospel knows nothing about believers going to heaven or having immortal souls. That is a fiction that confused Church goes long after the time of Christ and the apostles. We are not worshipping God in

truth when we believe that. We are not enjoying the true wonder of fellowship when we share bread and wine with those who believe that – and other teachings of human imagination.

It is evident that true believers must come together as “one body” and be of “one mind” as we have already demonstrated earlier in this treatise with a number of quotes. For example, “The bread we brake, is it not the communion (common-union) of the body of Christ? For we ... are one bread and one body, for we all partake of that one bread.” (1 Cor. 10)

Is an exclusive fellowship right?

Some make a complaint against others that they maintain an exclusive fellowship, as though there is something wrong with that. And there can be something wrong with that. The exclusiveness can breed pride, snobbery and a feeling of superiority. This was the spirit of the religious leaders in the days of Jesus, the spirit of the true believer must be the exact opposite.

Those who complain about the exclusiveness of our fellowship are usually those who say something like this: “We both believe in Jesus and in God so why cannot we be one together?” It does not take very much talking to discover that what they “believe in” is an emotional worshipping experience of constantly praising God and Jesus with no real understanding of the relationship between the two or the real nature of the salvation that God offers. But true fellowship is not a surface relationship of having a good time singing together and enjoying one another’s company in a superficial way. The prophet said, “Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name.” (Malachi 3:16)

The LORD listens to the conversation of those who fear Him as they enjoy fellowship together in talking of their relationship to Him and their understanding of His word. It is a wonderful and special fellowship. For such God has written a book of remembrance, that is, the book of life which He will open on the resurrection day so that he can welcome all those whose names are written therein into the Kingdom of His Son.

Reader, make sure that you are experiencing the wonder of true fellowship now. And then in the future there will be greater wonders in store.

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