

Fellowship

“If there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.”

Is there any encouragement in Christ? Do we not find the power to go beyond what we are capable of doing because of that grace that is poured out on those who are in Jesus? Life comes with frequent disappointments – some about ourselves, some about others. The encouragement we receive from being “in Christ” prompts us to keep going. The encouragement is worthy of a whole lesson in itself, but that’s not where I’m going this morning.

Is there any consolation of love? Do we not find consolation when the world rains on our parade? The love that God poured out in our hearts enables us to die that others may live. That’s another great topic.

Is there any affection and compassion? Are we not richly blessed by having people who truly care about us, warts and all?

Therefore, Paul writes, based on these things, be united.

What did I leave out? We understand those three motivations I mentioned. But there is a fourth wheel on this bus as we “attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” Is there any fellowship of the Spirit?

What is that?

And why is it important?

The encouragement that I derive from being in Christ is something I receive. The consolation of love is that pick-me-up I receive because I’ve been doing the right thing (loving the lost) even though I just got kicked in the teeth because of it. The affection and compassion again are things I receive.

The fourth wheel makes this bus stable and maneuverable. It’s the thing that goes both ways. It’s what ties us together permanently – the fellowship of the Spirit.

But what is that?

Acts 2:42, “And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.” Again, four items – three of which we understand very well – the apostles’ teaching, the Lord’s Supper, prayer. And one more thing that was so important that it made the list of the top four ways that the early Christians responded: fellowship.

And before we go any further, if the “fellowship meal” picture just popped into your head, that’s not even the hem of the garment. It’s not even the frayed threads on the bottom of your bathrobe. Now don’t get me wrong. I think eating together is grand. I think getting to know each other better over a good meal is a wonderful tradition. But it is not what Luke, Paul, Peter, or John meant when they said, “Fellowship.” The eating together and getting to know one another are part of “affection and compassion,” not fellowship – at least not the fellowship that Luke, Paul, Peter, and John wrote about.

This fellowship was so important that it was included in short lists of four examples in both Luke’s historical account and Paul’s encouragement to the Christians of Philippi. It led to unity. It led to growth. It led to power and effectiveness of the gospel. But within a generation it had become ho-hum, to the point that the writer of Hebrews enjoined, “Do not neglect doing

good and fellowship.” Our modern translations illustrate the loss of this fellowship of the Spirit because they translated it “Doing good and sharing.” It’s fellowship – koinonia.

So what is this fellowship of the Spirit that is a key ingredient to binding us together, a key ingredient to building that kingdom that crushes all the powers of this world?

John gives us this insight in 1 John 1:3, “What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.” John says, “I have a fellowship with God based on my own eyes and ears, and I want you in on it.” John is not organizing potlucks here. He wants to bring others into something important he has found. He is not trying to form a bond with other Christians. That would be affection and compassion. He is focused on a different wheel – the fellowship of the Spirit.

John goes on in verse 7, “If we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.” Where does this fellowship of the Spirit come from? It happens when we step into the light. When we develop a relationship with our true Father through the Spirit that is given to us and dwells in us, by default we instantly have fellowship with one another - connected.

How many people are in the light? What fraction of them have you met? With what fraction have you shared a meal? With only a slight modification, we could take that song from the Lion King, the Circle of Life, and make it the Circle of Light. But I’ll leave that for those more musically talented to figure out.

We instantly have a real connection with those in that circle of light, not because we agree on a set of principles or practices, or because we are part of the same organization. No, we are connected because we share one vital statistic. All those in the light, wherever they are, have been connected with Jesus. That’s in 1 Corinthians 1:9, “God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” We each have a connection with Jesus. We each share in His grace. Therefore, we also have fellowship, connection, (as John wrote) with one another.

This fellowship connection was so critical to the proper function of the body, to the power of the Kingdom, that God built it into our weekly metaphor, the Lord’s Supper. In 1 Corinthians 10:16, “Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a fellowship in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a fellowship in the body of Christ?” And for those of you who were quoting it along with me in your heads, yes, again our modern translators have decided to use “sharing.” It’s koinonia.

This entire universe is a gigantic metaphor for that which is both very real and very eternal, the realm of the spirit. Most people spend their lives focused on a literary device, while the reality, the fellowship of the Spirit, goes untouched.

But what is that, fellowship in the blood, fellowship in the body? Paul gives us a hint in Philippians 3:10, not long after that, “If there is any fellowship of the Spirit” line. In 3:10, “That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, in order that I may attain to the resurrection of the dead.” This fellowship with Jesus comes from understanding where Jesus head was at when He “emptied Himself” (2:7). Or, as Peter put it, “To the degree that you have fellowship with the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing.” That’s the fellowship we share in Christ, in the circle of light.

Unfortunately, many have reduced this fellowship with Jesus to a friendship full of conversation, food, and maybe even golf, instead of that joyous, excited, awe-struck servant-Lord relationship. No, this fellowship is being able to understand why God left heaven, took on

the form of a bondservant, left His powers behind and lived just like we do, and took on the extremes of temptation and abuse and humiliation – so He could save us. If we can wrap our heads around that image, we have reality, fellowship, and we will have no trouble with Romans 12:1, being a living sacrifice.

The very last verse of 2 Corinthians, Paul’s parting shot about becoming the “aroma of Christ,” goes like this, “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Grace, love, fellowship of the Spirit. Paul thought that fellowship of the Spirit was pretty strong stuff, right up there with grace and love.

Here’s my illustration of this fellowship of the Spirit that results in unity, this fellowship into which we receive that Spirit, when we are instantly immersed when we step into the light. Can you picture one of those nerf dart guns? Just in case, I brought one. Pretty cool. Once, when the grandsons were of the appropriate age, we bought these for them at Christmas. Grandparents do that – drums, paints, dart guns. Of course, I got to play with one a little before they got wrapped. I learned they are pretty accurate up to about 10 feet. So, at Christmas dinner, the twelve of us around the 9.5’ table, I took my customary place at the head – or the foot. On towards dessert, having sequestered one of those guns in my napkin, I pulled it out and popped our son-in-law’s sister, who was at the other end of the table, square in the forehead. Grampa can do that.

When we step into that circle of light, it’s like everyone who is already in the light has a nerf dart gun, and they shoot you with a dart that has a thread attached to it. Suddenly, without warning, you are connected with myriads upon myriads of people you don’t even know. It’s like you walked into that barn in “Arachniphobia,” with thousands of webs of man-eating spiders. We have a tightness, we are woven into that gigantic web, and we get the old life sucked out of us as we have fellowship with the sufferings of Jesus. We are tied to each other. What everyone else does tugs at me. How do we handle that?

Sometimes the darts catch you unawares, especially in our era of fellowship through gluttony. We had attended such a place for some time. So, when we went to a different place for a visit, my expectation-radar was turned off – truthfully, it was mothballed. They were a very small group, so visitors were often asked to participate. They asked me to help with the Lord’s Supper. Never one to turn down an opportunity to teach, I prepared a few remarks in my head during the first three songs, the prayer, and the fourth song. (Oh, we are so predictable.) I got up, went to the front, opened my mouth, and, thwack, out of nowhere, a spiritual nerf dart. What was that? OK, it was from the right, look left. Thwack. After about the fourth dart, I had nowhere left to look and had to fake a tickle in my throat and a fit of coughing to get myself back together. And the second dart guy ran to get me a glass of water. I learned very quickly that these folks are armed and dangerous. We’re still there, and we’re still connected, even right now, just like I am connected to you, which is why I’m reading this rather than just talking to you – because all of those connections are about to pull my heart out of my chest.

That connection, that fellowship of the Spirit, is essential to unity and power. That’s why it is in Paul’s list in Philippians 2. Fellowship of the Spirit should lead to being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose, not because we are good buddies (that’s the affection and compassion part), but because we are connected to Jesus, “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” and we understand why He chose to come here and face worse than we face.. Paul saw this fellowship as the driving force for evangelism, from Ephesians 3:8 – 10, “To me, the very least of all saints, this grace has been given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, and to bring to light what is the fellowship of the

mystery which for ages has been hidden in God, who created all things; in order that the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies.” We are connected to the exposition of the mystery. When we step into the circle of light, we become the channel through which the mystery is revealed. That sounds like a pretty important job – letting the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies know how God had planned to fix the terrible mess we and others have made.

This next quote does not mention fellowship, but in it Paul describes his role in revealing the mystery, in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one, an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma of life to life. And who is adequate for these things?”

We might well blurt out the same response to the enormity of the task of taking the gospel to the world, of making this mystery known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies. Who is adequate for these things? Is it any wonder that so many in the body respond with the words of that famous sixties song, “It ain’t me babe.” Alone, we are not adequate. God is fully aware of that. So, we are integrated into the fellowship of this mystery that is revealed through the collective body, that which is held together with threads and nerf darts.

Here’s another illustration that perhaps you will remember more often than when the kids or grandkids are shooting each other. Most of you know that I’m a chemist by trade, so I often think about how things work on a molecular level. Right now, I would like for you to think about thixotropy. If that doesn’t do anything for you, try this one: catsup. Surely it is a common experience in Western civilization that catsup behaves strangely. We turn the bottle over, and nothing happens. So, we hit the bottom of the bottle. Have you ever wondered if that does anything? Catsup manufacturers add a cellulose product to the tomato sauce to make it thixotropic, which means that it is gelatinous when sitting still, but can be made to flow with the addition of a little energy – such as when you hit the bottom of the bottle. Of course, hitting the bottom of the bottle has other hazards, but the real purpose is to give it that little jolt that starts in flowing. And it will flow. But when it stops, it sets up into a gel again. You can have the same effect as hitting the bottom of a glass catsup bottle, with a plastic catsup bottle by flexing the sides of the plastic bottle. The catsup will start to flow because you disrupt the gel by flexing the catsup.

So what does this have to do with the fellowship of the Spirit, the fellowship of the mystery, the church spreading the gospel? The fellowship of the Spirit is like that cellulose stuff that makes catsup thixotropic. When the catsup is together, like now, or like on the Lord’s Day all over the world, the catsup is thick, it holds together. It’s not a solid mass, but a fluid system. Still, while being fluid, it hangs together. But give it a little squeeze, or even a thump on the bottom, and the thixotropic mass flows toward the objective.

But it doesn’t separate. We all know there is cheap catsup and good catsup. What happens with cheap catsup? When you turn the bottle over, you get a thin dribble of watery red stuff that sogs up your bun. That’s like cheap imitation bodies, they aren’t connected. They send out weak dribbles of poorly funded missionaries who do their evangelism for them. But the thickness stays in the bottle, generally highly structured. But the quality catsup comes out thick, with body, connected. It flows as long as there is energy applied. And when it stops, it gels up in its new home, thick again. Quality catsup doesn’t lose its shape on top of the hot dog, yet it

has no discernible structure. It doesn't soak into the bun or spread out all over the plate. It stays connected while imparting its unique flavor.

That's the church – thixotropic. We are not so bound together that we can't get out of the monastery. When we stop for a few seconds in each other's company, we gel, we are bound to each other. But when God stirs or squeezes or thumps us on the bottom, we flow, still connected, having fellowship in the body and blood of Jesus. And when we reach the destination, we gel together again. The world looks at us like they look at catsup – a mystery. How come the catsup acts like that? How can the church act like that – connected, thick, yet flowing, moving when the pressure is on, but never losing touch. The church is thixotropic because of the fellowship of the Spirit.

Paul wrote to Philemon about that fellowship, "I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake." We step into the light, and fellowship happens, with people we have never met. But is that fellowship effective? Does it really tie us together? Is it as real and important as encouragement, and consolation, and affection, and compassion? How is this connection developed? Paul says, "Through knowledge." But not book knowledge, not even extensive study of the Scriptures – although those are profitable activities and have other benefits. Paul wrote, "Through knowledge of every good thing." But not knowledge of how to provide humanitarian aid like Steve Doty, although that, too, is a good thing and has other benefits. Paul wrote, "Through knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake."

What good things are in you for Christ's sake? What things are on deposit in you? Knowing what these things are will make our fellowship of the Spirit effective. What things? The context doesn't answer the question directly, so Philemon was supposed to know the answer. What good things are in you for Christ's sake? Let me throw out some generic suggestions.

How about love? "The love of God that has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us." Do you know about that gift that we receive when we step into the circle of light? Do you know about the agape love that the natural man neither has nor understands? If we understand the love that Jesus has and has deposited in us, we have connection not only with God but also with each other, and our connectedness, our fellowship, becomes effective.

How about the Spirit that lives in us? As in 1 Corinthians 2:12, "We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit." If we understand the job of this Spirit that resides in us, our fellowship becomes thixotropic, it becomes effective because it binds us together.

How about peace? When Paul or Peter or John start out a letter with "Grace and peace be multiplied to you," they are not just coining a religious phrase. These are deposited in those who will accept them. And why are they there? For Christ's sake. We are repositories of lots of God's good stuff. God thinks that we are a good place to store His stuff.

All these things are deposited not for your benefit, but for Jesus' benefit, for the building up of His body. "I have been crucified with Christ. It is not longer I who live, but Christ, who lives in me." When we come to comprehend the gifts, the down payment, the escrow account that we have become, the power of our fellowship becomes effective.

But – that terrible word, but – as we can see throughout the letters, those in the circle of light can take anything too far. This connectedness, this fellowship, probably because it is not defined concretely, allows for some predictable excesses. I'm sure you know people who cannot

seem to accept that there are nice people, perhaps even people who attend religious meetings regularly, who are outside of the circle of light. Look at it this way. I read on the internet just last week that 33% of all people in the world classify themselves as Christian. Even if that number is wildly inflated, even a fraction of that number would hardly qualify as “few are those who find it,” or “many are called, but few chosen.”

At the same time, we know that relatively few people who are in the light have achieved absolute perfection. I’ll let you decide who they are, because that is not my point. My point is that we are connected to mostly messy people. They have a wide variety of weak points, misunderstandings, and just plain bad habits. As we begin to comprehend compassion, we, like Paul, call imperfect people Brethren. Apparently, in Paul’s day, some people carried this idea of being accepting a little too far.

Paul had to remind the Corinthians that, no matter how much we want to be inclusive, we cannot merge darkness into the light. Even though Paul wrote about brethren who were so weak in faith that they hadn’t quite gotten it straight that idols were nothing, he also wrote, “I don’t want you to have fellowship with demons.” Although Paul was understanding with people who became Christians when already married, and advised them on how to deal with being married to an unbeliever, he did not incorporate unbelievers into the circle of light. Rather, he wrote about not being unequally yoked, saying, “What fellowship has light with darkness.” Paul advised Timothy not to get in a hurry in appointing elders, so he would not have fellowship with the sins of his hasty appointees. John reminded his readers that some teachings are beyond the pale – namely those who teach that Jesus did not come in the flesh. John says, even greeting such a one is to have fellowship with his evil.

Neither can we justify our own bad behavior because we are walking in the light and, therefore, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. John reminds his readers that anything less than the image of Jesus matters. “If we say we have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie.”

Bottom line, we cannot get the idea that we can merge darkness into the light. We are not connected with those outside the circle. Neither do we excuse the less than perfect behavior of people to whom we are connected.

That may sound like an impossible situation, having to decide what parts you are connected to and which parts you are not. It can be, if we fret over it and try to be God. What do I mean by that?

First, we have only two styles of relationships in the kingdom. With some people, we are merged, connected, in fellowship. To others, we are ambassadors. What country ever had ambassadors to itself? That would be silly. Ambassadors are emissaries to another country. With the citizens of the Kingdom, we have fellowship. To those outside the kingdom, we are ambassadors.

For those of you who may have come out of the more legalistic side of the house, if we establish clearly that we are not to have fellowship with some individual (and with some people, that’s pretty easy to decide), how should we treat them? Perhaps as a heathen and a tax-gatherer? Among some groups, this means to ignore them, to shun them, to not speak to them, and definitely not eat a meal with them – because eating is fellowship. No, it is not. Fellowship is being spiritually connected.

How did Jesus treat heathen and tax gatherers? He ate with them. He showed compassion on them. He spoke the truth to them. He was an ambassador.

Our fellowship is with the good things that have been deposited in each of us for Jesus' sake. We have fellowship with those who have received those gifts of grace that manifest themselves in so many ways – not talents, but gifts, things we could not do before becoming believers, but now do routinely. I am connected to people who routinely do the impossible because of that which has been placed in escrow within them. And that's really cool – to have thousands of connections to the miraculous. That's the fellowship that produces unity – when I look at you and think, “You can do the impossible in ways that I can't; and also the other way around.” God places those gifts “so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion for ever and ever.” Individually, we are the one-talent man who buries his responsibility in the back yard for safe keeping. Together, through the fellowship of the Spirit, we are the rock that grinds all other kingdoms into dust.

What happens when the fellowship of our faith becomes effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in us for Christ's sake? Here are some of the results the Paul wrote about. Don't be expecting anything fancy or worthy of writing in a history book. Certainly, these responses that happen because of fellowship are unusual when compared to normal human behavior, but they are not glamorous or headline material. There are seven of them, in Romans, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, all two each, and Galatians, once. Every one of them has to do with sharing our material possessions with the saints – with teachers and with those in difficulty.

Didn't you expect something a little flashier?

But think about the folks who majored in fellowship in Acts 2. The next line says that they had all things in common. Two chapters over, “There was not a needy person among them.”

Or how about the Philippians who must have been practicing this fellowship of the Spirit, since Paul used that line to them as a motivator to unity. They were the ones that Paul described this way, “In a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of fellowship in the ministry to the saints.

They did the impossible because of the knowledge of every good thing which was in them for Christ's sake. Their fellowship was effective. They had fellowship with people they likely would never meet. As a result, they shared what they had with those same people.

I have a spiritual connectedness with you. I have a spiritual connectedness with people around the world. I look at my escrow account and, instead of thinking I must be pretty hot stuff in the kingdom because I get to stand up in front once in a while. Rather, I am tugged by those treads. I think about my friend in Pakistan whom I have never met, and probably never will, who has suffered the loss of all material things and faces death daily for the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

If there is any fellowship of the Spirit, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Be effective in this fellowship of faith by knowing all the good things that have been put in escrow in each of us, because we are the impossibly powerful and connected ambassadors for Christ.