

Acts 2:42 (T R Shawcroft) 171817

Fellowship With God and With One Another, Fellowship With God and With One Another (2:42)

1 John 1:3-7. Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 10:16-21.

Of all the privileges conferred upon the believer through the work of Christ, none is more blessed than that of fellowship with God.

In 1 Cor. 1:9, we read: "God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord." And finding this where we do in the epistles, precludes the thought we might perhaps have had if we had found it in Ephesians or Colossians, that it belongs only to those advanced in the truth. It is a beautiful characteristic description of the Christian calling.

It is well known that the word used in the original is translated in our ordinary version both by "fellowship" and "communion," so, in this suggestive paper, we shall use these words interchangeably without further explanation. Could we have a better start? "God hath called us unto the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ," and our privilege is to be

When we come to the first Epistle of John, we have another feature of this fellowship and, here we may again say, one suitable to the place where it is found, "Fellowship with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." Surely this is an expansion of the blessing. John declares that the object of writing his epistle is, that his children in the Lord may have fellowship with the apostles, and that their joy may be full. The apostles were already in the enjoyment, by the Holy Spirit, of this communion with the Father and the Son, but it was not to be confined to them, they desired no monopoly of the truth, or of the enjoyment consequent upon it.

In similar grace, the Lord Himself, as we see in John 15:2, makes His final communications, "that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full." This communion is in the light, where God is, and is the privilege of every believer, whether enjoyed or not, because the work of Christ has brought us there. And there, in the light, we share with every other Christian the enjoyment of the things of God and of Christ, according to the measure of our spiritual capacity. But what words can adequately describe what this communion with God is, and the blessings flowing from it? How often have we enjoyed this fellowship with one another—a fellow-believer never met before perhaps—and together have tasted the sweetness of the things of Christ and of God, that are the common portion of "all saints," until some such question as, "What denomination do you belong to?" has marred the joy, to our mutual loss and sorrow. But, primarily, of course, these two aspects of fellowship belong to all Christians.

We append a few sentences from another, that beautifully expresses the truth of 1 John 1: "Thus we have fellowship with the Father in the possession of the Son, and fellowship with the Son in the possession of the Father. How could our joy but be full? Even heaven and glory everlasting dwindle in comparison, but we have these too."

If we turn to the Acts and read the refreshing picture of the early Church immediately after Pentecost, we find (chap. 2:42) that it is said of the newly converted disciples, "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers." Two things are linked together here by the Spirit of God that cannot be separated without loss—the apostles' doctrine and fellowship. But they have been separated, alas, and the doctrine corrupted; the bright picture of that early assembly did not even last out the apostles' days on the earth, as we know.

Returning again to first Corinthians, the epistle of church order and church government, we find in the tenth chapter another fellowship named, "The communion of the body of Christ." A different aspect of Christian fellowship, but belonging to and enjoyed by all who participate in what has been referred to. The 16th verse of this chapter is the only Scripture where the expressions occur, "The communion of the blood of Christ, the communion of the body of Christ." Here also is the only place where the expression is found, "the Lord's table."

Undoubtedly the view of the Lord's table given us here embraces the whole Christian company at all times, and not only when gathered together; for the analogy referred to as to "Israel after the flesh" eating of the sacrifices is, no doubt, the peace-offering, of which all Israel partook. In so doing they were in fellowship with the altar; and so also as to the cup and the bread at the Lord's table, all true Christians are contemplated as participating. Not, however, as members of some particular company, or assembly, or so-called church, but as in the fellowship of the body of Christ. The order in this passage (the cup being first partaken of) is not the order of the supper, as is well known, but would appear to be what may be called the sacrificial order, because of the reference to Israel.

Separation from evil is plainly taught, for the import evidently is that the Corinthians were to be true to their calling of separation from all that is contrary to God, and were not to have fellowship with the tables of demons, which was the only other then existent.

The contrast was simple enough in those days, when the Lord's table stood out in sharp contrast to the table of demons, but it is not so easy a matter now, when the Church's earthly testimony is in ruins, and numberless divisions have made the path most difficult for a Christian desiring to do the will of God. Yet, in view of all this, we can surely count on God to give the needed light and wisdom from His Word.

Perhaps the most serious difficulty in this connection is that which meets a believer who desires, amidst the prevailing confusion, to keep "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"—"one body, one Spirit, one hope of your calling." He refuses sectarianism of every kind as unscriptural, but finds those Christians who have gone back in practice to the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, divided into various companies.

Now it is perfectly clear that 1 Cor. 10 and 11 contemplate the whole body of believers in Corinth being found together at the Lord's Table, for in chapter 12, verse 27, it says, "Ye are the body of Christ and members in particular." That is, so far as Corinth was concerned, they were the local expression of that body. And we ask, "Is there anything that answers to that now, so as to command our conscience, and ensure to us above all else, the presence of the Lord, and the fellowship of the Spirit?"

We want to keep before our hearts two very precious things that belong to all Christians while in this world. First, communion with the Father and the Son; secondly, communion with all those who, cleansed by the precious blood of Christ, and baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ, are also members one of another, and should be found together remembering the Lord in His death.

We do not agree to differ, but grieve to differ from our brethren in the Lord. We see it plainly taught in this epistle (1 Cor.) that divisions are carnal; and another most important thing is, that as a result of Choosing for ourselves we lose some of the gifts that Christ as the Head has given to His assembly. By making Paul our leader, we lose Apollos and Cephas, and vice versa, for all the gifts are given for the edification of all, and we cannot afford to lose any. In addition to this there is the evil, in many ways, that man's will has brought into the assembly of God.

"All things are yours," therefore do not be content with a part only—is the teaching of this epistle.

But the evil that began in Paul's day has widened, and not only has the apostles' 'fellowship' been lost as to actual practice, but Christian doctrine has been corrupted, until that which he describes in his second epistle to Timothy is a picture of what the house of God has become. "But in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver, but also of wood and of earth; and some to honour and some to dishonour. If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use, and prepared unto every good work" (2 Tim. 2:20, 21).

All true believers are in the fellowship of the Father and the Son, and all are equally in the fellowship of the one body of Christ. Why then are we not all together at the Lord's Table which is the expression of that fellowship?

The principle of separation from evil, as incumbent on those who are in the fellowship of the Lord's Table, is plainly taught as we have seen in 1 Cor. 10, but there the evil was outside the assembly (or church), and the Scripture quoted above from Timothy ii. refers to evil inside, and is admittedly the only instruction given us as to separation from those within the house of God. An effort has been made to apply it to things and not persons, but the form of the phrase in the original is particularly strong, and it is quite clear that the vessels to dishonour are persons within the house of God, and thus the necessary light as to a path that is acceptable to the Lord in a day of confusion and outward ruin is not wanting.

There is no thought here of breaking with all other Christians, and making a new start, for although intensely individual—"if a man purge himself from these," etc., the exhortation is to follow on with those "that call on the Lord out of a pure heart." Does not this encourage us to suppose that there will be such, however confused and feeble the testimony may have become? Perhaps the most difficult question of all is, whether a Christian is to be received at the Lord's Table without reference to his (or her) ecclesiastical associations, or in other words what he may be in fellowship with, provided he is known to be sound in faith and practice. The desire to be clear from evil (doctrinal and moral) has led to separations, with the purest motives (if sometimes mistaken), so that today many companies of Christians are found claiming to be gathered to the name of the Lord alone, yet not in fellowship with each other. We all deeply deplore this, and desire unity, not the unity that is "in the air" as men speak, and advocated lay leading men in the sects, from various motives, but the practical expression of "the unity of the Spirit," God's unity, not man's "The oneness of the body is produced by the baptism of the Holy Ghost, and the connection of the members depends upon it. By one Spirit we have all been baptized to one body. The Lord's supper is the expression of this oneness." Every orthodox church regards the partaking of the Lord's Supper together as the sign of membership of that church or company, but Scripturally it is the privilege of every Christian as being already in the body of Christ.

But the maintenance of this principle, and the refusal of sectarianism, involves a path of separation. It is written, "Let every one that nameth the name of the Lord depart from iniquity," and what care and dependence upon the Lord it needs to avoid sectarianism while seeking to maintain these principles of truth. In a pamphlet before us, the writer speaks with surprise of a believer being introduced to him as "a brother in fellowship," but there is such a thing as assembly fellowship, and we should seek to preserve it from being narrowed up to a sect. How thankful we should all be if it were only necessary to say of any sister or brother in the Lord that they were known as such, without the necessity of adding any further qualification or recommendation. For it is practically true that all believers are in the fellowship of the one body of Christ, as before pointed out, and as such they take their place at the Lord's Table, and not as members of our fellowship in any sense but that. When we ponder the blessed Lord's own thrice repeated words in John 17, "That they may be one," we cannot but grieve over the divided state of His people. Had these words been more on our hearts we should have been less ready to separate from other believers, and more exercised as to the gravity of commencing another "breaking of bread" in any locality, while maintaining always the Divine principle of never associating the Lord's Name and Presence with any evil—doctrinal or moral. We can surely count upon the Lord to help us to find, in any state of things, what would satisfy a godly soul in search of the company described in 2 Timothy 2:22.

To drift unconsciously into sectarianism is easy enough, and to get narrowed up in our prayers and service to the saints we are associated with, has to be watched against, lest, we lose sight of the truths we have been considering. Faithfulness to the Lord's Name and Word will necessarily limit our fellowship in actual practice, but not our love for all saints, or our prayers for them. The growth of evil is only too evident, and the apostasy of the last days is rapidly approaching, but "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" will remain for us unto the end. May the Lord graciously preserve us in the enjoyment of them.

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