

OUR FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

A STUDY OF THE INTENT AND APPLICATION OF THE EPISTLES OF JOHN

The three short epistles of John have been referred to as letters of love. You could make an argument that the 28 verses that employ the word love is justification for this description. However, to imply that these writings are ‘**love letters**’ based solely upon their use of the word ‘**love**’ or a reference to ‘**love**’ misses the broader implications of John’s writings. It is important that we utilize some *insight* when examining 1st, 2nd and 3rd John. When we do this we discover that John paints the ultimate picture of Christian fellowship – a fellowship that begins with God.

The importance of fellowship is obvious in the early days of the church. After the crucifixion of Jesus the disciples were scattered. Following his ascension back to his Father they gathered once again in an upper room reminiscent of the day the Lord had instituted his memorial supper. Present on this occasion were the Apostles, some of the women who had been close to Jesus during his ministry and a few of Jesus’ close relatives. Jesus had died, the church was coming but they still felt the need to be together. And while their gathering was an informal meeting it still provided the opportunity to lean upon one another in the comforts of prayer. Who would feel the need of prayer more than this little group of disciples who had been devastated by Jesus’ death? There is no doubt that they prayed alone but when they really needed encouragement and support

they came together to share the reassurance that comes from Godly fellowship.

It is apparent by the time John writes his three epistles that there was already in the Church a need for instruction in unity. Perhaps Jesus' prayer for harmony as related by John in his gospel (17:21) foreshadowed this need. Whatever the situation may have been in the first century there is no doubt that the subsequent 19 or 20 centuries reflect the need for a habitual reminder about unity, love and fellowship.

If I were to ask today **“What is fellowship?”** How would you answer? Most Christians would immediately refer to Acts 2:42 where Luke writes that the first Christians **“...continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”** Having then recited that verse they would be no more confident of the meaning of fellowship than they were before. The reason for this confusion really centers on the contracted meaning given to **‘fellowship’** In Acts 2:42 **‘fellowship’** is rightly understood to mean the weekly collection for the welfare of the Church. Unfortunately such a narrow description is applied to other verses that rob us of the richer intent of our Lord in establishing this wonderful **‘fellowship’** with God. Fellowship is much more than sharing our wealth with other Christians.

The word **‘fellowship’** is the translation of the Greek word
“ ” Most modern lexicons render this word as

“fellowship, partnership, participation, communion, aid, relief, and contribution.” The important question in regard to this term is its application in scripture. Is it limited to a specific act or can it apply to various ordinances? To determine this we must look at the scriptures where the word is used. Now it would be impractical to read each passage so let me give you a brief analysis of the Bible use of this word.

- It is used as already mentioned in reference to the ‘fellowship’ or collection of the saints – Acts 2:42
- It is used in reference to the Christian’s relationship to the Son – 1 Cor. 1:9
- It refers to the ‘communion’ of the body and blood of our Lord – 1 Cor. 10:16
- It is used to warn against ‘communion’ with evil – 2 Cor. 6:14
- It is used to describe the Christian’s ‘fellowship’ in the gospel – Phil. 1:5
- It is used in reference to the ‘fellowship’ of the Spirit – Phil. 2:1
- It is used in reference to the ‘fellowship’ of Christ’s sufferings – Phil. 3:10
- It refers to ‘communicating’ our faith – Philemon 6
- It refers to our ‘fellowship’ with the Father – 1 Jn. 1:3
- It refers to our ‘fellowship’ with one another – 1 Jn. 1:7

parted them to all [men], as every man had need.” Obviously this **‘fellowship’** was seen primarily in their willingness to supply the needs of their brethren, but this **‘fellowship’** was in its infancy and would grow by leaps and bounds before the end of the 1st century. If you observe the way the early church looked at this subject and compare it to the attitude of modern, professing Christians, you have to ask the question, **“What went wrong?”** In the first century men and women were called together into one body (the Church – Col. 1:18) where they enjoyed **‘fellowship’** with those who shared in their **‘common salvation’** (Jude v 3) (**‘common’ - from the root word of “ ” - “ ”**). By the 2nd century things were beginning to change drastically. False doctrine was dividing God’s people and the very thing that troubled the Apostle Paul began to happen. Paul had warned the Ephesians in Acts 20:29-30 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 the disciples after themselves.”** What happens when men are drawn away from fellowship in Christ to the teachings of men? They start a fellowship of their own. This practice has incited well over a thousand different fellowships claiming to be Christian in today’s world. That is a staggering amount when you realize there was only one church, one fellowship in the 1st century.

The members of the church in Thessalonica worried about a lot of things, but they were extremely troubled about the

second coming of the Lord so Paul tried to correct any misconception they might have by revealing some things that would occur prior to the Lord's coming. He said (2 Thess. 2:3-4), **“Let no one deceive you by any means; for [that] [Day] [will] [not] [come] unless the falling away comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God or that is worshiped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God.”** The things Paul describes in these verses began in earnest in the 2nd century. Small divisions in the church coupled with false teachings led to bigger divisions and the dominance of false teaching. Eventually the Lord's church was concealed by large denominations that we label today as Catholic and Protestant churches. The interesting thing about these two large divisions is their position on unity. The period of dominance by the Catholic Church has been called by some authorities, the period of the *infallible church*. This period continued until the great reformation when the Protestant churches initiated the era of the *infallible bible*. The Catholics claimed their church was **‘infallible’** and as such could regulate or change the teachings of scripture. Rebellion against this led to the protestant reformation where men began to declare the **‘infallibility’** of the bible. On one hand the Catholics claimed that Christians could only be united in the Catholic Church and on the other hand Protestants claimed you could only be united by the *infallible bible*. The Catholic religion ignored the infallibility of God's word as it was delivered by Christ and his Apostles

and since they corrupted that word over the years they could only claim unity based upon incorrect teaching. Unfortunately, Protestantism could not offer unity anymore than Catholicism. In fact the structure of Protestantism can only lead to division. If Protestants based their hope for unity upon the *infallible bible* it was mandatory that they interpret the bible correctly, failure to do so would lead to differing doctrines, but if they interpreted the bible correctly they exposed their own error because they (all taught different doctrines) differ so widely. As a result there could be no unity in either division – Catholic or Protestant. Catholicism tries to separate the church from the gospel while Protestantism tries to separate the gospel from the church. So where does this leave man today? It leaves most men struggling in darkness to find God. How then does a man find the fellowship of God as described by John? John begins with the declaration that...

GOD IS LIGHT

John wrote in 1 John 1:5, **“This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.”** There is an important observation to be made in this verse. The Bible says **“God is light.”** It does not say God is **‘a’** light or **‘the’** light, but **“God is light.”** John’s emphasis that God’s nature is **‘light’** stands in stark contrast to the **‘darkness’** of sin. John wrote in his gospel (John 1:4-5), **“In Him was life, and the life was the light of**

men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” Man has the invitation to live in God’s light where he will find fellowship with God or he can reject it to live in concert with the darkness of sin. Notice that John also says that **“...in him is no darkness at all.”** John does not say that there is no **‘darkness’** in his presence, but there is no darkness **“in him.”** Look around! This world is full of sin, strife and death, but none of these is **“in him.”** Nothing can eclipse the divine light which is God!

One of the outstanding characteristics of John’s writing is his unique ability to describe God, as he does when he says **“God is light.”** In John 4:24 he quotes Jesus as saying that **“God is Spirit”** and writes in 1 John 4:8, 16 that **“God is love.”** Other writers, inspired and uninspired, have used peculiar descriptions as well. In James 1:17 the brother of our Lord calls God the **“Father of lights.”** Peter in 1 Peter 2:9 describes God as the possessor of light. Paul tells Timothy (1 Timothy 6:16) that God dwells in the light. Many unbelievers make God a god of darkness who is distant, unknown to man and not to be loved and worshipped. Philosophers make God nothing more than an idea, a figment of imagination and not directly cognizant to man (cp Acts 17:23). To the Jews he is a God who hides behind unfulfilled promises, not a God of light but a God of consuming fire. It is only to the Christian that God is revealed as light, free from all impurity and darkness. Light is the one thing that will always penetrate darkness. What better way to represent the Lord of the Gospel and the God of

creation who will penetrate and destroy the darkness of sin and its soul destroying effects.

The question naturally follows **“how do I find this light?”** John also answers this question in verse 5. **“This...is the message which we have heard of him and declare unto you....”** How do you learn about this **‘light?’** You learn about it through the preaching of the gospel, the same gospel declared by John and the Apostles in the 1st century. On Pentecost Peter answered the question **“What shall we do”** (Acts 2:37) by saying **“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost”** (Acts 2:38). Seven verses later the Bible begins its description of the **‘fellowship’** we enjoy through God.