

Getting the fundamentals right Fellowship

[English Standard Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

Introduction

Today's talk is number four in a six part series entitled "Getting the Fundamentals right." The series is based on Acts chapter 2 verses 41 and 42, which read as follows:

"So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers."

These verses are a straightforward account of what happened directly after the very first public preaching of the Christian gospel, on the Day of Pentecost. The "his" in "those who received his word" is a reference to the apostle Peter, who had just preached it.

Of course, the Lord Jesus Himself had preached countless times during the approximately three and a half years of His public ministry; and if you think of the substance of Christianity as being a matter of following His teachings and trying to live as He did, then you may be puzzled to hear me refer to something that happened seven weeks after His death and resurrection as the first preaching of the Christian gospel.

But setting out to live as the Lord Jesus did is actually not the substance of the Christian gospel. The Christian gospel is the proclamation of those very events which I've just referred to, the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus¹. It is only when someone hears about those events, and responds positively, that they become a Christian.

That positive response involves both repentance, that is, admitting and repudiating sin, and also faith, placing our entire life and destiny in Christ's hands, accepting that it is His death on our account which alone can put us right in the sight of God. Once this life-changing step has been taken, then, most certainly, the Christian is expected to model his or her life on that of the Lord Jesus², but to set out to live the Christian life, before making a personal commitment to Him, on the basis of His death and resurrection³, would be to put the cart before the horse.

The Bible verses which this series is based on, then, are the record, we might say, of the impact on people's lives of the reception of the Christian gospel. The first Christians, as we read a moment ago, devoted themselves to four things, and in this talk we are looking at the second of those four, that is 'The Fellowship.'

What is "The Fellowship?"

Our very first task, then, must be to understand what we are talking about, so we will begin with a very basic question: What is "The fellowship?"

The Greek word which is here translated fellowship is only found 20 times in the New Testament, if I've counted correctly, and I don't think it's too difficult to grasp the general idea of its meaning. If we think of the words and phrases, "sharing", "participation" and "having things in common", we will get a pretty accurate idea of what the word means.

Most people have probably heard of "the Fellowship of the Ring" from J. R. R. Tolkien's world famous book The Lord of the Rings, and the film series based on it, and are familiar with the idea of a group of individuals bonded together in a common purpose or mission. This is essentially what a fellowship is. But when we start to look seriously at some of the things the Bible says about the Fellowship which is our subject today, in some of those 20 references I mentioned, we will come to appreciate that the Fellowship which the Bible is talking about is in an altogether different league from anything we might come across elsewhere in human affairs.

In 1st Corinthians chapter 1 verse 9, we read:

"God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

I have no doubt that here Paul is writing to the Corinthians about that self same Fellowship to which the earliest believers devoted themselves in Acts chapter 2, and he tells us, not only that we have been placed into this Fellowship by the direct action of God (He has called us into it) but that it is the Fellowship of the Son of God. This is staggering! It is an amazing statement. It means that we have part with the Son of God Himself. Our lot, our destiny, is shared with Christ!

Now look at the following verses from John's first letter chapter 1 verses 3 to 7. They are perhaps even more amazing. They tell us that our fellowship, the Fellowship into which the grace of God has placed us, includes both the Father and the Son:

"...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 practise 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."

Going on from that, it should not really surprise us to find that, since this Fellowship is explicitly stated to be with both the Father and the Son, another of the 20 references brings the third Person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, into the picture too. Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 and 2 read:

"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."

The word translated participation here, in "participation in the Spirit" is the same word translated fellowship in the other scriptures we've been looking at.

Fellowship in Theory and in Practice

The Fellowship, then, to which the first Christian believers devoted themselves, is a truly remarkable thing, not to be compared with anything else in the whole gamut of human experience.

So as to gain a broad and comprehensive picture of the biblical scope of this Fellowship, we will, later in the talk, consider three different ways in which the Bible speaks about it and how it manifests itself. These are (1) fellowship in the gospel (2) fellowship in material things, and (3) fellowship in the sufferings of Christ.

But before we do that, we will reflect on a sobering and challenging subject, which I am going to call Fellowship in theory and in practice.

In the days when the New Testament was still being written, the Christian church was a single, visibly united thing. The Lord Himself, in His great prayer to the Father recorded in John chapter 17, had prayed that this might always be the case. Verses 20 and 21 of that chapter read:

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.”

Notice how the Lord specifically says “that they may all be one.... so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” The visible unity of all on earth who believed in Jesus, was to be, above all else, the proof that would convince the world that Jesus was indeed the One sent by the Father to be the Saviour of the world⁴.

Several years later, when Paul came to write his first letter to the church in Corinth, he faced the heartbreaking task of taking issue with them about several very serious matters in which they were going “off the rails” and portraying a bad impression of Christianity before the watching world. But of those serious issues, which was the one that he turned his attention to first of all? It was their disunity, the fact that there were open divisions amongst them. They had aligned themselves into parties, claiming to follow Paul or one of the other leaders. Chapter 1 verses 10 to 15 of 1st Corinthians says:

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul”, or “I follow Apollos”, or “I follow Cephas”, or “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.”

And in chapter 3 verses 1 to 7, Paul returns to the subject and says:

“But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, “I follow Paul”, and another, “I follow Apollos”, are you not being merely human? What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”

So scripture contains very clear instructions that divisions must not be allowed to enter the church. Yet what do we find as we pick up the story in the first century, when Paul writes these words to the church in Corinth, and follow it down through the twenty centuries to the present day? The parties which existed in Corinth have given way to great edifices of ecclesiastical organisations, deeply entrenched in opposing views on many things, and adhering to vastly different traditions. Against this backdrop, can we still speak today about “the Fellowship?”

Well, for me, the answer to that question is a resounding “yes.” When the Lord said “I will build My church”⁵, He didn’t say “I will build my churches.” Whenever a person responds to the gospel, they become part of that one global Fellowship. Everyone who has taken that step of repentance and faith in Christ, which we spoke about earlier, regardless of which branch of Christian tradition they may be connected with, is part of that one church which He is building, and therefore part of the one Fellowship which is the subject of this talk.

Sadly, very sadly, that one Fellowship is not obvious and easily identifiable to the non-Christian world around, but it is still a reality which those who are part of it experience and can testify to. A brother in the Lord, whom I knew years ago, had formerly been in the Navy. I recall him relating how, on arriving at a port which neither he nor his shipmates had visited before, they (his shipmates) would say things like “I suppose you’ll be going off with your mates again?” because they knew that he always succeeded in finding fellow believers, and was immediately welcomed and offered hospitality.

C.S. Lewis, in the Preface to his book *Mere Christianity*, makes the following observation about the various Christian communions, or denominations:

“It is at her centre, where her truest children dwell, that each communion is really closest to every other in spirit, if not in doctrine. And this suggests that at the centre of each there is a something, or a Someone, who against all divergencies of belief, all differences of temperament, all memories of mutual persecution, speaks with the same voice.”

Fellowship in the Gospel

I said earlier that we would look at three ways in which the Bible speaks about the word usually translated “fellowship.” The first of these is fellowship in the gospel,

In Philippians chapter 1 verses 3 to 5 Paul writes:

“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.”

Here the word is translated “partnership” rather than “fellowship”, but it is exactly the same word in the original Greek.

A second Scripture which I would link with this is in Galatians chapter 2 verse 9, where Paul is recounting a meeting with the earliest leaders of the church in Jerusalem. He says:

“...When James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.”

From these specific Scriptures, and from the New Testament in general, I pick up the impression that the obligation, the responsibility to preach the gospel, was felt by all the believers. So strong was their consciousness of untold joy and blessing that everyone shared the feeling expressed by Paul when he wrote "For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!"⁶. There was a genuine, and universal, "fellowship in the gospel."

Brothers and sisters in the Lord, listening to this programme today, how is it with us? Everyone's circumstances are unique, of course, and there may be some of you who have no opportunity at all to communicate the gospel to anyone. The Lord "does not lay on you any other burden"⁷ than what you are able to do. But do we have unbelieving family members, do we have neighbours, do we have fellow students, do we have work colleagues, to whom we may have some opportunity to witness for Christ? Let us be "making the best use of the time, because the days are evil"⁸.

Fellowship in Material Things

The second expression of Fellowship, found in the New Testament scriptures, is what I am calling Fellowship in material things. Look at these four Scriptures:

Hebrews chapter 13 verse 16 says:

"Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God."

Here it is the word for sharing which is the same Greek word elsewhere translated "fellowship."

Romans chapter 15 verses 25 and 26 say:

"At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem."

Here the same Greek word is translated "contribution."

Second Corinthians chapter 9 verse 13 reads:

"By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission flowing from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your contribution for them and for all others..."

Again, the Greek word is translated "contribution" here.

Finally second Corinthians chapter 8 verse 4 says:

"Begging us earnestly for the favour of taking part in the relief of the saints"

Where "taking part in" is the word "fellowship."

Three of these four Scriptures, those from Paul's letters to the Romans and the Corinthians, are all connected with a remarkable episode in the history of the early church. By this time, the gospel had already spread widely across the Roman world, and there were Christian assemblies in many cities, in the territories which today we would recognise as Turkey, Greece, Italy and the Mediterranean islands. It had become known that in Jerusalem, from where the gospel had originally begun its explosive growth, the believers were in great poverty.

Putting these three Scriptures together, we can see that the believers in Macedonia and Achaia (regions of present day Greece) were collecting money for their relief, and Paul was coordinating this and planning to personally deliver their gifts. Nor was this an isolated incident. Something similar had happened before, when relief was sent to Judea by the church in Antioch.⁹

The Bible clearly teaches us, then, that a readiness to share our material possessions with other believers, not only by showing hospitality, but also in giving – and that including giving over and above what we feel comfortable to give¹⁰, is a completely normal way in which the Fellowship we are speaking about ought to be demonstrated.

Fellowship in the sufferings of Christ

For the third and last of the ways in which, I suggest, we can see fellowship being expressed, we need to look at Philippians chapter 3 verse 10, which reads:

“That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.”

Here, as in the verse from Hebrews quoted earlier, it is the word for sharing which is the same Greek word as fellowship.

But this expression of fellowship is rather different, isn't it? When we think of fellowship in the gospel, or fellowship in material things, we are thinking of fellowship between believer and believer. But now we need to return to the wonder of what we explored at the beginning of this talk, that our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son, Jesus Christ.¹¹

A theme which runs consistently through the New Testament is that the Christian should never expect an easy life¹², but here as Paul writes to the Philippians, he is expressing his ambition and his heart's desire to suffer as Christ did. It is not a matter of steeling ourselves to “put up with it” for Christ's sake, but of actually rejoicing at the privilege of suffering with the Lord Jesus, and of experiencing fully “the fellowship of His sufferings.”

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on 'Fellowship' in our series “Getting the fundamentals right” - talk number T1425.

¹1 Cor 15:3-4, ²1 Pet 2:21, ³Rom 10:9, ⁴1 John 4:14, ⁵Matt 16:18, ⁶1 Cor 9:16, ⁷Rev 2:24, ⁸Eph 5:16, ⁹Acts 11:27-30, ¹⁰2 Cor 8:3, ¹¹1 John 1:3, ¹²Acts 14:22,

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.