

The Dynamics of TRUE FELLOWSHIP

A Special 'Ambiance' Exists Among the True Saints of God. Those in Fellowship with the Father and the Son Have Access into an Exclusive Fellowship with One Another, and Enjoy the Unique Benefits of a Common Relationship.

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Most who enjoy an evening out at a restaurant find that they can develop a preference for one over another. Often, it isn't for any definable reason. It isn't always the food. The food and the service can be equally good elsewhere. There's something else that can factor-in. It's the 'experience' of the place. It's usually a combination of things, the cuisine, the atmosphere, the way the food is prepared and presented that all work together to produce an undefinable quality we have come to call 'ambiance'! We know that, when we're there, the experience enhances our enjoyment.

A Church can also provide its own 'ambiance'. There's an atmosphere that can exist in and among the congregation. That atmosphere can be positive or not, greatly depending on the prevailing attitude toward one another, especially as it's enhanced by the Spirit of God. That Spiritual 'ambiance' is especially important as an environment for further growth, both individually and numerically.

Consider what the Elder Apostle John clearly saw developing toward the latter decades of the early New Testament Church. A situation progressing even to his being blocked from reception in one congregation led by Diotrephese! (3rd John 9 & 10)

*“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have **fellowship** with us: and truly our **fellowship** is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have **fellowship** with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have **fellowship** one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son **cleanses us from all sin.**” (1st John 1:3-7)* Here he makes a very direct

connection between fellowship among enlightened Saints and cleansing of a remnant of *sin* within us.

What does fellowship have to do with being 'cleansed of all sin'? (Could being a 'respector of persons' be sinful? Not just as it involves someones' physical appearance or societal status, but as it involves ones' perceived spiritual credentials, based on their organizational affiliation?) There are people within our greater fellowship sphere who regard themselves as 'superior' based on little more than their organizational affiliation. This is a severe detriment to the 'greater spirit of fellowship', and is a *sin* in its own right. A manifestation of a kind of 'self-righteousness'! God says He hates our being 'respecters of persons' and the related act of 'sowing discord among brethren'. What regard for others do we exhibit that promotes this discordant situation more effectively?

Is the 'carnality' referred to in 1st Corinthians' first three chapters that residual sin? (The subliminal 'carnality' of personal favoritisms, but in our day, ratcheted-up to the 'organizational' level?)

What does '**not** walking in darkness' have to do with fellowship? Is a person living off in a remote area, who doesn't have opportunity for regular fellowship, in darkness for that reason alone? What kind of darkness is John making reference to?

Immersed in Exclusivism

A pervasive contaminant that we tend to harbor within ourselves is extremely detrimental to true fellowship: that exclusivity we routinely self-immense ourselves into as was so masterfully enhanced for us back in the Worldwide environment. Yet it remains a manifestation of our basic human carnality, no matter how 'religiously' we attempt to justify it!

Paul saw it,¹ as did the Apostle John.

A Weakness, Not a Strength!

One thing that's routinely put forth in attempting to justify this attitude toward others is that it's to provide a barrier against possible internal turmoil caused by errant or doubtful doctrines. That MAY have some merit, especially in those cases where the congregation is theologically weak, **but if it's not weak** (yet where it professes to be not 'weak' is where the exclusivist 'disease' tends to be most prevalent), then there's all the more obligation on the part of that congregation to reach out and lend its guiding strengths to other congregations. Organizational 'loyalty' is another excuse for some to justify shunning their God-given obligations toward their brothers in the Faith. Will we ever see these excuses put in their proper 'light'? Will a love for, and a first response toward, fellow Spirit-endowed Children of God trump organizational consideration among our self-perceived 'superiorites'? Don't hold your breath!

The elder Apostle John tied darkness, fellowship, love of brethren and sin into one interrelated whole.

Hate Exposes Darkness

1st John 2:9-12 *"He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. It isn't entirely our 'theological enlightenment' that brings us out of it! "He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes. I write unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven you for his name's sake."* Enlightenment (light) and darkness as defined here is as much a function of our charitableness toward each other as any other devotion.

1st John 3:10-11 *"In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. For this is the message*

¹ See my article "I Am of Paul, I am of Apollos!" Paul the Apostle derides these 'superiorists' as being yet carnal no less than four times in four verses! (1st Cor. 3:1-4)

that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." John here puts righteous performance on a par with expression of love for our brothers, especially those with whom we share God's Spirit! Can the type of 'darkness' referred to be the inability to see this important connection?

1st John 3:14-16 *"We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in **death**. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."* Another profound declaration: The EVIDENCE of the indwelling of God's Spirit is the resultant expression of Love that originates there-with! And, according to this, its absence can prove spiritually fatal!

Love's Declaration

1st John 4: 6-11 *"We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. (Have we ever encountered a barrier between churches based solely on the originating source of the message, not necessarily its content?) "Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error. Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. In this was manifested the love of God **toward** us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another."* So, while we're in receipt of His Love toward US, (and John seems to be minimizing ours' toward Him) we're obligated to reflect the same toward all those He expresses His Love toward! In other words, if we have His Love within us, that same Love will be expressed from us toward them similarly. To be in receipt of it, but to not pass it on expressionally is that 'darkness' referred to in these passages.

What John Was Addressing?

It might be helpful to explain why John developed these themes at this late stage in the early Church.

As he explains, the Church by this late date (the '90's AD) was becoming somewhat set in its organizational structure and was coming to regard itself as 'more enlightened' in certain doctrinal areas. John saw need to start again from square-one, and re-orient them to the Divinity of Jesus Christ. The comparisons between the first verses of his first epistle and those of his gospel are unmistakable. Not only was there a growing infiltration of errant doctrines, (one particularly virulent that he refers to as the doctrine of antichrist!) but also an exclusion of true and faithful Ministers, even true Saints, from the local congregations. Even John himself was denied audience. (3rd John 9 & 10)

Those familiar with the underlying message of the three Epistles of John recognize he was countering a drift away from the Faith once delivered. His first letter was rather specific, the second, less so, and by the third, he was very limited in what he dared say, except in person. (3rd John 14) In the second he re-stresses the theme of love and the consequential error of those who hold diverging views as to the Divinity and physicality of Jesus. (Gnostic views adamantly disallow the possibility of both in the same person.) This error led to growing division within the congregations, such that it was becoming more and more difficult to find followers holding to this essential Truth. By the third epistle, John related his admonitions and writings being blocked from the congregation, and those remaining true believers being forced out.

John saw the effectiveness and absolute necessity of true fellowship as a tool in countering any doctrinal drift away from the Truth. As indicated also in Malachi 3:16, those who survive thru to the end-times are those who "speak often to one another". Not just engaging in small talk only, but having consequential conversations. It's that open dialog which keeps each of us from drifting irreversibly into heretical waters. Fellowship is that interpersonal environment which enhances the presence of and the effectiveness of God's Spirit. When Truth abates, and people are reluctant to call attention to the condition, whether from ignorance or from intimidation, the Spirit of God is dampened. In some cases, to the extent of even the withdrawal of the candlestick of enlightenment, as happened with the Ephesian era. (Rev. 2:5) They became

early casualties, and they never did repent! The Elder Apostle John saw it coming!

Ever Present Danger

But the issue of fellowship is not entirely without its precautionary considerations. Though we should be amenable toward every fellow believer, there is also a **danger area** to which we must be attentive. This especially is where a level of spiritual maturity is important. At the same time we embrace those we perceive to be in possession of God's Spirit, we should also be aware of the characteristics that bear evidence of that Spirit. John doesn't advocate we casually enter into fellowship without presenting us with this precautionary requirement also.

1st John 4:1 *"Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.*

2: *Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: (A growing heresy of the time.)*

3: *And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world. (He even calls it the spirit of antichrist!)*

4: *Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.*

5: *They are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them.*

6: *We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth, and the spirit of error.*

7: *Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God.*

8: *He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love."*

But with this precaution duly considered, our regard toward our brethren is a vital component of and evidence of our being truly in the Faith.

1st John 4:20 *"If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?"*

21: *And this commandment have we from him, That*

he who loveth God love his brother also.”

Where Sin is a Factor

But it was the matter of **sin** that John brought to bear as relevant in the matter of fellowship. He weaves darkness and fellowship together: Darkness being defined here as a negligent regard for our fellow-Saints. When we are remiss in this area, it is evidence that we don't fully grasp the essential quality of our calling: to possess and exhibit that same love toward our spiritual brethren as Christ and the Father do toward us! Not just love which we conjure from within ourselves in imitation of that which we perceive from the Word, but that Love which is generated within us by God's Spirit.

Romans 5:5 *“And hope maketh not ashamed; because the **love of God** is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is **given** unto us.”*

First is the source of that genuine Love, accompanied by the desire to express that Love, and the mutual benefit to both the giver and the receiver. The Love of co-involvement in the spiritual growth process, the mutual support in resisting natural temptations, the resistance against the intrusion of erroneous doctrines, all of these are direct benefits of our sharing of the love-fruits of the Spirit. Whole organizations and congregations within them, from the very beginning, have languished for lack of substantive fellowship. Unfortunately, that was a characteristic within the WCG, that partly accounts for both its drift into apostasy, virtually unopposed, and the resultant demise of its worth.

But, though many made it into their respective lifeboats, we shouldn't disregard the ever present danger. Not all splinter organizations have shaken off that reluctance to be genuine and to speak openly and expressly at any time. One split-off wanted to have it be known, speaking of their own group, and was candid enough to admit, **“This is not a fellowship, it's an organization.”** A statement that should create serious pause. Is that the way it **should** be? Was that part of the problem originally with the WCG? Apparently, not all have shaken that off. We should consider: are those who are of that opinion setting themselves up for the same to happen once again?

More than Conversation

Now, forgiveness of sins is not dependent upon our fellowship with others. So why did John say what he did? *“...but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have **fellowship** one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son **cleanses us from all sin.**”* (1st John 1:3-7) This is not suggesting that there's a pre-requirement of *fellowship* before we can have the blood of His Sacrifice applied to our infractions of God's Law. (John even provides us the quintessential definition of sin, just a few verses earlier! (1st John 3:4)) What is this “*all sin*”? Is it a matter of omission, rather than commission? In other words, though we are forgiven on the one hand, we can continue to remain in a degree of sinfulness so long as we fail to fellowship as we can and should. To be cleansed of *all sin*, we must employ all the charitable characteristics placed within us by the indwelling of His Spirit. Failing to see that is the relative ‘darkness’ he refers to!

1st John 2:9 *“He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in **darkness** even until now. 10: He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. 11: But he that hateth his brother is in **darkness**, and walketh in **darkness**, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that **darkness** hath blinded his eyes.”*

Our full conversion, made possible by the gift of God's Spirit, is more fully effected by our employing that Spirit just as He does. Further, it isn't possible to fully enter into fellowship with the Father and the Son if we begrudge the same toward others who are called as are we! *“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have **fellowship** with us: and truly our **fellowship** is with the Father, and with his Son...”* (1st John 1:3)

This deeper cleansing of our personal internal sin is a function of our employing the great Spiritual Gift we are given! Fellowship is such an essential part of the Christian life that we are seriously remiss should we not develop and apply its full benefit. It not only benefits us personally, but it positively impacts the spiritual welfare of others in our congregations who appreciate its ambiance! **Ω**