

SANCTIFICATION AND FELLOWSHIP

Efforts toward the unity of believers in Jesus often emphasize “the core of the gospel.” Pressing for greater Christian tolerance, a group of evangelicals that gathered at Vancouver asked the question, “Should evangelicals not seek to receive all who confess Jesus Christ as Lord, even though they may seriously disagree on theological issues apart from the core of the gospel?”¹ Corresponding to this “core of the gospel” is talk about “matters of basic Christian faith” and “what is absolutely essential.”² Unfortunately, the “core” and the “essentials” usually are left undefined and appear vague at best. Stress is laid on so-called minimum coherency factors to Christian unity rather than the maximum of Christian maturity—“the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).³ The basic foundation for Christian unity is clear—one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God (see Ephesians 4:4-6). But the importance of the believer’s “growing up in Christ” as a coherency factor for Christian unity must not be obscured by a misguided quest for a foundation. The foundation already has been laid (see Ephesians 2:20), and believers need to build on that foundation. The brunt of the problem of Christian unity seems rather to rest in the matter of sanctification. Little wonder then that Jesus, in his prayer for the oneness of his followers, also prayed, “Sanctify them in the truth” (John 17:17). Without growth unto holiness, fellowship among believers weakens and unity disintegrates. For believers in Jesus, sanctification is the key cohesive factor. It is in light of this understanding that the following thoughts on the role of sanctification for Christian *koinonia* or “fellowship” are developed.

Koinonia At Jerusalem. In commenting on the corporate life of most evangelical churches in the United States, Larry Christenson writes the following:

In words, they may describe the Christian fellowship in glowing terms, as a body of people knit together by close bonds of affection, mutual concern, and helpfulness; a community that answers to the language and imagery of family life. In actuality, except for a few hours of word-sharing each week, they live their lives more or less aloof from one another.⁴

Contrast the situation in Jerusalem in the first century A.D. The church was born in fellowship, fellowship with God, fellowship with the risen Jesus, fellowship with the Holy Spirit, fellowship in the Old Testament scriptures, and fellowship with one another. The eleven apostles and the 120 disciples “with one accord devoted themselves (literally, ‘gave their hearts’) to prayer” (Acts 1:14). Similarly after the descent of the Holy Spirit, the 3,000 believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and (the) fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

Koinonia basically indicates “sharing (of something) or joint participation (in something) brought about by a close association or a close relationship.”⁵ Walter Bauer’s lexicon outlines four meanings of *koinonia*: (1) a close relationship with others such as association, communion, or fellowship; (2) generosity, fellow-feeling, or altruism toward others; (3) a sign of fellowship or proof of fraternal unity like a gift or contribution; and (4) participation or sharing in something.⁶

The word itself is general in meaning but includes more restricted meanings determined by syntax and context. For example, *te koinonia* in Acts 2:42 could be translated “the contribution” rather than “the fellowship.” Verse 42 appears to be a summary heading that is defined further

by verses 43ff. Though not a strict elucidation of the items in verse 42, note the parallels in verses 43-47:

“through the apostles” (v. 43) with “the apostles’ teaching”;
“all things in common” (v. 44) with *te koinonia*;
“breaking bread in their homes” (v. 46) with “the breaking of bread”;
“praising God” (v. 47) with “the prayers”.

If the above phrases are parallel, then Luke defines *te koinonia* in this way, “All who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.” *Koinonia* in Acts 2:42 means a specific sharing (“contribution”) of material things based on the much broader sharing (“fellowship”) of all things in Christ. Alexander Campbell comments, “The contribution of money for the wants of the brotherhood appears to be [*koinonia*’s] import in this passage.”⁷ And Campbell’s revised translation of the passage reads, “They perseveringly continued in the apostle’s teaching, and in the contribution, and in the breaking of the loaf, and in the prayers.”⁸ For a similar use of *koinonia*, compare 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Romans 12:13; 15:16, 26, 27; Galatians 6:6; Philippians 4:15; Hebrews 13:16.

Application. The connection between “the teaching” (*te didache*) of the apostles and “the contribution” (*te koinonia*) is important. It is true the 3,000 were brought together as one body by divine power (“the Lord added,” v. 47; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:13) on the basis of their acceptance of God’s gift of grace through Jesus (e.g., by their faith, repentance, and baptism; hence, justification). But the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit and its role in the life of the individual believer must be allowed its place in the determination of Christian fellowship. The

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3,000 believers “devoted themselves” or “continued steadfastly” in *apostolic teaching*. Such teaching and a life-style effected by such, including “the contribution,” “the breaking of bread,” and “the prayers,” would place limits on the extent of Christian fellowship. This is illustrated by the case of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts, chapter 5. These two believers were cut off from Christian fellowship, since their lie indicated the deceiving work of Satan rather than the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. The role of sanctification, as well as the role of justification, is crucial in defining Christian fellowship.

Contrast the view of J. S. Lamar who seems to view sanctification as just “important” but not “essential.” He says, “While some truths are designed to impart life, others are for nourishing and developing that life. . . . The former are absolutely, the later are relatively, essential.”⁹ But is growth in Christ “relatively essential” or “absolutely essential”? The latter seems to be the case. For example, in Romans 15:27 Paul discusses the debt incurred by the Gentiles because of their sharing in the spiritual things of the Jews. He reasons, “If the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.” The reciprocal sharing is a matter of obligation; it is not optional. The proper response of one who has received or shared in the gospel of God’s grace is the “enlarging of his bowels of compassion,” that is, sharing in return and in the fullest sense. Sanctification of the heart for a sharing of material things seems required (cf. Galatians 6:6).

Fellowship With Deity. Paul remarks to the church of God at Corinth that they were called “into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1 Corinthians 1:9). Note that the

church's justification (e.g., "you were called") is not lacking the corresponding sanctification (e.g., "who will sustain you to the end," v. 8) and ultimate glorification (e.g., "guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ," v. 8; cf. Romans 8:30). Note too the corresponding condition of God's work in them—"as you wait," that is, waiting in the sense of faithfulness to God's covenant work in them (cf. Romans 8:19, 23, 25; Galatians 5:5; Philippians 3:20). If they would wait, then God would be faithful, so that he who began a good work in them (namely, the work of the gospel in bringing the Corinthians into fellowship with Jesus) would bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (that is, sanctification and ultimate glorification; see Philippians 1:6). So *koinonia* in 1 Corinthians 1:9 includes "both spiritual communion with Christ in the present life and participation in his glory hereafter, without which this communion would be incomplete."¹⁰

Interestingly, Paul includes these washed, sanctified ("definitive" rather than "progressive" sanctification¹¹), and justified believers (see 1 Corinthians 6:11) in the kingdom of God (excepting perhaps the immoral man of chapter 5), even though their level of "progressive" sanctification leaves much to be desired. Contrary to their divisiveness, they are in fellowship with Jesus, but their low level of true spirituality threatens the very core of their Christian community. So the apostle emphasizes the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (see 1:2, 30; 6:11, 19; 12:13). He emphasizes love, unity, and true doctrine. He rebukes, warns, and condemns (e.g., "if any one has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed," 16:22). The Corinthians need to "grow up" spiritually; they need sanctification. As a footnote, one might contrast Paul's response to the Corinthians' "antinomianism" with his response to the Galatians' "legalism." The former

needed a lesson in sanctification; the latter needed a lesson in justification. Both are important equally, yet realizing that justification is the basis for sanctification, Paul's greater severity to the Galatians is understandable.

One problem disrupting the fellowship at Corinth concerned the eating of meats used in connection with pagan idol worship. Paul devotes quite a bit of space to this problem (8:1–11:1).

The section can be outlined as follows:

introduction to the problem (8:1-13);
Paul's own example (9:1-27);
condemnation of idolatry (10:1-13);
the conclusion (10:14–11:1).

The part that is important for this study is Paul's conclusion, 10:14ff. Here Paul envisions four distinct situations: (1) a pagan idol feast; (2) the meat market; (3) a common meal (with no idolatrous connotations); and (4) a common meal (with idolatrous connotations). In the first situation, Paul says *don't eat*. His reason is that the cup of the Lord's supper is "a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ," and that those who sacrifice to idols become "partners (*koinonous*) with demons" (vv. 16, 20). "Participation in," "sharing in," or "fellowship in" the ritual meal of sacrifice constitutes oneness with the altar (vv. 17-18; see Hebrews 13:10; cf. Ephesians 5:2). Therefore, as Paul warns, "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (v. 21). Communion with Christ necessarily *excludes* communion with non-Christian and anti-Christian persons and/or things *in cultic celebration*.

In the second situation, Paul says *eat* (v. 25). His reason is that “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (v. 26). So communion with Christ necessarily *includes* communion with *all that belongs to the Lord* (whether persons or things), having been sanctified by him. In the third and fourth situations, Paul says *eat* and *don’t eat*, respectively. His reason is that “for conscience’ sake” (e.g., one’s own, v. 27) eat and ask no questions, or “for conscience’ sake” (e.g., a brother’s, vv. 28-29) don’t eat. In other words, the intent behind the eating dictates the action in the situation. In these latter cases, communion with Christ necessarily invokes brotherly love, brotherly tolerance, and the sacrificing of Christian liberties for the edification of the body (cf. 8:1, “love edifies”; 8:9, “take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak”; 10:32, “give no offense”).

Fellowship in Christ, however, calls for separation from more than pagan cultic celebration (see 2 Corinthians 6:14ff.). But Paul does not define specifically the extent of separation, unless one interprets an absolute separation, contra 1 Corinthians 5:9ff., for Paul’s words—“do not be yoked together with unbelievers” (6:14, *New International Version*), and “what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever” (6:15, *New International Version*). More than likely, Paul is thinking of pagan versus Christian lifestyle. This seems to be supported by the contrast “what fellowship has light with darkness.” The comment of Norman Hillyer is to the point:

Conversion for Gentiles meant an absolute break with Corinth’s entire way of life, which revolved around idol-worship. . . . Separation may mean loss of relatives, friends, and livelihood, and giving up apparently innocent involvements. But the holy God

promises to dwell among his people, and there can be no compromise with anything contrary to his interests.¹²

Obviously this sort of separation would elicit abuse and criticism from unbelievers. But this is the way of fellowship with deity. Since “the slave is not greater than his master” (John 13:16), those who are “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) must “share in” or “participate in” the sufferings of the Christ (see 2 Corinthians 1:7; Philippians 3:10; cf. 1 Peter 4:13; 5:1). The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit involves suffering first and only then glory.

Application. Fellowship with God is the basis for fellowship with one another in the church. Like salvation, fellowship is a gift from God. Man does not and cannot create Christian fellowship, but man must strive to maintain the purity of the gift that God has granted (cf. Ephesians 4:3). Christian fellowship demands commitment to God and his ways, with a love of all that he loves and with an abhorrence of all that he abhors, yet tempered with forbearance, lovingkindness, and mercy. This will bring abuse on believers in certain circumstances, but so be it.

Fellowship With One Another. Christians can fellowship one another in spreading good news about Jesus (Philippians 1:5; cf. Galatians 2:9), or in the sharing of one’s personal faith (Philemon 6). But believers should not participate in or share in the sins of others (1 Timothy 5:22). An important scripture concerning brotherly fellowship is 1 John 1:3ff. John makes clear that *koinonia* among believers, apostles, and the Father and the Son (v. 3) was made possible by the proclamation of the one, i.e., the eternal life, who was revealed in the flesh (contrary to docetic teachings of certain gnostic dualists). Christian fellowship is grounded and rooted in

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doctrine but not doctrine that is abstract and meaningless. Christian fellowship is based on doctrine about a person—Jesus. Note that in verses 1-4 the apostle begins with life and ends with fellowship and joy. The remarks of B. F. Westcott are appropriate:

Life is manifested in fellowship; and in regarding the end of his message, St. John looks at once to a twofold fellowship, human and divine, a fellowship with the Church and with God. He contemplates first the fellowship which exists in the Christian body itself, and then rises from this to the thought of the wider privileges of such fellowship as resting on a divine basis.¹³

John further indicates that fellowship with God demands reflecting the *imago dei* in one's daily "walk." So to claim *koinonia* with him who is light and to walk in darkness is to lie (v. 6). This is the plight of those gnostic dualists whose views of the created order and of flesh opened the door for the excesses of asceticism or libertinism. But, John continues, to walk in the light (as God himself is light) is to have fellowship (not only with God, but) *with one another* (v. 7). Instead of a repetition of "with him" in verse 7, John uses "with one another." Westcott notes:

The Christian can in his measure imitate God (Ephesians 5:1); and as he does so, he realises fellowship with the brethren, which is the visible sign of fellowship with God. At the same time Christ's blood cleanseth him constantly, and little by little, from all sin. The chosen rule of life—the "walking in light"—is more and more perfectly embodied in deed. The failure which is revealed in the presence of God is removed. . . . That fellowship [with the brethren] is the pledge of a divine fellowship; that consciousness calls out the application of the virtue of Christ's life given for us and to us.¹⁴

In other words, fellowship with one another in Christian community "provides the climate for personal maturation toward Christlikeness."¹⁵ Christian fellowship nourishes sanctification (e.g., confessing sinfulness and growing in holiness by the healing power of the grace of God), and sanctification reinforces and gives support to Christian fellowship. If perfectionism is claimed

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(“if we say we have not sinned,” v. 10), fellowship crumbles. To deny need for sanctification is to deny the truth of God’s word (“we make him a liar, and his word is not in us”).

Another important text for fellowship with others is 2 John 11. The one who “helps on his way” the missionary who is not teaching “the doctrine of Christ” (*te didache tou Christou*, v. 9) is counted as one who “shares” (*koinonei*) his wicked work.” The false teachers involved are those who are denying “the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh” (v. 7), and the condemnation rests with equal force on any doctrine that veers from the apostolic witness concerning Christ (e.g., that Christ is God incarnate). The believer is to give no help to such teachers either by received them into the house or by giving them any greeting (i.e., in the sense of approval of what they are teaching).

Application. Christian teaching is not teaching devoid of content or substance; it is not teaching in the abstract. Christian teaching is teaching for life—life in communion with God, with Christ, with the Holy Spirit, and with fellow regenerated sinners. Christian teaching is a must for Christian fellowship. The sanctifying work of the Spirit through the word must be the focal point for *koinonia* and growth in Christ.

Conclusion. Some evangelical churches have fallen victim to the false perfectionism of an external or a formal righteousness. External criteria for fellowship have been set up rather than the inner sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. As a result, the inner person has grown cold and callous while the outer person falsely rejoices in so-called righteousness. Apostolic tradition has been neglected and even abandoned while human traditions have been allowed to soothe the

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seared consciences of many by the perpetuation of a formal but hollow (e.g., a whitewashed tomb) institution. Men and women of God must call the church back to true righteousness and true holiness described by Paul in his own experience of Christ.

I suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but refuse, that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not having a righteousness of mine own, even that which is of the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith (Philippians 3:9-10, *Revised Version*).

True fellowship is based on true righteousness and true holiness, and true righteousness is letting Christ lay hold of me while true holiness is trying to lay hold of Christ.

Brethren, I count not myself yet to have apprehended. . . . I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded; and if in any thing ye are otherwise minded, even this shall God reveal unto you; only, whereunto we have already attained, by that same rule let us walk (Philippians 3:13-16, *Revised Version*).

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ENDNOTES

1. Kenneth S. Kantzer and V. Gilbert Beers, "Winds of Change in the World Council?" *Christianity Today* (April 20, 1984), 11.
2. Reuel Lemmons, "The Unity-Doctrine Tension," *One Body* (February 1984), 3.
3. All scripture quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version* unless otherwise noted.
4. Larry Christenson, *A Charismatic Approach to Social Action* (Bethany, 1974), 78.
5. Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, eds. W. F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (University of Chicago, 1957), 439-440.
6. Ibid.
7. Alexander Campbell, *Acts of the Apostles* (repr.; Old Paths, 1858), 18.
8. Ibid.
9. J. S. Lamar, "The Essential, The Important, and The Indifferent," *New Testament Christianity*, Vol. 1 (Z. T. Sweeney, 1923), 13, 22.
10. J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on the Epistles of St. Paul* (repr.; Alpha, no date), 150.
11. On the distinction, see John Murray, *Collected Writings: Selected Lectures in Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (Banner of Truth, 1977), 277ff.
12. Norman Hillyer, "1 Corinthians," *New Bible Commentary: Revised* (InterVarsity, 1970), 1081.
13. B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (repr. 3rd ed.; Eerdmans, 1892), 13.
14. Ibid., 20.
15. Joe S. Ellis, *The Church On Purpose* (Standard, 1982), 69.