

The Tie That Binds The Church

What is the “Cement” which holds the Church together?

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We have all heard that “blood is thicker than water.” This proverb tries to impress upon us that family ties are closer than all other human relationships. But, if we think biologically, the proverb is not always true. There are many times when individuals discover “There is a friend that sticks closer than a brother” (if I may cite another proverb).

Such friends — the kind you can count on, the kind who care and who support you — more often than not are found in the Christian Church. Indeed, that’s one reason why God has put his church in the world: so that we may have that kind of close relationship with one another.

Listen to one scriptural description of the early church:

“They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer...All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42–47).

Strangers though these people may have been before they came together as the Church Of Christ, their association with one another clearly became a recipe of their lives.

They should remind ourselves that one reason why God has placed his church here in the world is to provide an umbrella of fellowship under which his people may come together. The beloved Apostle John wrote one of the New Testament books to drive home this point forcefully. “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard,” he explained, “so that you may also have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (I John 1:3 NIV). His words serve well to provide the central theme of this message.

THE NATURE OF FELLOWSHIP

We talk a great deal about fellowship in the Christian Church. We extend the “right hand of fellowship” to new members. We hold “fellowship hours” after our worship services. We tell how much we enjoy our fellowship with one another.

In the New Testament, the Greek word for “fellowship” appears 20 times, although it is not always rendered in English by that word. But we need not examine each occurrence of the Greek word *koinonia* in order to determine the nature of Christian fellowship. The outlines of this great privilege are obvious in John’s words in our text.

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

In the first place, fellowship is a special relationship to God. “Our fellowship is with the Father...” Everyone, of course, is related to God. God is our Creator and we owe our origin to him. God is also the one who maintains us in existence; it is “in him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28 KJV). God is everywhere and so we cannot escape his presence wherever we go in this creation. But our existence does not assure that we are automatically in the proper relationship to God.

The presence of sin in our lives produces an ethical separation between us and God. Like Adam in the garden, we may avoid God’s presence and hide from him in bushes of our own making. In Romans Paul tells us that sinners are “God’s enemies” (Rom. 5:10) “and are under God’s wrath” (Rom. 1:18). It does us no more good to be related to God in a wrong way than it does for a husband to be living in the same house with a wife whom he despises.

But, Christian fellowship brings us into the right relationship to God. Jesus Christ has reconciled us to God by his life, death, and resurrection. Now we can call God “our heavenly Father.” Now we can enjoy being in his presence, contemplating his glory, and doing his will. Christian fellowship, then, is being in the right relationship with God.

That’s why John also emphasizes that “our fellowship is with his Son, Jesus Christ” (I John 1:3). There is not other way to come to God the Father except through his Son. So, when we come into the correct relationship with the Father, we will also sustain the proper relationship to our Lord Jesus.

Why is the church in the world? God has put it here as a group of people who have a special relationship to him. That relationship is one of *koinonia*, fellowship. The meaning of this relationship is perhaps better expressed by the word communion, used four times in the New Testament to render *koinonia*. To be in communion is to experience the unity of sharing a common element. In this case that element is love. “We love God because he first loved us.” “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins...God is love” (I John 4:9, 10, 16, NIV).

In the church, Christians receive God’s love through Christ as it was embodied in his death for us. In turn, God pours out his love in our hearts by the holy spirit (Rom. 5:5) so that we may love God in a responsive movement.

FELLOWSHIP WITH OTHER CHRISTIANS

Members of the Christian Church also have fellowship with one another. We not only have something in common with God; we also have come to have much in common with one another. The Apostle John explains that he has preached the Gospel “so that you also may have fellowship with us” (I John 1:3, NIV).

We do not often enough contemplate the many things which we share as members of the Christian Church. For a starter, we are all sinners and we have come to realize our need of the forgiveness which God offers us through Jesus Christ. As believers, we share the common experience of a “new birth,” or regeneration as the theologians call it. We have become new creatures in Christ. Further, God has sent the holy spirit to dwell in our hearts. We share and confess a common faith in God. We call him “Father” and view one another as “brothers and sisters.” We have passed through one baptism and we take the

bread and cup of communion together. We rejoice together in worship of the same Scriptures. We have been gifted by the same spirit and we share the same task in this world.

A brief survey of how the New Testament uses the word *koinonia* will help us to see what is included in the fellowship we share with each other in Christ. The Greek word itself occurs twenty times in the New Testament, but is translated in several different ways in the King James Bible.

Koinonia is rendered as Fellowship” twelve times. As Christians we discover that fellowship includes friendship, companionship, and a special sense of family. The British pastor John Fawcett captured this spirit when he wrote:

“Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

Before our Father’s throne
We pour our ardent prayers;
Our fear, our hopes, our aims are one,

Our comforts and our cares.
We share each others woes,
Each other’s burdens bear;
And often for each other flows
The sympathizing tear.

Four times *koinonia* is translated as “communion.” Here the emphasis is upon a smooth and harmonious relationship among the people of God. A common faith runs through believers and by it we are bound together as beads are held together by the string running through them. The Lord’s Supper, so important to the worship of God’s people, is a visible symbol of this harmony among church members.

Another meaning of the Greek word *koinonia* is “communication.” Because Christians are “one in the spirit” they are able to talk to each other on a level which really communicates their hearts. Have you not noticed how inconsequential much of our conversation is? What does weather, or sports, or small talk really matter? But, those who belong to each other and to Christ, are able to share themselves in conversing over eternal matters.

Finally, the New Testament translated the Greek word *koinonia* as “contribution” or “distribution.” In this sense, fellowship is a sharing of our material possessions with one another. This was true of the church in Acts when people willingly sold their property and shared the proceeds with those who had need. There is a communism in the New Testament, but it is not a communism of production. It is a sharing of property with fellow believers who are in need. The church is a group of people who care for, and take care of, their own. It doesn’t stop there; but, it does start there.

CONCLUSION

And so we are back to our original question. Why in the world is the Church? God has ordained the church to be here as a supportive fellowship of believers.

In the fall of the year, those in New England often have the opportunity of observing the V-shaped formations of Canadian geese as they migrate southward for the coming winter months. It is not by accident that these lovely birds assume the flying pattern in which they move through the skies. For as each bird moves its wings, it creates a pattern of drafts which makes it 71 percent easier for the bird behind it to fly. Flying as a flock, Canadian geese can travel 71 percent further than any one of them could fly separately. We could almost call that “fellowship.”

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