

THE FELLOWSHIP OF LOVE

"ONE GOD AND FATHER OF ALL"

"ONE SPIRIT"



"ONE IN CHRIST"

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Front Cover

THE FELLOWSHIP OF LOVE

The church is people—God's people. It is the total of all people who obey the will of God. It is a congregation of newborn children of God. It is a breathing, functioning, living organism. It is literally the body of Christ (Colossians 1:24). It is The Fellowship of Love. The church is not a building as Webster defines it. The church is not a ritualistic organization. It is not a sanctimonious society for sinners. It is not a religious sect or denomination.

The church of the living God is not the greatest institution of all time. To say "greatest" is to compare God's Holy Church with all institutions, when there is no comparison. Rather, the church is the One Truly Great Institution. The church stands above all institutions. Many sincere individuals cry out, "Down with Churchanity! ...Long Live Christianity!" They make such statements without an understanding of the nature of the church as planned by God, implemented by Christ, and described in the New Testament. Generally, popular concepts and impressions of the church do not measure up to the exalted description of the first century church. Quite often, people confuse the church as planned by God with man's frailty and inability to carry out that plan.

Am I willing to examine the church as planned by God, or do I prefer to continue depreciating the church as directed by men? It will take faith and courage on my part to reject human institutions of religion and study seriously the concept of the church as preached by Jesus. No doubt, during my search, I can receive strength from the example of Christ. When He came to implement the plan of God, He moved against the stream. Public sentiment did not favor Him. Religious leaders opposed Him. Nevertheless, He continued to describe the coming kingdom. He continued to share with men the nature of His church. Following His example, I will seek to understand God's description of the church. I will not accept man's views nor will I confuse the divine plan with human innovations.

THE PLAN OF GOD

God revealed Himself to man in the person of Jesus Christ. Previously, God had prepared man for such a revelation through

His dealings with a chosen people. By giving the Israelites a law on tablets and by speaking to them through His messengers, He gradually unfolded His will for all men.

And then, at the appointed time in history, He lavished upon man His marvelous grace in the gift of His son. "He chose us in Him ... having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved. ... Having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth—in Him" (Ephesians 1:4–10).

THE COST OF THE PLAN

The plan of God cost Him the blood of His son. Jesus purchased the church "with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). The church became the possession of the Lord. God made Christ "the head of the body, the church" (Colossians 1:18). God granted preeminence to Christ for all ages.

God invited man to become a member of the very body of Christ. In order to assure all men this opportunity, He recorded His will in an official document, the last will and testament of His son. Man may respond to the will of God and become a part of the body of Christ by believing deeply in Christ as the Son of God, turning from his sin, confessing his faith in Jesus as Lord, and submitting to baptism, a burial in water in the name of Christ.

Following his response to the plan of God, a man is added to the church by the Lord (Acts 2:47). He is incorporated into the Body of Christ. He is made free in Christ Jesus. He is not shackled by creeds, human restrictions, or denominational alliances. He is simply and vitally related to God in the body of Christ. He responds further to the plan of God by meeting with other saints on the first day of the week to worship. In worship, he unites with children of God in hymns of praise and in prayer. He shares the holy memorial meal, the Lord's Supper, as he remembers the sacrifice of Christ. He gives of his means to

support the work of the body of Christ. He receives more of the will of God as teachers instruct him from God's Word. He gladly accepts responsibilities since he conceives of himself as one member of the body which seeks to glorify God. As a newborn child of God, he submits his will fully to Christ. He looks to Christ for strength. He depends upon Christ for direction. He goes to Him for guidance. He meditates upon the instructions of Christ as recorded in His will. He seeks daily to walk in the light. He strives daily to better his relationship with the Lord.

In the fellowship of other Christians, he comes to appreciate more keenly man's needs and God's ability to meet those needs. He discovers through joyful experience what he has always believed. Namely, man is not an island. Human beings are gregarious. Regardless of the degree of one's self-sufficiency, no man can live very long in isolation and remain either happy or normal. So, he understands that God's plan for man's happiness includes the church. He participates with the saints in communication with God. He experiences unspeakable blessings in the fellowship of love. He learns that the Christian fellowship is a bond which unites Christians to each other, to Christ, and to God.

There is a blessing in fellowship with one another. The term fellowship comes from the word *koinonia*. It is used eighteen times in the testament of Christ. It is only one of the many words translated fellowship. A careful study of all these words reveals numerous ideas associated with the word fellowship. In the Christian life, there is a fellowship which means a sharing of friendship and an abiding in the company of others (Acts 2:42; II Corinthians 6:14). It is very interesting to know that friendship is based on common knowledge, for "you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (I John 1:3). Only those who are friends with Christ can really enjoy spiritual fellowship or friendship with each other.

In the Christian life, there is a fellowship or partnership in the work of the Lord (Philippians 1:5). It is a sharing of one's self with others in the cause of Christ. In the Christian life there is a fellowship which means practical sharing with those who are less fortunate. The word is used three times in connection with

the collection of the churches for the poor saints in Jerusalem (Romans 15:16; II Corinthians 8:4; II Corinthians 9:13). In other words, the Christian fellowship is a practical endeavor.

In the Christian life, there is a fellowship in the faith. The child of God is never an isolationist. He is a member of a believing company (Ephesians 3:9). In the Christian life, there is a fellowship of the spirit (II Corinthians 13:14; Philippians 2:1). The Christian lives in the presence of the company, the help, the strength, and the guidance of the Spirit.

In the Christian life, there is a fellowship with Christ (I Corinthians 10:16). This is especially appreciated in the communion of the Lord (I Corinthians 10:16). Further, that fellowship with Jesus is fellowship with His sufferings (Philippians 3:10). In suffering, the Christians knows he is sharing with Christ.

In the Christian life, there is a fellowship with God (I John 1:3). However, this fellowship is not for those who have chosen to walk in darkness (I John 1:6).

The New Testament further describes this great truth by using the word partner. James and John are Peter's partners in the fishing business (Luke 5:10). Paul speaks of Titus as his partner (II Corinthians 8:23). The Christian looks on all fellow-laborers as partners in a great work. For him to call a fellow-man partner is the most natural thing in the world.

This idea is expanded by using fellowship in the sense of a sharer in an experience (II Corinthians 1:7; Hebrews 10:33). Nothing happens to man alone. It happens to all men. In the fellowship of love, there is a sympathy between Christ and man, and man and man, as ones who have passed through a common experience together.

Perhaps one of the most meaningful uses of fellowship illustrates man's sharing in the divine nature (II Peter 1:4). Men share not only in the things of the earth, but in the glory of heaven as well. The fellowship of love is a foretaste of heaven itself.

No one can read the newspaper without becoming aware of the desperate struggle all over the world for a type of fellowship. People just do not enjoy a "Robinson Crusoe existence." It is

evident that only two forces bring people into fellowship. One is a common danger and the other is a common purpose. A common danger drives people together, but a common purpose draws people together.

It appears as though most people are being driven together by common danger. People of one ideology are coming together out of fear of another ideology. People of one nation are coming together out of fear of another nation. People of one race are coming together out of fear of another race. Whenever this happens, the community of fellowship which results is never a wholesome one. Its foundation is selfishness. Its teaching are "might is right," and "the strongest shall survive," and "every man for himself."

Conversely, the fellowship of love draws people together with a common purpose. Its foundation is "mutual concern." Its teachings are "the weakest shall have an equal opportunity with the strongest," and "right is might," and "every man shall love his neighbor as himself."

Think of the kind of world which will exist when the fellowship of love is a reality for all men! Ponder the blessings which mankind will enjoy when the will of God reigns in the hearts and lives of all men!

There is a blessing in bearing one another's burdens. This thought begins in an unusual place, "the attic of a church building." Few attics are as interesting as the one in which the Hunchback of Notre Dame lived; yet, some of them have an intriguing story to tell. Such is the case of a church building in Michigan, for in its attic a Chinese student lived for four years. Before living in its attic, he had attended Michigan University; however, the pressures and demands of university life were too much for him. He failed his courses and was unable to adjust to his new surroundings. He thought this would mean disgrace to his parents who lived in China, so, he escaped to the attic of the nearby church building. At night, he would slip down to the kitchen and eat what was left over after social functions. He took clothing and blankets from a storeroom. Life became nothing more than mere existence for him. He was terribly lonely and very deeply troubled. During these four years, Sundays became special days for him. He would crawl down behind the pulpit so

that only a thin wall separated him from the worshipers. Emotion filled his heart as he desired to reach out and touch the people. Oh, how he enjoyed hearing them sing and pray. Oh, how he longed to be with them. Then, it happened. One day he was discovered. The story made the newspapers all over the country. People were moved with compassion as they read the story.

The conclusion of the story is even more touching, for this church opened its arms and took him in. No longer was he a "loner," unknown to everyone. Now, he was a part of a loving fellowship which knew no barrier of race or color or social standing. On that occasion, the congregation exercised the New Testament admonition: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your opinion" (Romans 12:15-16). On that occasion, the church learned the meaning of sharing the burdens of one another. The people experienced joy and happiness as they shared themselves with the Chinese boy.

An outstanding characteristic of the New Testament fellowship was that the members learned how to bear one another's burdens. Early Christians were linked together by the common bond of love. They were genuinely interested in one another. One member could not say, "I have no need of you," for God had so adjusted the body that each one was indispensable. God worked in the early church and promises to do so now in order "that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; and if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it" (I Corinthians 12:25-26). This is not to say that sincere concern was always natural, but it is to say that God's plan called for members to bear one another's burdens. Thus, the people in the first century church learned to think less of self and more of others in bearing one another's burdens. Today, I must seek to follow the Biblical command "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2).

There is a blessing in strengthening and encouraging one another. When one fails to strengthen and encourage a deserving individual for some worthwhile accomplishment, the results are

two-fold. First, discouragement comes to the one who has performed the good work. He wonders if his unselfish acts are truly worthwhile. He may even decide to pursue another avenue while all the time he was on the right road. A little encouragement from the right person at the right time in the right spirit would have spurred him on to greater service and even more rewarding accomplishments.

Second, one deprives himself of a happy privilege when he fails to reward a laborer with encouragement. Unexplainable joy will fill the heart of the encourager as well as the encouraged. It is a spiritual blessing indeed to the one who encourages others along the highway of life.

A car was stalled on a busy street and traffic was halted for an entire block. Horns were blowing and angry drivers were shouting. Soon, the cars began to pull out of the line and drive around the stalled car. Finally, one driver gave the stalled car a push, and it was soon moving under its own power again. Within a few moments traffic was back to normal.

This mechanical illustration carries some meaning for me. Life is so much like a traffic jam. People get halted under various circumstances. Most of the time they are not in need of criticism or censure, but rather a gentle push of encouragement. Encouragement is like premium gasoline. It helps to take the knocks out of living. Many people can work through their problems if they are encourage by Christian friends.

"Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers" (Ephesians 4:29). In my anxiety to permit no corrupt speech to proceed from my mouth, I may have failed in letting words of edification flow freely from my lips. I should emulate the example of the Israelites in this regard. "Everyone helped his neighbor, and said to his brother, 'Be of good courage'" (Isaiah 41:6). I should find strength in the life of Paul who "went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches" (Acts 15:41) and "went over the region of Galatia and Phrygia in order, strengthening all the disciples" (Acts 18:23). I need to pursue "the things which make for peace and the

things by which one may edify another" (Romans 14:19). I need to strive "for the edification of the church" (I Corinthians 14:12).

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I need to remember that, along with evangelism and benevolence, the work of God's people also embraces edification. Much of the last will and testament of Christ includes letters of edification. The first four books of the New Testament relate the life and teachings of Christ. The fifth book tells the history of God's church. However, the other books of the New Testament are designed primarily to encourage and strengthen the child of God as he anticipates the heavenly home. These letters are available to me in my Bible. I may search them for personal encouragement and strength from God. I may examine them for my responsibility in lifting up others.

GOD'S PLAN AS A REALITY

Is anything of greater value than the knowledge that brethren in the fellowship of love are ready to lay down their lives for me? Is anything more beautiful than people who are sympathetic, forgiving, understanding, loving? Is anything more attractive than a church whose members stand ready at all times to encourage, strengthen, and inspire me?

If the church I know does not measure up to this exalted standard, then individuals need to change. God has clearly revealed the nature of His church. His plan is perfect. Therefore, the only conclusion is that man has failed in carrying out the perfect plan of God. The needs of men will be met in the fellowship of love when men permit God's will to reign in their lives and in the life of the church.

I cannot achieve the spiritual life outside the church of the Lord. I cannot experience victory over Satan's Destructive influences outside The Fellowship of Love. I must live, grow, and function in the body of Christ if I am to experience the good life.

It is time for me to take seriously the concept of the church. It is time for me to act in a responsible way. The church must not remain a beautiful idea in my mind. It must become a reality in my life. Only then will Satan's destruction be possible.



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