

The Responsibilities of the Church: Fellowship, Part 2

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: 90-139

It is a joy to have some time tonight to look together to the word of God and come back to our very important study of fellowship. For those of you who were not here this morning we are in the a prolonged study of the anatomy of the church, talking about what a church is; we talked about its foundation or its structure, its skeleton. We talked about its internal systems or motivations or spiritual attitudes and now we're talking about the function of the church. If we were comparing that to a body we would be talking about the muscles, the things that make the body move, that put it into motion, and the first of these areas of activity, action in the church we're considering in the church is fellowship.

This is what the church does. This is the church in action. It is a fellowship and we said this morning that basically that means it is a group of people tied together in a common eternal life with a mutual ministry to each other. We have the responsibility in love by the power of the spirit to minister to one another. And we asked an initial question this morning which is a very important one and that is what is the basis of fellowship? On what is our fellowship founded or based? And the answer to that came from 1 John 1:3, "Our fellowship is a fellowship of those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. The basis of our fellowship is salvation." John makes that very clear that when someone believes the Gospel, exercises saving faith in Jesus Christ, they enter into the fellowship with other believers and with the father and his son, Jesus Christ.

So as we talk about the fellowship we start with the basis of fellowship and then we move from there, and I think it's so important to establish that and I know that those of you who were here this morning have an understanding of that very important point. Everyone who is a true believer is in the fellowship and we are responsible for expressing our ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit to them in whatever ways the spirit of God may give us opportunity, and we pointed out some of those things this morning.

Now we'll get a little more into that tonight. Let's take the second point as we work our way through these six elements of fellowship. I told you we'll talk about its basis, its nature, its symbol, its danger, its responsibility, and its results. But let's look secondly at its nature.

We said that the basis of salvation is fellowship, not let's go to the nature of fellowship. How does it really function? When we as a spiritual fellowship go into action, what happens? How do we exercise this mutual responsibility? How do we move into the experiential, experimental aspect of

fellowship? The real functioning togetherness?

Let's begin by looking at Acts 2 and there are a number of passages we'll address but Acts 2 is a good starting point because this is right at the very beginning of the church and defines for us the fellowship at its very start. Now as we come to Acts 2 we most importantly will start at verse 42, but I want to back up a little bit from that because I want to reinforce the point I made this morning.

When you come to verse 42 you read they were continually devoting themselves to the apostle's teaching and to fellowship; to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Fellowship was a part of the life of the early church on a daily basis. When it says continually that really means all day, every day. "They were day by day," verse 46 says, "continuing with one mind in the temple and breaking bread from house to house. They were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart." Praising God and having favor with all the people and that was really a way to describe their every moment of every day kind of fellowship.

But who were the people in this fellowship? For that we go back to verse 38 where Peter at the conclusion of his sermon here on the day of Pentecost says to the Jews who were listening to him, "Repent, and let each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Baptism as we saw tonight being the symbol of a heart of faith putting its trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and being united to him in his death, burial and resurrection. When that happens the forgiveness of sin takes place and you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Well the promises for you and your children and for all who are far off, that would mean Jews and Gentiles, as many as the Lord our God shall call to himself, and with many other words he solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them saying be saved from this perverse generation so then those who had received his word were baptized. So you have people who heard the Gospel which he preached, you had people who responded to his call, his invitation to repent and to receive the forgiveness of sins through Christ and to be baptized and 3,000 people that day responded.

Then verse 42, "And they were continually devoting themselves to the Apostle's teaching and the fellowship." And again it reinforces the fact that the only people who really participate in the functioning of fellowship are those who have come to faith in Jesus Christ. It was the 3,000 who were continuing to devote themselves to the Apostle's doctrine and fellowship. They were all true believers. It's always fascinated me that 3,000 souls were added to the church that day and baptized and they were continually devoting themselves. In other words 3,000 were saved, 3,000 were baptized, and 3,000 continued to express their faith in the fellowship. They were all true believers continuing steadfastly or continually devoting themselves; it's the different translation of what could be translated continuing or continued steadfastly.

All the professors we might say were possessors. All of those who had come to name Christ publicly had also come to trust Christ inwardly. They were not just hearers of the word only in the words of

James, but they were doers as well. Verse 44 says, "All those who had believed were together." All those who had believed were together, and in that togetherness of the early church there was the sharing of spiritual life and spiritual power that we talked about this morning that belongs to those who are in the fellowship. They expressed their partnership in a mutual ministry.

Just a brief moment of diversion over to the tenth chapter of Hebrews, you don't need to turn to it, but you're familiar with it. I'll read it to you, verses 23 to 25. It says, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering for he who promised is faithful, and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds not forsaking our own assembling together as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near." And the writer of Hebrews is exhorting the believers to make sure that they get together, that they are assembling together and in that assembly encouraging one another and stimulating one another to love and good deeds.

And I remind you of what I said this morning. We have a responsibility as God gives us opportunity to everybody who is in the fellowship. Their theology may be different, their forms of worship may be different, they may interpret some things in the Scripture differently. They may have a different lifestyle. They may come from a different culture. They may be from a different society, whatever. We have a responsibility if they are in Christ, if they have been linked to us eternally and inseparably by the common life of Jesus Christ which we share, we have a responsibility to minister to them, to stimulate them in the words of Hebrews to love and good works, to encourage them. That's part of our responsibility in expressing the partnership of mutual ministry and the power of the spirit to all of those who are in Christ.

Now that's very very basic to Christian experience, but I think in the day in which we live today we have lost much of the understanding of that because we live particularly in Western society and even more particularly in America, we live in a culture that is so very used to being entertained. We are primarily used to being spectators, to watching the show go on. And many churches, of course, have fallen into this trap and people go there to watch the performance, albeit it's a spiritual performance to one degree or another, and somebody preaches or speaks and all of that and it looks and feels like it's church, but the reality is for many people it is nothing more than something they attend and they have no idea of the responsibility for mutual ministry in which they have been called and to which they are held accountable by the Lord himself.

Let's go back to Acts 2 for a moment and let's get a little deeper into the fellowship, the first fellowship and find out a little more about it. First of all in verse 42 it is noted for us that they were continuing steadfastly or continually devoting themselves to the Apostle's teaching. It is characteristic of the fellowship that the priority is upon the truth, that the priority is upon learning and knowing the truth. When you enter into the fellowship, you begin then as a child of God, if we can mix our metaphors a little bit, you begin then as a child of God to need to nourish your own soul that you might grow to

maturity and you feed yourself on the Word of God. The word is our food; the word is our bread as Peter said, "As newborn babes desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby."

We have the responsibility then to expose ourselves to truth and the truth is primarily the truth that we know the truth of the new covenant, the truth of the Gospel and all that is attendant to the Gospel. The truth of the mysteries which were hidden in time past, but have been revealed in the New Testament through the Apostles and so it is the Apostle's teaching which constitutes the New Testament which is the focal point of our emphasis and our thrust.

You say, "Well what about the Old Testament?" well, just be reminded that according to 1 Corinthians 10 the Old Testament exists to remind us, to set examples for us of matters of great importance to us, but the substance of Christian doctrine is found in the writings of the Apostles. We don't minimize the Old Testament, it is equally inspired by God, it is equally edifying when understood in connection with the New Testament, you understand that. You understand that studying the Old Testament without the New Testament does not bring one into the knowledge of God. You must come all the way to Christ. Understanding the Old Testament in light of the New Testament gives the Old Testament the fullness of its meaning.

After all Jesus said to those on the road to Emmaus that the Old Testament are the things concerning me. He opened up the Old Testament, taught the law, the prophets, and the holy writings, and taught himself from them. So we emphasize then the Apostle's teaching not to the disregard of the Old Testament but understanding it in the light of what the New Testament has to say. And then in the fellowship the second thing is that we participate in the expression of fellowship as well as breaking bread which is sharing the communion, the Lord's Table, celebrating the cross as well as prayer, there is this fellowship.

Now the fellowship has a number of ways to express itself as we've already noted anyway that we can express some fulfillment, some encouragement, some instruction, reproof, rebuke, or whatever it is to somebody else is an expression of the fellowship, but in this particular portion of Scripture let me show you something that really kind of opens this up to us. In verse 44 it says, "And those who have believed were together." And that is a fulfillment of the injunction of Hebrews 10:24 to assemble yourselves together, and they were all together because that's essentially where the real fellowship takes place. That's where the spiritual dynamics operate; they operate when we're together. That's why it's so important to do what we do, come together on the Lord's Day. To come together in the middle of the week. To come together in Bible studies, to come together in prayer groups, to assemble ourselves in families of believers and in couples of believers and with young people who believe and in those assemblies it's very very important because coming together is where we generate the expressions of fellowship.

One of those expressions is indicated at the end of verse 44. It says, "They had all things in common." It was characteristic of early church that nobody felt himself the singular owner of anything that he possessed. In other words, there was a certain sense in which they all felt that everything they had belonged to whoever needed it. And so in verse 45, "They began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all as anyone might have need." This is an imperfect tense verb in the Greek; they began selling which is continuous action in the past. At different times it would become known that different Christians had needs, and so somebody would meet that need. Eventually what happened in the early church was that all of their loose cash was consumed. Let me tell you what the picture was here, remember this; Pentecost, the great Jewish celebration of Pentecost or First Truths, was a celebration that was of significant enough nobility in God's economy of feasts set up in the Old Testament, it was a significant enough feast the pilgrims came to Jerusalem for this and when they came into the city of course they were accommodated by the Jews who lived in Jerusalem who took them into their homes and fed them and cared for them.

Now many of these pilgrims who came in for this event heard the Gospel and were among the 3,000 that were saved and a little later you have 5,000 men saved and just a couple more chapters and you probably have 20,000 believers in a very few weeks in the early church. So many of them had come from other places and now they're in Jerusalem and they're still staying with believers and they need resources, they don't have what they need to sustain their life and so the church has to take care of them. They are distanced from their home and their employment, their jobs, their income, their farms or whatever it was that they had.

Then you had another problem complicating the situation, it didn't take long for persecution to arise from the Jews and anybody who identified himself with Jesus Christ could lose his job, could be dispossessed from his family and so you had a very large group of poor people in Jerusalem, poor Christians who needed to be cared for those who had resources, and at first everybody would use whatever extra money they had to take care of these people, but eventually that would run out and it probably didn't take too long for it to run out and soon after that in order to meet needs you had to sell, liquidate, assets and so that's what began to happen.

This wasn't communism; I want to make that clear because some people get very confused about that. It wasn't one moment in time where everybody in the church sold everything they had and they pooled all the money and doled it back out in equal amounts, no. They were selling over a period of time; they were selling when someone expressed a need. Now that's one of the ways the fellowship worked. It worked to meet needs. It worked to express Christian love to those who were in dire straights of one kind or another and had to have the necessities of life met by someone else.

In fact in 2 Corinthians 8:4 it talks about the favor of participation and it's the word fellowship *koinonea*, the favor of fellowship in the support of the saints, and that was a pretty typical thing that went on in the early church.

Then in verse 46 there was another aspect of fellowship, "Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple." What were they doing there? What were they doing all together one-minded in the temple? Well, what did you do when you went to the temple? What was the temple for? It was for worship wasn't it? And so very clearly they were in the temple every day all together worshipping God, praising God, glorifying God.

And then it tells us in verse 46 they went from house to house breaking bread. That could refer to meals together, but certainly refers to the breaking of bread in the communion service. They may have had a meal or a love feast prior to the Lord's Table, but certainly were sharing in the Lord's Table every day as they were centering on the cross.

Now what is the compelling issue that you direct your attention to before you take the Lord's Supper? What is it? It's confession isn't it? It's coming to grips with your sin so that you don't eat or drink in an unworthy manner.

So the fellowship then expresses itself in a number of ways: the study of sound doctrine, coming to the Lord's Table which involves the confession of sin, times of prayer, finding out who had needs and going to sacrificial extremes to meet those needs, and praising God, worshipping God collectively. And then going from home to home and sharing in the Lord's Table and the dealing of sin in the heart. All of those things were part of their life and it says at the end of verse 46, "They were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart." Just the joy of sharing together in the work of God in each life, just the joy of sharing their testimonies with one another, in verse 47, "Collectively praising God," and all of this of course causing favor with all the people because these people had been so totally transformed they were wonderful people. They were people who desired to serve and honor God and the transformation was apparent to everybody in that society who came in touch with them and as a result the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

So I guess in summation of this particular text we could say that fellowship is the sharing of spiritual life daily in the bonds of Christ so that all needs are met. The common joys of praise and thanksgiving, the common discussion around sound doctrine, the common coming to the table of the Lord and dealing with your sin, prayer together; all of those things. Sharing testimonies with gladness and sincerity of heart, collectively praising God; all of those are features of the fellowship.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer whom I quoted a number of times this morning again speaks to this. He writes, "Because God has already laid the only foundation of our fellowship, because God has bound us together in one body with other Christians in Jesus Christ long before we entered into common life with them, we enter into that common life," listen to this, "not as demanders, but as thankful recipients. We thank God for what he has done for us. We thank God for giving us brothers who live by his call, by his forgiveness and by his promise. We do not complain of what God does not give us,

we rather thank God for what he does give us daily and is not what has been given us enough brothers who will go on living with us through sin and need under the blessings of his grace?" Bonhoeffer talks about that as the divine gift that Christ has given us in the fellowship. He writes, "Even when sin and misunderstanding burden our fellowship is not the sinning brother still a brother with whom I too stand under the word of Christ? Will not his sin be a constant occasion for me to give thanks that both of us may live in the forgiving love of God in Jesus Christ? Thus the very hour of disillusionment with my brother becomes incomparably salutary because it is so thoroughly teaching me that neither of us can live by our own words and deeds, but only by that one word and deed which really binds us together; the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ."

We share everything. We share even common forgiveness and that's a humbling reality, but that is Christianity. Aristides wrote in ancient times about Christians, "They abstain from all impurity in the hope of the recompense that is to come in another world when there is among them a man that is poor and needy and if they have not an abundance of necessities," he writes, "they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with the necessary food. Such is the law of the Christians and such is their conduct."

What is the nature of fellowship? It is mutual sharing. That's it. It is the sharing of everything that is an expression of love and spiritual life. This is the character of the early church. This should be the character of every church.

Another couple of passages that illustrate this, 2 Philippians for an illustration, the first few verses, Paul writes, "If there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love," and then this, "if there is any fellowship of the spirit and if in that fellowship there is any affection and compassion." And what he's saying here is if the fellowship is real, if there really is a fellowship of the spirit, if there really is Christian love and compassion in that fellowship, then make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, loving everybody the same. United in spirit, intent on one purpose; that's all fine, that's all sort of abstract in a sense. But he gets very specific in verses three and four, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself. Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interest of others."

Now here is the essential that makes the fellowship work. In a word, humility. Right? Humility. How is it that you can be willing to sacrifice your property for the sake of someone in need? How is it that you can be willing to fast for two or three days so someone else may eat? How is it that you are willing to get on your knees to pray and intercede with someone else? It is when you view them as more important than you. It is when you are not merely looking out for your own personal interests but for the interests of others. And when you come together with God's people and the perspective is right, it is this perspective, I'm not coming to see what I can get, I'm coming to see what I can give. I'm not coming to see what might be done for me; I'm coming to see what I might do for someone

else. I'm not coming to be encouraged, I'm coming to encourage. I'm not coming so much to be instructed as I'm coming to instruct. I'm not coming so much to have all my needs met as to be available to meet somebody else's need. I'm coming in order that I might give. That's the fellowship.

The nature of fellowship is selfless, sacrificial, humble giving. It's giving. It's sharing everything I have in Christ with you. If I have truth and wisdom and encouragement and strength, I share it with you. If I have resources, I share them with you. If I recognize your need and I can meet your need, I must do that.

1 John 3 says that, "If I see that you have a need and I close up my compassion to you it's questionable whether I'm even a Christian," right? How dwells the love of God in such a person?

So the nature of fellowship very simple; the basis is salvation, the nature is sharing. Sharing of all spiritual realities as it becomes evident that there is a need. Sharing together in common confession of sin, confronting sin if need be, rebuking sin as well as extending forgiveness and restoration. Sharing.

Turn to Romans for a moment, chapter one, just to strengthen this point a bit. In 1 Romans the Apostle Paul is writing to the Romans to sort of establish himself with them because he wants to come there. He wants to come to the great city of Rome, the capital really of the ancient world. He wants to preach the Gospel there. He wants to have a ministry there. He's greatly burdened about that city, but even more significant in his mind is he wants to come to Rome and preach and establish himself and get to know the believers there so that they will send him to Spain. He wants to go to the utter most part of the earth as far as he knew. He wants to go as far as he can go, all the way to Spain. And so his goal is to come to Rome and to set up a relationship with them to get some support from them so they can kind of launch him to Spain.

As he writes to them in chapter one to introduce something of his heart and his theology and then at the end of the epistle to the Romans has talks more about his plans, but as he starts he says in verse 11, "I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you that you may be established." Now here is a man who has a goal in mind, he wants support. He wants to go to Rome so that he can get the necessary base established, to get the financial support and the prayer support, and perhaps the human support to go with him to Spain. His objective is to get support for his ministry. Even though that is his ultimate goal and his ultimate objective, his immediate objective and his heart is not to go to get all of this for him, but to go to give; and so he says, "I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you that you may be established."

And that was always in his heart. He was always the giver. He was always the one willing to make the sacrifice for someone else. He lived what he wrote in 2 Philippians; "He looked not on his own things, but the things of others, and he considered others better than himself." That's how real

fellowship works.

One other passage on this point 2 Timothy 4, 2 Timothy 4, the Apostle Paul is writing the last chapter of his life really, the last chapter of his epistles, he's about to die and the last thing he wrote was 2 Timothy and this is the last chapter in 2 Timothy. He's writing to his young son in the faith and he says to him, Timothy probably in his late 30's, Paul in his mid-60's about to die, and he says to him in verse nine, "make every effort to come to me soon." He wanted fellowship. At this time obviously he knows his life is coming to an end and he wants to be with Timothy one more time. And then he adds this, it's really sad, "for Demas having loved this present world has deserted me and gone to Thessal and Ika, Crescens has gone to Galachia, Titus to Dalmatia. Only Luke is with me. Pick up Mark and bring him with you for he's useful to me for service." And then verse 21 he said, "Make every effort to come before winter."

Paul wanted fellowship. He wanted someone there, someone he loved, someone he knew deeply for mutual exchange. He wanted to strengthen Timothy because he knew what was ahead of him and he knew Timothy had been struggling deeply. Now let me give you a little background without belaboring the point, when Paul writes 2 Timothy, Timothy's in some bad shape. Go back to chapter one. Now remember Paul is going to pass the mantle to Timothy, he's going to hand off his responsibility to Timothy, but Timothy is in a very serious situation and Paul has to say to him in verse six, "Kindle afresh," or stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. The Apostle Paul was God's instrument, put his hands on Timothy and Timothy received the gifts of ministry for preaching and evangelizing and leading the church, but he had let it fall into disuse because he was so intimidated by the people in the Ephesian church who were sinful and who were in leadership and shouldn't have been there. And he was also fearful of the persecuting of the Roman Empire that was going on in Ephesus where he was when Paul wrote him. And so he had sort of folded up his tent and stolen away into the night and he wasn't doing what he should. It was a very very difficult time for Timothy and he was waning in his spiritual strength, so Paul says, "Stir up the gift of God, put it back into action Timothy." And then in verse seven he reminds him that God hasn't given him a spirit of fear or a spirit of cowardess or a spirit of timidity and it indicates to us that Timothy was behaving in a timid way, a somewhat cowardly way. In verse eight he says to him, "Don't be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord." It's almost unthinkable that Timothy could express any shame over the person of Christ, but apparently he had or at least was on the brink of that.

He says, "Don't be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord. Don't be ashamed of the testimony of me as prisoner. Be willing to join with me in suffering for the Gospel."

Down in verse 13 he says, "Retain the standard of sound words or sound doctrine. Hold on to your sound doctrine." In verse 14 he says, "Guard through the Holy Spirit who dwells in us the treasure entrusted to you." And the treasure of course was truth. Truth, revelation, Scripture. In 15 he sums up his concern, "You're aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me." One of the

saddest things he ever wrote. Here he is at the end of his life and everybody all around him is abandoning him. The heat is too hot, the persecution is starting to escalate and everybody's abandoning Paul and Paul says, "Timothy don't do that."

He let his gift fall into disuse. He had become timid. He had shown signs of being ashamed of Christ and Paul. He maybe was not holding firmly to sound doctrine. Maybe he was on the brink of turning away. In chapter two, verse one Paul begins by saying, "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. Be strong Timothy. Don't be weak in this time." In chapter three he begins by saying, "Realize this, that in the last day's difficult times will come. You have to expect it Timothy, it's going to be tough. You be strong. You hang on." In chapter four he starts out by saying, "I'm charging you solemnly in the presence of God and Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing in his kingdom preach the word. Don't let go of the word. Don't let go of your ministry. Don't fail. Be ready in season and out of season, reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and instruction, Timothy. Hang in there and be faithful."

Now with that background you come to verse nine. "Make every effort to come to me soon. Along with all the rest Demas has deserted me." Then in verse 21, "Make every effort to come before winter."

Let me tell you something. It wasn't just that Paul wanted some sweet fellowship with Timothy; Paul knew Timothy needed help, and Paul wanted him there because Paul wanted to exercise some real spiritual fellowship. And the wonderful end of the story is that Timothy in the end was faithful and strong and courageous and suffered willingly for the Gospel. But Paul wanted him there because Paul wanted to minister to him. Paul knew what Timothy's needs were and he knew that by the grace of God and the power of the spirit he could be the instrument to meet those needs. That's real fellowship.

Whenever it is that that believer needs, whatever it is that that brother or sister needs, if you have the opportunity to meet that need that is fellowship. That's how fellowship functions. It's basis? Salvation. It's nature? Sharing.

One other point for tonight, it's symbol. It's symbol. The Lord has given us a magnificent symbol of our common shared life. To understand what that is turn to 1 Corinthians 10, and this is but a brief point, but an important one. We've already alluded to it in the expression of fellowship in the early church, but in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 we read this. "Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a fellowship in the blood of Christ?" Literally koinonea. "Is not the bread which we break a fellowshiping in the body of Christ since there is one bread we who are many are one body for we all partake of the one bread."

Beloved, the symbol of our fellowship is the Lord's Table. It is the cup and it is the bread. That's the symbol. We share a common participation in Christ by salvation. We have in common our faith in Christ and his life in us and his spirit in us and his truth in us, and nothing celebrates that or symbolizes that like the Lord's Table. The church gathers at the Lord's Table to share in expressions of its common life. We all come to the Lord's Table as sinner forgiven, right? We all come to the Lord's Table acknowledging that our common life is based upon a common faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Communion then visualizes the fellowship. It symbolizes the fellowship. I'm not a sacramentalist, I'm not a sacerdotalist, I'm not somebody who wants to read more into the "sacraments" of the Lord's Table and baptism than the Bible allows. I'm not someone who would ever say that in baptism and in the Lord's Table there is some dispensing of saving grace or even that there is some dispensing of sanctifying grace. And I do not believe that God reveals himself in some supernatural manifestation in the elements of the communion, either literally or spiritually. And I do not believe that there is some revelation of God in a miraculous way in the waters of baptism. I'm unwilling to read into those ordinances any more than the Bible permits.

Both of them are symbols. Symbols of a spiritual reality, but in themselves they are only symbols and not the reality. The most that can be said for baptism is it is an act of obedience by which one is blessed in the same way that one would be blessed in any act of obedience. And the most that can be said about the Lord's Table in so far as its spiritual benefit is that it too is an act of obedience in which the believer is blessed and it too is a focusing on one's sinfulness and that blesses us when we seeing our sinfulness confess and repent of it.

But it is the repentance that brings the blessing. It is the obedience that brings the blessing. It is the remembrance of the death of Christ that excites the heart to worship that brings the blessing. It is not the sacrament itself mediating some supernatural grace. And so I want to make it clear that I am not one who will overstate the significance of these, but neither will I understate it. Baptism is essential and important because it is commanded in the Scripture and because it gives us opportunity to confess Christ before men which we are to do. Because it gives us the privilege of portraying the dramatic reality of being united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection as one goes into the water and comes out, and the Lord's Table is the same. As we take of the cup it is reminiscent of the blood of Christ which was given for us as he poured it out in death as a substitute for us on the cross and the cup I should say and the bread is his body which symbolizes of course his atoning work as a substitute, dying as man for man in our place.

It is the symbolism that is all the reality God ever intended. But when you come to the Lord's Table in that symbolism, you look face to face into the reality of our common life. We all get stripped down to the bare minimum at the Lord's Table, don't we? We're all sinners saved by grace. We all stand commonly at the foot of the cross. We've all come through the same route, the prompting of the spirit

of God who convicted us of sin and righteousness and judgment. We came under the conviction of sin, the Lord moved upon our hearts so that we in hearing the Gospel understood it, believed it, confessed faith in Christ, embraced in the savior, had our sins forgiven and we all came in the same way. We came in like children who have nothing to commend themselves and no record of achievement to offer God. We came to the foot of the cross as needy sinners all redeemed by Him, granted forgiveness by Him, and through love brought into his fellowship. The Lord's Table vividly celebrates this, and that is why the Lord's Table is so important in the life of the church because it just pulls us back to the substantial basis of our fellowship. All who can come to the table and eat and drink in a worthy manner because they have embraced Jesus Christ are part of the fellowship.

We all come, we all drink the cup, we all eat the bread. We are all confessing that we together have been redeemed through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and we celebrate that common redemption, that common eternal life, that common Holy Spirit, that common resurrection which some day we will all enjoy and then we will share together commonly in the presence of the Lord forever.

So back to chapter ten for a moment, verse 16. Now you understand what he means is not the cup of blessing which will bless a fellowship in the blood of Christ. Is not the bread which we break a fellowship in the body of Christ? Yes it is. It is the symbol of our fellowship. Paul ____ said a lot of things and wrote a lot of things that were kind of goofy when it comes to theology, but one thing he may have had right was when he said, "Fundamentalism has been the death of the sacraments." I suppose he would have certainly read more into them than I want to, but I do see today a diminishing of the centrality of the Lord's Table and I think that's to the great great danger of life in the church because I think there was a reason why the early church did this every day; a reason why they broke bread every day, why they came to the Lord's Table every day, because they were so enthralled with the work of Christ. They were so amazed and astonished and astounded at the meaning of the cross and so eager to deal with their own sins that it was a daily situation to come to the Lord's Table, confess your sin, and partake and thus to share your common life. The church needs to do that regularly so we never get too far away from that commonality.

A writer some years ago wrote of an individual he was absenting himself from the worship and from the Lord's Table. The pastor went to see him and after they had talked over the issues involved as they were sitting by an open fire, the pastor took the tongs from the hearth and separated the flaming coals in the fire and spread them around the outer circumference of the open grate. In a few moments the flames died down. In another few minutes the coals lost their brightness and grew ashen and dull. The pastor looked at his member and said, "Do you understand?" The man had grace and wisdom enough to say, "Yes, pastor, I understand." Then he took the tongs again and taking the coals from the outer edge of the grate he drew them all and piled them together, you know what happened. They had not been together many moments before they began to glow once more. They came up in flames and the fire was strong. Again the pastor looked at his erring member and said, "Do you understand? Do you? Let nothing divide you and your fellowship with your fellow

believer because you will both grow cold. Not only will you be the losers, but so will the integrity of the church. The flame will go down; the fires of revival will depart. We are together in Him and never more," said the pastor, "than at the Lord's Table. The nearer we come to the Lord at his table, the nearer we are to each other." That's the symbol of our fellowship.

I might say to you in closing that it is absolutely crucial for you to come together with the Lord's people regularly Sunday morning, Sunday night forsaking not the assembling of yourselves together and I thank the Lord for your obedience in that regard and I know that he will bless you life for it. You need to do that, you are doing that, and I thank God for that and you can count on his faithfulness to bless your faithfulness to him.

But may I say especially is it important that you gather when God's people come to his table so that you can be reminded again of that which is true of all of us; that we are damned sinners apart from coming to the foot of the cross and having that common forgiveness which Jesus provides for all who are penitent. The Lord's Table is the symbol. Sharing this, the nature and salvation is the basis of fellowship. While I didn't think I'd get through this today, next time there are three more. First of all I want to talk about the danger to our fellowship, and we'll do that next Lord's Day.

Father it is with a sense of grave responsibility that we submit ourselves to the Word. We understand its strong implications in our lives. We understand how essential it is for us to be obedient to it. And we hear it with seriousness. And we understand the duties of fellowship as binding. And when obeyed, as blessing, and when not obeyed, as leading to chastening, but Lord even as we think about that we are most mindful of the fact that this is not just duty. We thank you that the fellowship is not just a duty that we have to grit our teeth and perform but it is the sweetest of enterprises we can ever engage in for in it we minister in the power of your spirit on behalf of those we love, and more than that those whom you love.

Show us the duty of fellowship and the sweetness of it as well and may we enjoy both. One for the sake of blessing from you and the other for the sake of reciprocal joy and love from others, and may you be honored as we fellowship. In Christ's name, amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2015 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).