

The Fellowship of the Church
II Corinthians 13:11-14

INTRODUCTION

Fellowship is essential to the life of the church. Whatever destroys the fellowship destroys the church. This word is the translation of a rich Greek term, *koinonia*. The word means to share, to be partners. It was used in the Greek speaking world of the sharing and communion that a couple knows in marriage. It was used of a business partnership. It speaks of something that the church must know if the church is to survive.

Actually there are two dimensions in the word in the New Testament. It speaks of the sharing known between believer and believer. This is the human dimension of the fellowship of the church. The early Christians had all things in common. They shared with each other. They gave of their means, prayers, and life in the support of each other. But the word is used also of the sharing that we know between God and the believer. There is a fellowship, a communion that we know with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

As Paul comes to the conclusion of the Corinthian letter, his primary concern is with the fellowship of the church. Because the fellowship of the church is in jeopardy, the church itself is in jeopardy. Paul addresses this situation in a summary way as he gives a series of brief admonitions, and then closes with a moving benediction. In these we can see that the fellowship of the church is both a human work, and a divine gift. The human work is embodied in the admonitions. The divine work is expressed in the benediction.

We need this word. Everything we have found in our studies about First Baptist Church indicates that we must enrich the fellowship of the church if we are to impact our world effectively. If we will follow the counsel of this text it will lead to a better and richer fellowship for our church.

I. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH IS A HUMAN WORK.

There are things that you can do to enrich the fellowship of First Baptist Church. Your actions can effect both the human and the divine dimensions of the fellowship. Paul sets some of them before us in these imperative statements.

"Finally, brothers, goodbye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints send their greeting." These admonitions speak to the needs of the church that have been discussed in this letter.

"Goodbye" can be translated rejoice. This form of greeting was used in the Greek speaking world by almost everyone. We really do not have a term in English to translate the word. The idea is that of finding joy, or the things which bring joy. It is the same word translated in the Philippian letter, "Rejoice in the Lord." Someone has suggested the translation, "Let my last word to you be rejoice." It is a call for the expression of real joy. The attitude which you bring to the fellowship of the church can be so important. Some people are constantly

destroying the fellowship of the church by their negative, critical attitude. Nothing ever pleases them. They know no joy--so they give no joy. You need to evaluate --- what is my attitude doing to the fellowship of the church. Is it a brighter, happier place because I am here? Will my smile send someone away with a little sunshine in their lives?

"Aim for perfection." This statement calls for more than having a goal to be morally perfect. The word really calls on us to adjust the things that are wrong in such a way that the fellowship of the church will be enhanced. The word was used for the setting of bones that had been broken by the physician. We are to constantly be adjusting and restoring the things that might be broken so that the fellowship of the church may not be hindered. We must not tolerate broken relationships and hard feelings. They must be made right. If I have wronged someone, I can do the things that are necessary to make them right. If I see someone who is in the wrong, instead of judging him, I can lovingly, kindly, and meekly seem to be a part of the solution to the problem. Members who are acting in this way will be maintaining, yea enriching the fellowship of the church.

"Be of one mind." This does not call on us to all think alike. Rather it is a call for us to search for the common ground, to emphasize the things that we have in common. It is a call on us to give loving consideration to the point of view expressed by a brother, and an earnest attempt to understand why he feels the way he does about the matter. If we will give the time to do this, it will surprise you how much the circle of your fellowship can be enlarged.

"Live in peace". This surely fits in with what our Lord said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." Paul adds, "And the God of love and peace will be with you." Peace is absolutely essential if the church is to have fellowship, A church filled with hostility and broken relationships will not know true fellowship. Let me ask a probing question. Are there members of this church that you are avoiding? Why? Is it because there is hostility in your heart toward them? This must become a matter of concern to you. As long as it depends upon you, there must be a peaceful, harmonious relationship with every member of the body.

Then the Apostle adds an interesting little admonition. "Greet one another with a holy kiss." In both the Greek and Jewish culture, the men kissed the men, and the women kissed the women in such a greeting. They did this in the synagogue, and later in the church. it had much the same significance as the modern "handshake". To withhold the kiss was a sign of a broken relationship, and to give it was a sign of acceptance and love. There needs to be visible expressions of love if the church is truly to know New Testament fellowship. Some of us are negligent of this. In our haste we never take the time to express our love and affirmation to each other. We need at least a good handshake and greeting when we come to the house of God.

These things are a part of the human work in building the fellowship of the church.

II. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH IS A DIVINE GIFT

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." This is probably the most familiar verse of the whole epistle. It is famous for its practical indications about Paul's belief in God as Trinity. Without hesitation, in his prayer, Paul addresses God as Lord Jesus, God, and Holy Spirit.

This benediction follows the order of human experience. We first experience grace, then love, then fellowship. You do not know fellowship until you have first known grace. Also we first come to know the Lord Jesus, then we know the Father and the Holy Spirit. Let us look at each of these in some detail, keeping in mind that they indicate to us that fellowship is the gift of God.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is the point of beginning. By the use of the full name and title of our Lord, the Apostle calls attention of the greatness of the grace. "Lord" identifies Him as man. "Christ" identifies His mission as One sent by the Father. Grace is all that He does to remove the barriers between God and man, and to enable man to become what God desires for man to be. Grace is God's generosity being expressed toward us.

Guilt is one of the great barriers to fellowship. It is the great barrier between us and God. It is the great barrier between man and man. As long as I carry a load of guilt, I am afraid to share too much with you lest you learn the truth about me, and judge me. I must keep those parts of my life hidden from you. Only a rich experience of the grace of God can remove those barriers making fellowship possible. Whenever you find a person experiencing fellowship with God and with others, you can know that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ has been experienced in the life.

"The love of God" comes next. God's love is there all of the time for His love is eternal, but my perception of the love of God is not there all the time. You will never be able to convince me that I am loved of God until the sin and guilt has been removed. Once I experience the grace of God in the removal of sin, then I am in a position to affirm that I am beloved to God Himself. Until I know that I am loved of God, I will not be able to give you the love that is necessary for me to have Christian fellowship with you. How can I share with you if I do not know that I am loved of God. The Apostle touches on one of the greatest realities of life here. There can be no true fellowship, until I am loved--that is, until I know that I am loved!

"The fellowship of the Holy Spirit" comes last in the experience. Like the others this should be considered as the fellowship which the Holy gives. It includes both dimensions of the fellowship of the church. When I know that I am loved, then the Holy Spirit can give me the gift of fellowship, partnership, spiritual sharing, with my fellow believers in the church. There will be no fellowship until there has been the knowledge of grace and love. At the same time it is by the ministry

of the Holy Spirit that I experience the sense of oneness with God, the communion with God that we call fellowship.

This is not an admonition, but a prayer, a benediction. It expresses the deep-heart felt longing of the Apostle. Interestingly it is for "all" of the members of that troubled Corinthian church. Paul does exclude those who have excluded him. He knows that this would be the answer to the problems of that troubled church. Would this not be the answer to our problems? What we need is a fellowship in which we can be helpful and healing toward each other. We need a place where we can come with our bruises and hurts and find help. This is what the church needs to be, and will be when we have the fellowship that God desires. Do we not need to be the kind of people that will attraction of real fellowship. This is what they are looking for whether they know . it or not. It is the gift and provision of our God for His Church.

CONCLUSION:

We must heed the admonitions, and pray this prayer for our church. As we do, we will experience together fellowship that is like to that of heaven above.