

Sonship, Fellowship, Partnership

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—I John 1:3

AS THE YEAR 2012 OPENS

before us, it is appropriate that we review the important subject of Christian fellowship. From our theme text, we learn that this relationship is of a threefold nature. It is with our Heavenly Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and our brethren in Christ, each one of whom enjoys the same blessed fellowship with the Father and the Son. When we view the world around us—its cares, troubles, and seemingly endless distractions—it is more important now than ever before that the true Christian take full advantage of these blessed relationships.

The word “fellowship,” as ordinarily used, does not fully convey the depth of meaning which the

Apostle John would have us grasp as to what is comprehended in the blessed association that is ours in the divine family. The Greek word translated “fellowship” in this text literally means “partnership.” John is thus pointing to the fact that the dedicated followers of the Master have entered into a partnership with the Heavenly Father and with his Son, as well as with other members of the body of Christ.

We are accustomed to thinking of the Heavenly Father as a loving parent who supplies all our needs. We rejoice in the glorious assurance of his Word that while we were yet sinners he sent his beloved Son to die for us, and thus provided for our reconciliation with him. John, however, takes us beyond the point of our merely being recipients of divine favors and assures us that there is a possibility of our being partners with God. This is an important truth, and it is difficult to grasp the reality of what this really means.

In divine providence, it seems to have been the Apostle John’s mission to introduce the church to much of the depth of truth concerning this partnership with God, particularly as it relates to our being members of the divine family. In his first epistle, the Apostle Peter enlarges upon this from the standpoint of the church’s share in the sufferings of Christ and the consequent hope of participating in his glory. Peter said, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: But rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy.”—I Pet. 4:12,13

The Apostle Paul also speaks of this from the standpoint of our partnership in the sufferings of Christ, and of being co-workers with God. (II Cor. 6:1) It is the Apostle John, however, who approaches the subject more particularly from the standpoint of our being members of the family of God as his sons, who are partners in the outworking of his divine plan of salvation.

The hope of sonship was evidently a very blessed one to John. He wrote, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God." (I John 3:1) This great truth is a demonstration of special favor from the Heavenly Father. John further saw that this favor makes possible the exaltation of those who formerly were sinners, condemned to death, to a position in the divine family as sons of God and his partners in the divine cause of restoring the condemned world of mankind to life.

In the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus is presented to us as the great King of promise, as the Messiah of the prophecies, and as the Son of man. Not until we come to the gospel of John do we learn much about his sonship. While we may often, and properly, think of John as the apostle of love, he was also a theologian, and a very exact one. When introducing Jesus to us as the Son of God, he exercises great care in explaining who Jesus was and how, as the Word of God [Greek, *Logos*], he was made flesh and dwelt among us. He explains also that the *Logos* was "the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."—John 1:1-14

A BASIC DOCTRINE

John was very staunch in stressing the importance of this doctrine. Not only did he purposely outline in detail just how Jesus, as the Son of God, was made flesh, but he emphatically stated that any doctrine which was not in harmony with this great truth was not of God. (I John 4:1-3) Thus we see that, while he recognized the fundamental importance of the operation of divine love among the people of God, he was not willing to gloss over the evil influences of false doctrines in the church. He was not willing, in the name of love, to advocate the faith-destroying policy of nominal churchianity which implies that it does not make much difference what we believe as long as we live uprightly.

The teaching that Jesus was the Son of God was strong meat for the Jews, and the majority of them were not able to accept it. This doctrine was one of the points of controversy during the days of Jesus' earthly ministry and doubtless continued to be for some time thereafter, especially where the Jewish influence was strong in the church. In John 10:33, the apostle quotes the Jews as saying to the Master, "For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because thou, being a man, makest thyself God." Jesus had not said he was God. Later, he stated clearly that "my Father is greater than I" (chap. 14:28), but even after this explanation many Jews condemned him for claiming to be God's son. (chap. 19:7) Here then, was one of the vital issues in Jesus' day which had such an important bearing on whether or not one became a true follower of the Master.

While John's insistence on the fact that Jesus was the Son of God constituted him in the eyes of the Jewish people generally a teacher of blasphemy, he did not stop with the identification of Jesus as the Son of God. He added that as many as received Jesus "to them gave he power [also] to become the sons of God." (John 1:11,12) If it was difficult for the Jewish mind to become reconciled to the thought that Jesus, the undefiled one, was a Son of God, how much more difficult it would be to accept the inspired statement of John that by divine grace even members of the fallen, sin-cursed race may become children of God.

NOT NOW UNDERSTOOD

Today all of Christendom applies the term "Son of God" to Jesus. Additionally, the thought of sonship as related to God is many times applied to all mankind in the expression, "universal fatherhood of God, and brotherhood of man." This is an erroneous thought. Such a viewpoint was not generally held among mankind in the days of the Early Church. It must have required great courage on the part of John to advocate the teaching that sonship with God was possible for man under certain conditions, because it was so opposed to the popular conception of religion in his day. So we wonder if today, among those who are rejoicing in the light of present Truth, all the blessed implications of this sonship doctrine are fully appreciated, including the privilege of our being partners with our Heavenly Father.

Being sons of God implies more than the thought of being redeemed from death by Jesus, and this is

brought to our attention by Jesus himself. The Master was replying to the Jewish charge that he was a blasphemer, and asks, "Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? If he called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; Say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world, Thou blasphemest; because I said, I am the Son of God?"—John 10:34-36

Jesus' quotation, "Ye are gods," is from Psalm 82:6, and he tells us that this prophecy applies to those to whom the Word of God was given. Identifying these, John quotes Jesus as saying in prayer concerning his disciples, "I have given them thy word." (John 17:14) Not only was the Word of God given by Jesus to his immediate disciples, but also to all those who believed on him through their testimony. (vs. 20) What a powerful argument Jesus thus used to offset the charge of blasphemy leveled against him by the religious leaders of his day. If the Heavenly Father identified as gods those members of the sinful race who became disciples of Jesus, why should they think it strange that this one whom they despised should himself claim to be the Son of God? However, the Jewish leaders were not prepared for truth of this sort, either as it applied to Jesus or to his disciples.

After explaining that it was the Father's purpose to induct into the divine family those who truly believed on him, Jesus added, "I and my Father are one." (chap. 10:30) In John 17:20-24, where Jesus makes the interests of his disciples a matter of earnest prayer, he petitions the Father to continue the work of sanctification in their lives that they may

become one, even as he and the Father were one. It is thus clear from Jesus' words that he spoke of this as a oneness, not of person, but of purpose and desire and work. It would be upon the basis of this oneness that his disciples ultimately might share his glory and be with him—"where I am." All of this must have impressed itself deeply upon the Apostle John, for when he wrote his epistle, he said, "It doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is."—I John 3:2

It is this same apostle who records the Master's promise to prepare a place for his disciples, and after preparing this place, to come again and receive them unto himself, "that where I am, there ye may be also." (John 14:2,3) The apostle continues to emphasize the fact that this glorious partnership with the Father and with the Son is dependent upon belief in, and obedience to, the Word of God which reaches us through Jesus.

OF GLORY AND WORKS

John not only points out to us our sonship privileges in the divine partnership and that the overcomers are to share in the divine glory, but he also gleaned from the teachings of Jesus the fact that there is a purpose behind this partnership, and a work to be accomplished. He quotes Jesus as saying, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do." (vs. 12) How glorious is the thought that we should be partners with God and with Jesus in doing these works.

Jesus said, "Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works." (John 14:10) From this, we see that even the works which Jesus did were not his own works. He was merely performing the works of his Father as a partner with him. Then comes the astounding information in the text previously quoted, that those who truly believe on him shall likewise do these same works. They will do even greater works than had up to that time been performed by the Master. What a wonderful partnership is shown.

Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead. In God's due time the church will share with him in restoring the whole dead world to life. Jesus was commissioned to proclaim the Word of life. God has likewise given to us "the word of reconciliation." (II Cor. 5:17-21; 6:1) Jesus suffered and died. It is our privilege also to suffer and to die with him by living a life of sacrifice. It is this that Paul emphasized when he wrote of the "fellowship [partnership] of his sufferings."—Phil. 3:10

When an earthly partnership is formed for the purpose of carrying out some business project, it is essential that those who are parties to the covenant are agreed as to its implications and are fully prepared to carry out its terms. How immeasurably this applies to our partnership with the Heavenly Father and with his Son. If we think of "fellowship" as involving merely the exchange of thoughts pertaining to the teachings of the Bible, then one's outlook could be quite different as to what constitutes the basis of that fellowship. However, when

we realize that fellowship really means a partnership with one another based upon our partnership with God in the carrying out of the divine plan, it behooves us all to look well to the Word of God. We are to make sure that we are so conforming our lives to the terms of the partnership that we will continue to be worthy of the high favor of God which constitutes us his sons and co-workers.

THE MESSAGE

The apostle summarizes the significance of the truths which he had learned from the life and teachings of Jesus, and wrote, "This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." (I John 1:5) From this, John concludes, "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."—vss. 6,7

The word "light," as used here, is synonymous with truth. Pilate asked Jesus the question, "What is truth?" (John 18:38) If we should ask the question today as to what is light, the answer would be the same as that which Jesus gives us in John 17:17, "Thy word is truth." It is God's Word that provides the revelation of truth, or light, pertaining to his plan for the salvation of the human race from sin and death. Many centuries earlier, David had confirmed the relationship between God's word and light, when he wrote, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."—Ps. 119:105

This Truth, or light of God, reaches us through two closely allied channels—the written Word and the living Word. The written Word we find in the record of the Bible. The living Word we have in the life and example of Jesus. Jesus' perfect interpretation and application of the written Word, through his teachings and life, is one of the primary means by which we are now able to comprehend the will of God and endeavor to follow in his footsteps. John wrote, "In him was life; and the life was the light of men."—John 1:4

Jesus had life because he was wholly at one with the Father. As the *Logos* he was an obedient Son of God, and after being made flesh, he continued to be obedient. Hence, Jesus possessed life by virtue of his obedience to the divine will, and he is the light of men; that is, his obedience reveals the manner in which others also may have life. The psalmist wrote, "In his [God's] favour is life." (Ps. 30:5) The fact that Jesus had life was evidence that he was in the favor of God. He was in God's favor because he was obedient to him. This is the only basis upon which anyone can have God's favor and live.

SANCTIFIED BY THE TRUTH

Jesus prayed on behalf of his disciples, saying, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth." (John 17:17-19) Here is revealed the manner by which Jesus' oneness with the Father was established and maintained. It was through the sanctifying power of the Truth.

This Truth had been recorded by the writers of the Old Testament scriptures as they were inspired by God's Holy Spirit. When Jesus entered into his covenant of sacrifice with his Father, he agreed to do all that was written of him in the "volume of the book." (Heb. 10:7) By living up to this agreement, he became sanctified, or set apart, to perform his share in the glorious partnership he enjoyed with the Father. Thus was he not only faithful himself, but by his faithfulness he pointed out the way for us similarly to be wholly set apart to the carrying out of our partnership contract.

If we walk in the light which emanates from God through his written Word and which is exemplified by Jesus as the living Word, we have fellowship and partnership one with another. (I John 1:7) What a blessed partnership this is! Concerning one phase of it, Jesus said, "As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world." (John 17:18) Can we grasp the reality of the partnership expressed by these words? Perhaps we cannot do so as fully as we ought, but certainly they imply the glorious privilege of being co-workers with the Father in the reconciliation and salvation of the world.

THROUGH THE BLOOD

The apostle seemed to anticipate the test that would be placed upon our faith to believe that we actually have a part in the great divine program that is being worked out through Christ. Hence, after assuring us that if we do walk in the light we enjoy this wondrous partnership in the divine family, he is quick to add that the "blood of Jesus Christ

his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” (I John 1:7) Thus we are placed in a position of holiness before the Lord wherein our labor and sacrifice are acceptable to him. In the next chapter of his epistle, John confirms this, saying of Jesus that “he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our’s only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” (I John 2:2) This means that, even though we are by nature sinners, we can actually become “gods, sons of the Highest,” and partners with him through the blood of Jesus.

To walk in the light and be sanctified by the Truth requires obedience. John wrote, “He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.” (I John 2:4) To this, John adds, “But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.” (vs. 5) Here John associates the thought of obeying the Word of God—the Truth—with the development of divine love in our lives and the manner in which that love should operate among those who claim to be in this glorious partnership with the Father. He sums up the thought by saying, “He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.”—vss. 10,11

We read in John 3:16 that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” From this, we can see that love was the motivating principle in the partnership

existing between the Heavenly Father and his beloved Son. Jesus prayed, "As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world." (chap. 17:18) Just as it was love which prompted the Heavenly Father to send Jesus into the world, it was love which prompted the sending of Jesus' disciples into the world to be his ambassadors. Love is clearly seen to be the motivating power in this wonderful partnership of the Father, the Son, and his body members.

LIGHT REVEALS LOVE

The terms "light" and "love" are closely related. True light, the light in which God dwells, the light which constitutes his will for us, reveals the divine principle of love as being the motivating power of the entire plan of salvation. This being true, failure to imbibe the spirit of love from the knowledge of the Truth would imply a disobedience to the light, a contradiction of the great objective of the whole divine plan in which one is called to be a partner.

The applications and manifestations of divine love must be governed by the terms of our partnership if we are to be wholly faithful. John exercised love in his dealings with the brethren, but he did not hesitate to call attention to the fact that there were in the company of the believers of his day those who subverted the Truth. He also pointed out that there were false prophets and that it was necessary to "try the spirits," or doctrines, that they might know whether or not they were of God. (I John 2:18,19; 4:1-3) True love for the brethren at times requires that an alarm be sounded when they are in danger because of doctrinal error.

The divine love that should permeate every phase of our fellowship with the Father, with the Son, and with one another, is a love that leads to sacrifice and to a laying down of our lives for the brethren. Indeed, this spirit of sacrificial love is the very essence of our partnership in the work of God. John wrote that Christ “laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.” (I John 3:16) He further stated, “We have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.”—chap. 4:16

Let us be ever mindful as we begin another year in the school of Christ of the glorious privilege, and its accompanying responsibilities, of sonship, fellowship, and partnership with God, his son Jesus Christ, and the fellow body members of the church.

“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.”—I John 1:3 ■