

Living in Fellowship: Invitation to Fellowship

1 John 1:1-4

Today we begin a series of lessons on the New Testament book of 1 John. The letter that we are going to begin a study of today was written by John, the apostle, son of Zebedee, one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. He was known as **"the disciple whom Jesus loved"** (Jn. 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 20) because of his especially close relationship with Jesus. Church historians tell us that later in his life John lived in the city of Ephesus and served as pastor in the church there. He wrote the Gospel of John, three letters (I, II, III John) and the book of Revelation. He spent several years exiled on the isle of Patmos for his beliefs. The apostle John probably wrote this letter late in his life near the end of the first century when he would have been pushing ninety years of age.

Picture with me this grizzled old apostle. His eyes are weak. His hands ache from arthritis. Yet his spirit burns brighter than ever. His heart is full of the love of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit comes upon him and he sits down with pen and ink at a crude desk and begins to write a message, a letter. John's letter is an invitation, an invitation to fellowship.

Here at New Covenant Baptist Church we have an understanding of fellowship. There is a wonderful spirit of love and cooperation in our church. We minister to each other. We meet each other's needs. We also offer an invitation for others to come and be part of us.

Don Graham writes about a young woman named Linda who was traveling alone up the rutted and rugged highway from Alberta to the Yukon in the fall of the year. Linda didn't know you don't travel to Whitehorse alone in a rundown Honda Civic, so she set off where only four-wheel drives normally venture. The first evening she found a room in the mountains near a summit and asked for a 5 A.M. wakeup call so she could get an early start.

She awoke to early morning fog shrouding the mountaintops. She went to breakfast where two truckers invited her to join them. Since the place was so small, she felt obliged. **"Where are you headed?"** one of the truckers asked. **"Whitehorse."** **"In that little Civic? No way! This pass is too dangerous in weather like this."** **"Well, I'm determined to try,"** was Linda's gutsy response. **"Then I guess we're just going to have to hug you,"** the trucker suggested. Linda drew back. **"There's no way I'm going to let you touch me!"** **"Not like THAT!"** the truckers chuckled. **"We'll put one truck in front of you and one in the rear. In that way, we'll get you through the mountains."** All that foggy morning Linda followed the two red dots in front of her and had the reassurance of a big escort behind as they made their way safely through the mountains.

Caught in the fog in our dangerous passage through life, we all need to be "hugged" in that way. Fellowship is sharing a common life together, and that common life is Jesus.

John's invites us to fellowship, to share a common life. He invites us in v.3 to **"have fellowship with us and truly our fellowship is with the Father and His**

Son Jesus Christ." Fellowship is two ways: VERTICAL fellowship with God and HORIZONTAL fellowship with His people.

Just like in his gospel, John tells us exactly the purpose for his writing this letter. In fact he gives us four purposes:

1. That we may have joy: **"And these things we write to you that your joy may be full."** (1 John 1:4 NKJV).
2. That we would not sin: **"My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."** (1 John 2:1 NKJV).
3. That we may know we are saved: **"These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life."** (1 John 5:13 NKJV).

Those are the positive reasons for John's letter. There is also a negative one. John also writes to correct error.

4. That we would not be deceived. **"These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you."** (1 John 2:26).

When John wrote this letter from Ephesus the early church was rapidly expanding. At this same time there was a growing belief system known as Gnosticism. From the Greek word *gnosis* meaning "knowledge," the Gnostics claimed to have special, secret knowledge ordinary Christians lacked.

They believed that the material world, including the human body was evil and that spiritual world was pure and good. They denied the Incarnation and Atonement of Jesus. They claimed Jesus was an inspired teacher who had a greater understanding of secret knowledge, spiritual powers and mystical moments. They considered the beliefs of the ordinary Christian to be crude, backward and superstitious. Though Gnosticism as a religion has long since faded, its fragments can be seen in the liberalism, modernism and New Age philosophies so prevalent today. John wanted believers to walk in fellowship of truth.

John is the 'no middle ground' apostle. He explains reality in dichotomy. You are either in light or darkness; a child of God or a child of the devil; and you either love your brother or hate your brother. John has neither the time nor the inclination to beat around bushes or play games. Souls are in jeopardy, truth is being challenged, the church is being assailed, and Christ is being dethroned by those who were perpetrating both philosophical and theological lies. (Cleavon Matthews, SermonCentral.com)

There are a number of similarities and contrasts between the Gospel of John and the letter of 1 John. For example, the gospel places the emphasis on salvation; the epistle's emphasis is on sanctification. The gospel focuses on the events of Jesus' life; the epistle focuses on our lives today. The main message of the gospel is that Jesus died for us; the message of the epistle is that Jesus lives in us. The gospel tells us that the Word was made flesh; the epistle tells us that the Word was made real in us.

The fellowship we have today with God and His people is precious. John doesn't want us to take it for granted. He invites us to partake deeply of this fellowship for five reasons.

I. Our Fellowship is Eternal (v.1a).

A. Our Fellowship is not New.

When John first penned this letter, at the end of the 1st century, there were those who were teaching a "new thing." These false teachers thought it necessary to leave behind the apostles' doctrine and to pursue new "truth."

John, on the other hand tells us to go back to basics, back to the beginning. In v.1, John speaks of **"that which was from the beginning... concerning the Word of life."**

One scholar says **"that which was from the beginning...concerning the Word of life"** means *"what has always from the beginning been true about the Word of life"* (Dodd).

In other words, John does not give us something that is new or novel. He does not introduce a new innovation or a divine afterthought. Rather, he faithfully proclaims what has always been true about God and His one and only Son Jesus Christ.

B. Our Fellowship began in Eternity Past.

What is meant by **"from the beginning?"** Some say it means the beginning of the gospel, or when Jesus came to earth, or the beginning of the Christian era. However, when compared with other verses in 1 John and the fourth gospel, I think it is evident that John refers to the beginning of time as we understand it.

There are three books of the Bible that begin with these similar words: Gen.1:1 says, **"In the beginning God..."** Jn.1:1-2 says, **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God."** And now 1 John 1:1 says, **"that which was from the beginning... concerning the Word of life."**

The message that we proclaim, the gospel that we believe, the Savior in whom we trust is eternal. He has always been! V.2 reminds us that in Jesus **"eternal life... was with the Father."**

But not only is Jesus Christ eternal, but He is also historical.

II. Our Fellowship is Historical (v.1b).

Jesus, **"the Word of life"** has been **"from the beginning."** He is eternal. Yet the eternal Word entered human history at the fullness of times. God became man and dwelt among us.

John was one of the eyewitnesses of His majesty. He says in John 1:14, **"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."**

Here John tells us 3 ways our fellowship is verified historically.

A. The Apostles heard Him.

1. John speaks of Jesus "**which we have heard**" in v.1. Imagine what it must have been like to hear Jesus speak the words we now read 2000 years later.

2. John first heard Jesus call him and his brother to abandon their fishing business and become "**fishers of men.**" "**Immediately**" they followed Him (Mt.4:19-20).

John heard Jesus speak! He did not get the word second hand. He didn't read His words in a book. He heard Him speak with his own ears!

He heard Jesus say to the questioning Jews, "**Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.**"

He heard Him say to Nicodemus "**Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.**"

John heard Jesus say the most significant words ever uttered, "**For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.**"

He heard Him say "**lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!**"

He heard Him say, "**Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.**"

He heard Him say, "**I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.**"

He heard Him say, "**I am the light of the world. He who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life.**"

He heard Him say, "**If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.**"

He heard Jesus say, 'if you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.'

He heard Him say, "**I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture.**"

He heard Him say, "**I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.**"

He heard Him say, "**I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.**"

He heard Him say about His death, "**And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.**"

He heard Jesus say, "**A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.**"

He heard Him say, **"Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you."**

He heard Him say, **"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."**

He heard Jesus say, **"These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."**

John heard Jesus speak from the cross. Jesus said to his mother, Mary, **"Woman, behold your son!"** He said to John, **"Behold your mother!"** (Jn.19:26, 27). He heard Him cry out victoriously, **"It is finished!"** (v.30).

When John first saw Jesus in His resurrected glory, he heard Him say, **"Peace to you! As the Father has sent me, I also send you"** (Jn.20:21).

John and the other apostles heard Jesus. And John records their response to the words of Jesus when in the gospel of John 6:68 Peter says, **"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. Also we have come to believe and know that You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."**

B. The Apostles Saw Him.

John describes seeing Jesus in two ways in v.1. He says first, **"which we have seen with our eyes."** They witnessed Him in the flesh. Second, they **"looked upon"** Him. This means "to look deeply, to study," like a fine painting or beautiful landscape.

John saw Jesus heal all manner of ailments. He saw Jesus give sight to the blind, he saw the lame made to walk, lepers made clean and he even saw Jesus raise the dead to life. John saw Jesus defy nature. He saw Him walk on water. He saw Him calm the storm. He saw Him turn water to wine. He saw Him feed the multitudes. He saw Jesus take little children in His arms and bless them.

John saw Jesus transfigured in glory on the mountain, talking with Moses and Elijah.

John saw Him in righteous indignation cleanse the temple.

John saw Him falsely tried, beaten and hung on a cross. He saw Him suffer with our sins for six hours and then he saw Him die.

But John also saw the empty tomb! John saw Jesus alive, raised from the dead. He saw him in the upper room and on the beach in Galilee. John saw Him ascend into the clouds back into heaven.

John records Jesus words to Thomas in Jn.20:29, **"Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

C. The Apostles Touched Him.

John further says in v.1 **"our hands have handled"** him. John had physically touched Jesus. John, **"the disciple whom He loved"** had his feet washed by

Jesus at the Last Supper. There he **"leaned on His breast at the supper"** (Jn.21:20).

Like the other disciples, John touched His resurrected body putting his fingers in the nail wounds.

To the false teachers who denied that Jesus really lived in a fleshly body, John could say, **"God appeared in the flesh and I know because I touched Him and He touched me!"**

John could say, "Jesus is real. He is not just something we made up so we could start a religion or so we could have church." Peter puts it this way, **"For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of His majesty."**

III. Our Fellowship is Shared (v.2).

A. John was a Reliable Eyewitness.

John says in v.2, **"The life [of Jesus] was manifested [made known] and we have seen and bear witness."** It is as though John is testifying as a key witness in a trial. True witnesses don't speak of what they've heard second-hand but what they've seen first-hand.

B. John was a Messenger.

Not only did John **"bear witness"** but also says we **"declare."** **"Declare"** means "to proclaim or announce." They declared **"that eternal life which was with the Father... was manifested to us."** 1900 years later we continue John's mission, announcing eternal life through Jesus.

IV. Our Fellowship is Intimate (v.3).

A. We have Intimate Horizontal Fellowship.

In v.3, John tells us why that which the apostles **"have seen and heard"** they **"declare"** or proclaim to others... **"that you also may have fellowship with us."**

The original 12 had their share of petty human squabbles as any group would. However, imagine the depth of their relationships in the early days of the church as the Holy Spirit came to live within them. Imagine the bonds forged in the eternal flame of God's love. Above all, they wanted to share this with others.

"Fellowship" or *koinonia* means "partnership" and even more literally "sharing." **"Fellowship"** is not just a potluck dinner. Fellowship is the giving and receiving our lives with one another.

I don't know how I would live without the fellowship of our church. I couldn't make it without the fellowship of my brothers and sisters in Christ's body both here and around the world. As I said last week, Christianity is a **"one another"** religion.

B. We have Intimate Vertical Fellowship.

John says that he wants to have fellowship with his readers because **"truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ."**

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said this about our fellowship, *"Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us. What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ."* (Quoted in Foster, Devotional Classics.)

The only true fellowship is what we share in Jesus Christ. A. W. Tozer put it this way, "One hundred worshipers meeting together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become "unity-conscious" and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship." - in THE PURSUIT OF GOD

John recorded Jesus' great high priestly prayer in his gospel, chapter 17. Let's examine part of it in **Jn.17:20-21**, **"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me."** When we have a "oneness" with the Lord, we will have "oneness" with each other.

V. Our Fellowship is Joyful (v.4).

Last, John says, **"And these things we write to you that your joy may be full."** John recorded Jesus' word in Jn.15:11, **"These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full."** This kind of joy Jesus said in Jn16:22 **"...no one will take from you."**

Peter wrote, **"...whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory"** (1 Pet.1:8).

Someone said, *"Joy is the flag that flies over the castle of our hearts announcing that the King is in residence."* How high is your flag flying?

Here's your invitation. Come and fellowship with the eternal God and His family.

1. Christ, our Life, has eternally existed with the Father.
2. Christ, our Life, was manifested in the flesh.
3. Through this incarnation we obtain fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.
4. Therefore we should make the Biblical understanding of Christ the basis of the fellowship with other believers.
5. And we should seek to draw others into this fellowship because we long for the fullness of joy that comes when others share the delight we have in the fellowship of the Father and the Son.

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