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"This is the Message... Fellowship"

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 1 John 1:1-2:1.

John uses the phrase 'This is' ten times in his brief letter, and the first of his identification of things is this one in verse five: "This is the message which we have heard from him". And if you look to see what the message is, you will see that it focuses upon one word, a word which is repeatedly used in the first part of the letter. It is the word 'fellowship'. It occurs twice in verse three, again in verse six, and again in verse seven; and the recurrence of this word indicates that here is something about which the Apostle is evidently greatly concerned in relation to believers.

The main issue with which John was concerned, in his Gospel, in his Letters, and in his great Apocalypse - the Book of the Revelation, the supreme, inclusive issue was this matter of life. I suggest that you read even the Book of the Revelation with that word in mind, and you will be tremendously impressed. This is the issue all the way through. It is the matter of livingness. Early in that book you have the "living creatures" (Rev. 4:6) and "the Spirit of life" (Rev. 11:11). The book closes with "the river of water of life" (Rev. 22:1), "the tree of life" (Rev. 22:2), and so on.

It is quite evident that the question, or the issue, with which John was so greatly concerned for believers, was not that they should *have* life - that was the object of his Gospel, but that they should *know*, that is, live continually in the consciousness of possessing this life. So he says: "That ye may *know* that ye have eternal life" (1 John 5:13).

Now you may see how he links these two things together at the outset. He will link other things with the matter of life as he goes on with his letter, but right at the outset, in this first section, he links the matter of fellowship with life. These two things are brought together, and it is as though he were saying - indeed, he is saying in other words: 'Life is a matter of fellowship and fellowship is a matter of life.'

A Family Fellowship

And what is the nature of this fellowship? Well, it is quite evidently a family fellowship, because you notice it is: "Our fellowship is with the *Father*, and with his *Son*". And then John says: "My little *children*". So it is quite a family thing: Father, Son and little children; Father, Son and the rest of the family. It is a family fellowship.

And what again does that mean? It is, of course, a nice word, a pleasant idea, but a family is built upon one life; just constituted by one life, isn't it? The great trust of life has been fulfilled, for life is a trust. It is something committed for transmission, for passing on, for reproduction. That great trust of life has been fulfilled, and the family is the result of the letting go, the giving up of life, the distribution of life. So that every member of a true family is a part of one life, all sharing a single life. In every one there is the same life. It will manifest itself in different ways, and, of course, that is the mystery and wonder of life. We cannot stay with that, interesting and instructive as it is, but in a family you have so great a variety, all from the one source, from the one life - variety of disposition, temperament, and so on, all in one family. But it is one life expressing itself in many ways.

The Lord's family is like that. Sometimes we are rather inclined to want all the members of the family to be exactly alike, to think the same thing and do the same thing. Really we want them uniform, but the Lord does not do it like that, either in the natural creation or in the family. That does not alter the fact that it is His own one life in all expressing itself in a multitude of different ways, but all coming from the one source. It is a family life. We all, therefore, share the life of the Father through the Son, and we are the little children - and God forbid that we should ever be more than little children in the family, that is, in spirit! There is a growing up, there is such a thing as maturity, but it is a good thing that however old we are in this Christian life and experience, however much we have learnt, we are still there where we know that we still have everything to learn, that we are only at the beginning of things. That is a good mark. It is a very bad mark when anyone in the family thinks he knows it all! That upsets the family, doesn't it? It just ruins everything if any think they know - they have no need to learn anything else, they have got it all, they know it all. Oh! that spiritual pride has been the cause of many divisions. However, that is by the way.

Here we are with this fellowship, and we want to compress into a short space a little on two matters in this very connection.

First of all, this fellowship just dates right back to God's eternal, primary desire to share His life, and by thus sharing it to have fellowship between His creation and Himself; just clear, pure, open, unsullied fellowship between Himself and man, between man and Himself. Is not that the first picture of the relationship of man with God? In the garden they walked in the cool of the evening, in blessed fellowship; God and the man whom He had made. That fellowship was something very precious to the Lord. We cannot understand why God, all self-sufficient, so full and so wonderful and so mighty, and, in a sense, so absolutely independent and sovereign, should find this in His heart, to have a creation with which He could have this kind of fellowship, as Father with a family. But there it

is. That is what the Bible reveals as God's desire at the beginning. And this fellowship of which John is speaking just dates right back to that. You see, "our fellowship is with the Father" - that takes up the eternal thought and desire of God and brings it here right into expression amongst the Lord's children now.

Fellowship the Foundation of All

Now then, the very first thing in the Christian life is this matter of fellowship, union with God. The strain has gone, the breach has gone, the distance has gone, the isolation has gone, and everything that kept God and us apart has gone when we come into what we call 'new birth'. When we are begotten of God and born of the Spirit, then it is union with God. That is the foundation of everything. Let it be clearly understood that that is not only just an act which is carried out and finished, but it is the very basis and foundation upon which God is going to do everything. All God's hopes are bound up with that. All God's intentions are bound up with that. All God's purposes are bound up with that. All God's interests for time and for eternity are based upon this fellowship-union between Himself and His children, and His children and Himself. That is why this is such a battle, because God has vested in this very thing *everything* for which He hopes, and *everything* that He has purposed and planned He has just vested in this. It is God's great investment. And you know, when you come to the end of the Old Testament you find that the prophets are in a state of Divine distress because God has lost His family. The great word that governs those prophetic utterances is that God has been robbed of something. God has been robbed; something upon which He placed so much importance, indeed, upon which everything hung, has been stolen from God. God has been robbed of it. This family relationship between Himself and His people, has been stolen from Him. Therefore God in a sense is in desolation until that is recovered, and His people are also in desolation until that relationship is recovered and restored and re-established.

This is what John, by the Spirit, is talking about, saying that God has done something in us in bringing about a union. But it does not end there. All God's investment is in that union. He has invested all His hopes, all His purposes, all His expectations, all His interests in this union, this fellowship-union with Himself. All that we are ever going to come into, dear friends, of those great purposes and designs of God is going to be on this basis of our fellowship with God, our maintained fellowship with God. God works on that basis. Get out of fellowship with God and everything comes to a standstill. We know that quite well. If anything cuts across our fellowship with God, well, all has gone. It is as though everything is lost, and we know quite well that there is no going on, no getting on, no hope whatever until we get back and have that relationship put right and the way clear with the Lord. How much there is, then, bound up with this relationship!

Now, how is it to be? John tells us: "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another". With Him, of course; "our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son..." "if we walk in the light... we have fellowship".

Fellowship rests, then, upon walking in the light, "as he is in the light". John says: "This is the message... that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all... If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship".

What does that mean? It means far more than I can put into few words, but let us look at the Lord Jesus because this is what John is saying: 'This is what we have heard from *Him*; this is what we have seen in *Him*; this is what we have handled of *Him* - the Son.' And he is saying, 'This is what the Son

did.' He walked in the light with the Father. How did He do it? What did that mean to Him? Well, in the case of the Lord Jesus He always raised one question about everything in His life - His movements, His goings or comings or stayings, His not moving, His doing this or not doing that; everything with Him was governed by a question - 'Is this in the Father's interests? Or is it in My own interest? Or am I governed by some other influence - ideas, policy, for instance? Is it politic to do this? Or how does it affect the Father? Is it in My interest or is it in the Father's interest?' He subjected everything, even His physical, quite legitimate physical requirements. He hungered, as we hunger in body - and it is not a sinful thing, is it, to take food when the body needs it? But there were times when Jesus said, 'That is secondary. There are interests of My Father to be served, so even those legitimate things in which there is nothing sinful or wrong must just stand aside while I attend to My Father's business.'

That is what He said at Sychar's Well, to the disciples. They came and said: "Rabbi, eat. But he said unto them, I have meat to eat that ye know not... My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to accomplish his work." (John 4:31,32,34). Well, He hungered. He sent them to buy food because He was hungry and they were hungry. When they brought it back - 'That can wait. There are other interests. My Father's interests come first, before even My legitimate needs can be met.'

In the wilderness, with the Devil: "Command that these stones become bread" (Matthew 4:3). His question was: 'Where does this come from? From the Father or from another source? Is the Father's interest going to be served supremely by My doing that?' He decided 'No'. For the time being, after forty days of fasting, He hungered. Nevertheless - wait - 'I am in a spiritual battle, and it is the spiritual interests that have to be established before I can allow these perfectly legitimate things to have their place.'

You see what I mean? His life was like that. He was walking in the light with the Father. 'Father, is, this Your pleasure? Is it of You that I go here, that I do that? If I have not the witness that it is of You, then it must wait. It must be set aside.' There may be nothing wrong in a thing in itself, but nevertheless there is something higher than a life of 'Oh, there is no harm in it'. Many Christians are governed by that! 'Oh, you know, there is no harm in it. Other people do it. There is no sin about that - it is quite a natural thing.' But there is a higher standard than 'no harm in it'! That is negative! The positive life of the Lord Jesus is: 'What about the Father? What does He think about this? What is His mind on this?'

Walking in the Light

The Lord Jesus would not allow a shadow to come in between Him and His Father, not one bit of darkness to break in upon that relationship. He knew that the only way and the only ground for the fulfilment of the purpose for which He had come was by walking in the light with His Father.

So John says here that we ought to walk as He walked. Note it in chapter two: "He that saith he abideth in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked" (1 John 2:6). "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another". Fellowship demands that you and I shall be walking with God. If one is not walking with God, not walking in the light, fellowship is interrupted. If some are walking in the light and others are not walking in the light, fellowship is arrested, and our fellowship, which, as I have said, means so much to the Lord and to us, requires that we are all keeping an open Heaven with God, that we are all walking in a transparent fellowship with Him, that we are all so committed to Him that any other interests, no matter what they are, come second to

this: 'What does the Lord want in this situation? How does the Lord look at this? That is the thing that governs and I am going to walk according to that, God helping me, as the Spirit bears witness in me to the Will of God, I will walk in the light.'

If we all do this, oh, how wonderful the fellowship will be, and how the Lord will be able to take us on in all the fulness and purpose of His desire, and fulfil Himself in us and through us!

Now, there is very much more, but that will be enough for us to get on with for the moment.