

FELLOWSHIP, NOT INDEPENDENCY

by H.H. Snell

A collection of articles and writings by H.H. Snell from Fellowship, Not Independency, covering various biblical topics and Christian teaching.

3 Chapters

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Fellowship, Not Independency

Fellowship, Not Independency: Part 1

In looking a little into the subject of fellowship, there is no thought of trespassing on the truth of the believer's individual responsibility to the Lord, which is so often brought before us in scripture. On the contrary, there can be no doubt that true fellowship in the Spirit flows out of personal dependence on the Lord, and felt obligation to His claims.

It is interesting to observe that, when the Holy Ghost came down on the day of Pentecost, a new and distinct character "of things was produced. Among others, we read of saints being in "fellowship." This was not known before, because redemption had not been accomplished. At Pentecost believers were baptized into "one body." People on earth were thus, by the gift and indwelling of the Holy Ghost, united to a Head in heaven—Head and members forming one body. Before this, they had individually been partakers of life, and were children of God. Christ was not ashamed to call them "brethren." Then, however, they were by the Holy Ghost, united to Christ, and to one another, in a divinely formed unity. All being partakers of resurrection-life in Christ, redeemed by the same blood, formed into "one body" by "one Spirit," there was now a basis and a power by which saints could act together, and continue in a fellowship, such as never could have been known before. Hence we read that believers "continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship." (Acts 2:42.) It is not by this implied that their individual responsibility to the Lord was lessened, for, when after this Paul addressed the elders at Ephesus, before he admonished them to care for others, he said, "Take heed to yourselves." We find also when writing to Timothy about his ministry, he says, "Take heed to thyself, keep thyself pure." This has always been the way of truth. Service must flow from personal piety. In olden time it was said, "Greater is he which ruleth his spirit, than he which taketh a city."

Christian fellowship is then the result of the gift and indwelling of the Holy Ghost, consequent on the accomplished redemption of our Lord Jesus Christ. Its activities are therefore spiritual. Fellowship is free and unfettered in its operation, but gives no license to levity or pride. It is serious, and gives none occasion to the flesh. It is a divinely wrought work.

Friendly intercourse and associations even among Christians may be far short of this. It should be guarded against, especially in the present rage for confederacies of almost every kind. Gatherings of Christian people may be but spurious imitations of being gathered to the person of the Son of God. To sympathize with one another because we are in Christ is connected with very different motives and objects from those which come of mere benevolent and philanthropic energies. Neither is the bestowment of gifts in a patronizing way fellowship, for it gives credit and importance to the donor; but to minister as from the Lord and to the Lord, as caring for His members in sympathy with them as members of His body, is a different thing, and brings glory to God. The more we are taken up with Christ, as He is revealed to us by His word and Spirit, the clearer will be our discernment of things, and the truer will be the course we pursue. It cannot be otherwise. We do well to remember that it is easy to descend from fellowship in the Spirit to ordinary habits of human intercourse. How cutting was the rebuke of the apostle to the Corinthian saints when he

said, "Are ye not carnal and walk as men?" May we be kept walking in the Spirit!

Every believer is, by grace, brought into this fellowship. He is introduced into it by calling. "God is faithful, by whom ye were called into the fellowship of His Son Jesus Christ our Lord." (1 Cor. 1:9.) By fellowship we understand partnership or joint participation. Communion and fellowship are generally the same word in the original. It is really a wonderful character of blessing and privilege, and for present exercise and enjoyment. The apostle John begins his first epistle by the presentation of the person of Christ, "that which was from the beginning." He explains that he did it in order "that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." Brought as we are, in Him, to God who is light, and where the blood assures us of perfect cleansing, we walk in the light as He is in the light. By the Spirit we enter, in measure, into the Father's thought and estimate of His beloved Son—His glorious person, offices, and accomplished work—His joy and rest in Him; as well as the Father's love, purposes, and ways toward His children. We enter too, in our measure, into the Son's love to the Father, as well as His perfect love to us. We thankfully consider Him in His obedience unto death, His rejection, His triumphant work and glorification. We delight to think of His loving care, as Head, for every member of His body, and to have fellowship with Him in His varied ministries for their edification. We look off unto Him the glorified Son of man with adoring praise and thanksgiving. Thus, in some feeble degree, we can say, "Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." The apostle does not say, Our fellowship ought to be, but "Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." This is fellowship indeed. Walking in the light (not as some say, up to our light, but) as He is in the light, we enjoy it together, "We have fellowship one with another." It is true that fellowship may be interrupted by sin, but then the advocacy of Him who is the righteous One, based upon His work of propitiation, produces in us by the Spirit self-judgment, and the confession of our sins; and, by the application of the word, we know such cleansing as restores our souls again to this blessed fellowship with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. We are called then unto this fellowship, sustained in it by divine power, and restored, when we have got away through sin, by the advocacy of Jesus Christ, and the washing of the word. Nothing less than our knowing the Father, and our holy association in love with Him, could suit His gracious heart. He has made us children, and given us the Holy Ghost that we might participate in His thoughts and joys. This is our present happiness, and it is made known to us that our joy may be full. (1 John 1:4.) And could the Holy Ghost give us lower thoughts and feelings than those which are according to the Father and the Son? Impossible. We may be feeble in our apprehensions of them, or the Spirit may be so grieved and hindered by us that we do not enter into them, but this is a different matter. "The communion of the Holy Ghost" we are entitled to know now, as much as the grace of the Lord Jesus, and the love of God." Wondrous fellowship. (See 2 Cor. 13:14.)

While the truth of our individual responsibility to the Lord cannot be too firmly held, yet nothing can be more contrary to the Lord's mind than independency. The idea is fatal to the manifestation of the true activities of the church of God. It is opposed to keeping the Spirit's unity, and it ignores the practical action of one body and one Spirit. Independency is the refusal of the communion of saints which is wrought by the Holy Ghost.

At the Lord's table fellowship is particularly expressed. (1 Cor. 10:16-21.) The cross brings before us the ground of fellowship, and this is, doubtless, why it is here, not the body and blood of the Lord, but the blood and body of Christ, and why we have the cross mentioned before the bread.

The blood is the basis of this divine order of fellowship, and known only to those who know the peace-speaking power of that blood which was shed for many for the remission of sins. It sets us before God on the ground of thanksgiving and praise. Hence we read, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?" It is fellowship. "We bless." Though our histories may be all different, we were all sinners, we, all needed atonement; but now, through the accomplished work of Jesus, all are set on the ground of worship and thanksgiving to God. While thus consciously brought on the ground of peace made, and the title to glory given, we bless God, we thank Him together, we worship God in the Spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus. The weak in faith and the strong, the elder and the younger, find here a common ground of fellowship and praise. "Is it not the communion of the blood of Christ?" Oh the blessedness of this divinely established fellowship! By the one loaf on the table, the character of our fellowship is set forth. It is the membership of one body. It is unlike anything that has preceded the calling out of the church, or that will follow it, for there are not many bodies, but "one body." True, in eating we "discern the Lord's body," we feed on Him who loved us, and gave Himself for us, which we also, members of one body, in breaking and eating the same loaf express as our fellowship, or joint participation, in Him: "The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? Because we, being many, are one bread [loaf], one body, for we are all partakers of that one bread [or loaf]." Thus every time we surround the Lord's table, and so remember Him, we express both the ground and the character of a divinely-wrought fellowship upon an accomplished redemption, and through the gift of the Holy Ghost. The principle of independency is the complete denial of this, whether looked at as the act of one person, or of several confederated together, on some other ground than the practical acknowledgment of one body and one Spirit, while holding the Head.

It is well to remember that the precious truth of one body formed and energized by one Spirit is not merely to be expressed on certain occasions, but is that which should mold and fashion all our ways in relation to Christ and His members. We need every member of the body, and each member needs us, for we are hound up together in mutual care and activity for each other's good. We are members one of another. While each is dependent on the Head, and is never right unless right with Him, yet it is through the various members that the Head acts for the edification of the whole body. "For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing If the whole were hearing, where were the smelling? But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body as it hath pleased Him. And if they were all one member, where were the body? But now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee; nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary." (1 Cor. 12:14-22.) Nothing then can be more clearly taught than the distinct place of service which is assigned to each member of the body, so that no one member can do the work of another, but all are needed. While each too is entirely dependent on the Head, the body is edified by that which every joint supplies. Nothing then can possibly be more at variance with the truth of God than the principle of independency. Nothing can more effectually deny the true way of edification in love. It dishonors Christ, grieves and quenches the Holy Spirit, and turns the soul, from the authority of the word and dependence on the Lord, to some form or other of denominationalism.

The importance of saints being practically established in this divine order of fellowship so weighed on the heart of the apostle Paul, that when he knew that saints were defective concerning it, it caused him great anxiety. This was the condition of the Colossian believers. He had learned from Epaphras of their conversion and of their love in the Spirit, and he rejoiced at their steadfastness in the faith, and their orderly walk; but they were not practically established in the truth of holding the Head, and thus were more engaged as individuals, than knit together in the endeavor to keep the Spirit's unity. Paul was deeply exercised about this. He was in an agony. When he writes (for he had never seen them) he says, "I would that ye knew what great conflict I have for you, and for them at Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh; that their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God." (Col. 2:1, 2) This he knew was God's will. It is that which the Spirit has formed. We are not called on therefore to make a unity, but to "keep" what God has wrought. We are to endeavor to keep the Spirit's unity in the bond of peace, one body and one Spirit, and with all lowliness and meekness, forbearing one another in love. (Eph. 4:2-4.) Nothing less than this could satisfy the heart of the apostle, because he was assured it was the character of things which God by His Spirit was now working. No individual state can compensate for lack of this. Hence, while the apostle could thank God for the faith and love of these Colossian saints, and could be with them in spirit, joying and beholding their order, and the steadfastness of their faith in Christ, yet he had no rest concerning them, but was in great conflict and prayer, that their hearts might be so established in the mystery of God; that they might know the comfort of fellowship in being knit together in love, and the practical acknowledgment of it. (Col. 2:1, 2.) This, and the other scriptures we have referred to, show how contrary to the Lord's mind is practical independency in a member of the body of Christ, and how impossible it is to enter upon the present character of blessing which God gives, when there is not the endeavor to keep the Spirit's unity.

(To be continued.)

Fellowship, Not Independency: Part 2

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Nor can the ruin of the church, looked at in its place of responsibility on earth, its almost endless divisions, and increasing confusion, be rightly pleaded as a reason for acting on the principle of isolation, and individual loneliness, much less for the formation of human confederacies and associations not according to the Lord's mind. For God has given us the Holy Ghost, and revealed in His word, that He has formed a unity of all believers in Christ. "By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body." This unity we are enjoined to keep. This unity is as true as ever for all the members of the body of Christ, before the eye of God; though, as to its manifestation before men, where is it to be seen? Alas! how very opposite it is to this divine character. Still, the principles of God for our guidance during the interval of our Lord's absence have not been changed because of man's failure. The injunction that we should, with all lowliness, be "endeavoring to keep the Spirit's unity in the bond of peace" has never been abrogated. The faithful are to act on it as much as ever. It is simply a question of carrying out the will of God. If one true Christian can only find another to act with him on the ground of "one body and one Spirit," these two persons would be so far carrying out the will of God, even if there were no other persons in the world so doing. It is not setting up the church again, nor reconstructing what has been practically broken in pieces; but, while owning humbly its departure and ruin, such take the place of acknowledged weakness, and cast themselves on the mercy and faithfulness of the Lord. They are obedient to His word who is holy and true, and, however few they may be, they stand for the true character of the church of God—"one body and one Spirit." Such know that God is faithful, His word as true as ever, His Spirit abiding, and that the Lord Jesus is still in the midst of two or three, when gathered together to His name. They know Him as Head of the body, the Sender of the Holy Ghost, the Son over His own house, and soon coming to take us unto Himself. Of course if others are found acting on these truths in other places, all such companies of saints become practically one; they rightly own that the only ecclesiastical association which God has set up on earth is "one body" united to Christ the Head in heaven, formed and energized by "one Spirit." This is true all over the earth. God looks down from heaven and beholds this "one body," formed by "one Spirit," however man may have defaced its manifestation by endless divisions, and untrue associations. This only is the divinely-ordered character of fellowship, consequent on an accomplished redemption, and the gift and indwelling of the Holy Ghost.

Gifts indeed have been bestowed by Christ the Head in glory, and for what purpose? We are told they are for the edification of the body, and that the body is edified by that which every joint supplies. Sign-gifts were necessary at first, such as miracles and tongues, as witness of the power of God to them that believe not. But these soon passed away. Apostles and prophets, the spiritual founders of the assembly, also passed away. They were the foundation stones of the building, and we may still be edified by their writings. But are there not evangelists, teachers and pastors? Can anything be more distinctly seen on earth now than servants of the Lord Jesus, having spiritual ability for evangelizing, teaching the children of God, and shepherding the flock? (See Eph.

4:11-13.)

It must not, however, be supposed that fellowship is limited to the privileges and blessings we enjoy when assembled together, for it extends itself into the various details of the state and circumstances of every member of the body. Thus, "if one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it." (1 Cor. 12:26.) We are all exhorted to be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment, as also "to rejoice with them that do rejoice, and to weep with them that weep," to "bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ;" and that those "taught in the word should communicate to the teacher in all good things." (see 1 Cor. 1:10; Rom. 12:15; Gal. 6:2, 6.)

Moreover, we are instructed that "To one is given, by the Spirit, the word of wisdom, to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:8). Hence it becomes more helpful to seek under certain circumstances the counsel and fellowship of such. Some members of the body being specially gifted with wisdom and knowledge, we not only honor the Lord in seeking their counsel when necessary, but in this small degree we carry out, in a practical sense, the precious truths of "one body," and "one Spirit," because such gifts are given for the profit of the whole body. Perhaps no one point is more apparent among saints than that their failures are often traceable to their independent action, when they might, in the fellowship of the Spirit, have happily availed themselves of the counsel of discreet and honored members of the body. We know how habitually Paul seems to have cultivated the fellowship of his brethren, and invited the help of saints by their prayers. It may be that many in our day, who see clearly the practical ground of assembly action, have never thought seriously of their obligations to Christ in these details. Some may need awakening on this point, and to have their consciences exercised as to whether we do not often fall into the selfishness of independency, instead of practically owning the use which the Lord would have us make of the different members of the body?

It is impossible that any member of the body can walk healthfully alone. When any choose to do so, it is because there is something wrong in the state of their souls; for we are members one of another, and can no more do without each other's service, than one member of the human body can dispense with the assistance of the others. Those who have cultivated this fellowship have proved its blessedness. Nothing, surely, can more completely deny the ground of the church of God, than the habit of going on in the various details of life, outside the public gathering together of the saints, independently of the other members of the body. Such a state of things is to be deplored, not only as dishonoring to the Lord, but as damaging to souls. It is, however, to be feared, that many, who have sat at the Lord's table for a course of years, have known but little, or nothing, of this practical fellowship in the Spirit. Such things ought not to be. When saints of old were in primitive freshness and fervor, when "great grace was upon them all," we know how lovingly the fellowship extended itself, oven to the things of this life. We read, "They were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness. And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and one soul; neither said any of them that the things which he possessed was his own; but they had all things common.... neither was there any among them that lacked.... and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need." (Acts 4:31-37.)

In making this quotation, and applying its instruction to ourselves, we have no thought of reconstructing the church on earth, or of imagining that Pentecostal days will ever be acted over

again, but rather that we might learn from the divine record what we are to understand by fellowship, and what characterized it as practiced in the apostle's days, before the assembly lost its manifested oneness; when faith and love were in freshness and activity, and the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven was not grieved and quenched as He is now. Our place certainly is to confess the ruin of the church as a corporate witness on earth by our sin, to cleave to the Lord, to call upon His name, thankfully owning all that we can discern to be of Himself, and refusing all human imitations. We rejoice that we still have the Lord in the midst of two or three gathered together to His name. Besides, through abundant mercy, we have the presence of the Holy Ghost, the unalterable word of the Lord, and have to do with the only wise God, who is faithful and cannot deny Himself. As a people we have only "a little strength," and taking the place of confessed weakness, we are bound as much as ever, in faithfulness to our loving Lord, to "depart from iniquity," to be obedient to His word, and with all lowliness "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (2 Tim. 2:19-22.) And have not many proved it to be the place of God's presence and blessing?

When souls have really to do with the Lord, everything goes on well; without it, nothing is right. The question at this time is not so much one of usefulness as of faithfulness, not as to the extent of activity, but of reality; not quantity of service, but quality. May we seek only to please God! Where there is the knowledge of divine truth, a single eye, and a subject will, there will be acting for His glory. H. H. S.

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