The Church and Its Fellowship

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0:00] You'll find it helpful if you open your Bible to 1 John chapter 1 and I make it on page 1021.

This term we've been looking at the church Jesus builds and today's passage is all about fellowship. The church as fellowship.
And so we expect this lovely passage to be all about love. It's written by the last remaining apostle, the apostle John, who was known as the apostle of love.
He is the one who brings us again and again and again the new commandment, love one another as I have loved you from Jesus. So what would you do to write a chapter on fellowship?
I think I anticipate, and this might be just me, some gentle reminders of how important my neighbors are, that I need to slow down and sit down and have a nice cup of tea.
[1:07] Because in most of the churches I've been in, fellowship, the word fellowship is used to be the sort of Christian equivalent of the McDonald's Happy Meal. Where we have a nice coffee together and we chit chat and have a nice time.

The only problem is at the heart of the passage is verse 5. Let me read it for you. This is the message we heard from him, meaning Jesus, and proclaim to you that God is light and in him is no darkness at all.
That has got to be a mistake. Don't you think? Surely if you're going to talk about fellowship, he should say God is love and in him there is nothing that is not nice.
By the way, I really like the lighting this morning. I thought we were going to have ambient lighting again, but the spots came on as we arrived, which I had nothing to do with.
Well now John does go on, of course, and in chapter 4 he does tell us that God is love. But what is the core and the essence of the message that Jesus taught and gave to his apostles?
[2:21] It's verse 5. God is light and in him is no darkness at all. And you may be saying, what on earth has that got to do with fellowship?

And the answer is absolutely everything. Because it shows us the incredible lengths to which God will go to secure fellowship with us. Fellowship is the reason God made the world.
Fellowship is the reason Jesus came into the world in the incarnation. It's the reason for his crucifixion. And it's the reason for the existence of the church. This is it.
And fellowship, we'll talk about this a little bit more in a minute. Fellowship is more than just a happy gathering. Fellowship goes to the heart of who we are, why we're here, who God is and why he made it.
Fellowship. So if we have time this morning, I want to look at four things about fellowship from this passage. The importance of fellowship. The source of fellowship. The reality, how you can tell you're in fellowship with God.
[3:26] And finally, the cost of fellowship. What did it cost God to give us this fellowship? So firstly then, the importance of fellowship. I usually have two points for those of you who are note takers.

There are four this morning if we get time. Firstly then, the importance of fellowship. I hope you noticed as it was being read from verses one to four, this is a really unusual way to start a letter.
He doesn't say, dear believers over there in Asia Minor, how are you? How are things? He goes straight to the purpose of Jesus coming to the world. Twelve phrases about Jesus.
That which we saw. That which, that which. And then in verse three, he comes to the point and purpose. The main point of that first sentence. That which we have seen, verse three.
And heard, we proclaim also to you. So that, here is it. This is the so that. You may have fellowship with us. And indeed, our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.
[4:31] So all those, all those phrases beforehand, the speaking of the incarnation and the coming of Jesus. And all the proclamation of the Gospel and particularly of the Apostles. Is so that they will

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share with us the fellowship they have.

The true fellowship. The blessing of fellowship. That they have with God the Father and God the Son. You see? So St. John the Apostle's view is that every single Christian. Every member of every church.
Has fellowship with God the Father. God the Son. God the Holy Spirit. And we share that fellowship with each other. And I think you get a bit of a sense of the awe that John has in speaking this.
Because he says in verse three. Indeed, he says, our fellowship is with God the Father and God the Son. A fellowship is not just a happy half hour with each other. It is participating in the life of the God of heaven and earth.
Now, the simple question is. Is there anything that comes close to this in importance? I think it's possible for us as we read these words to miss how personal they are.
[5:42] Look back at verse one. That which was from the beginning. He's speaking about Jesus. Older than the creation. Before the world was made. Then he says, we heard, we saw, we handled.

That's the word used in the second last chapter of John. For Thomas touching Jesus after the resurrection. We handled the word of life. Jesus, the full revelation of God.
And then he says, what we saw and testify, proclaim to you. That eternal life, verse two, was with the Father. Doesn't quite come across so much in English. That's a very forceful word.
It's profoundly personal. To say that the word was with the Father is to literally say he was face to face, at home, in personal, relational presence with God the Father.
Because the essence of life, this eternal life that Jesus comes to bring, is nothing other than fellowship with the Father. Am I moving a bit too quickly?
[6:45] See, this is the weightiness. This is the glory of the revelation of Jesus when he came. When Jesus came, the glory that he brought was not just power and authority.

But it was the glory of true, uninterrupted, face to face, eternal, clear, mutual fellowship with God the Father. That is the point of the very famous Christmas text that we read at least once a year. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. That itself is an utter miracle. And then John says, we have beheld his glory. And what is that glory?
Glory as of the only son from the Father. Literally, the only son who has come from the side of the Father. Full of grace and truth.
It's all about fellowship. It's all relational language. So the glory of God or the glory of Jesus Christ, if you will, it's not just pure wattage.
[7:53] You know, it's not thousands and billions of volts and ampers of, I don't know how you measure power. It's grace and truth. Grace and truth. And they are the two essential things in fellowship.

Grace and truth make friendship possible. You cannot have a relationship with another person if there's no truth in the relationship. If they're lying to you, there is no relationship.
In the same way, you can't have a relationship unless there's grace. But if there's grace and if there's truth, there's both friendship and joy. So the night before Jesus was crucified, he prayed and he said, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.
You see, the glory Jesus is longing for again is that uninterrupted fellowship with him because he knows he's going to the cross where that fellowship will be broken. So fellowship is a very, very important word.
And I want to just spend a moment on it, defining it. It's more than friendship. It's more than relationship. It is something that two or more people hold in common.
[9:06] It's something outside themselves together. And I've tried to think of illustrations. Here's the best one I've come up with this morning. I notice the organist is gone. However, imagine David Poon, Dan Gifford and I got together and decided to make a lot of money.

You're not laughing and that's a kind thing. A musician and two clergy, that's great. So I asked the guys for an idea this morning and they said, well, let's get an iPhone app that does hip-hop bark. Download for 49 cents. Well, that was their idea. But just imagine, it wasn't my idea. I would have had hip-hop sermons, but that's another thing. Just imagine we made the app.
You know, we raised some money. I don't know how you do these things. You went public with it and started to make money. That is something outside ourselves that we participate in.

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We have fellowship together in the Hip-Hop Bark app. Coming to your iStore very soon. The point is, fellowship can never just happen between two people.
[10:15] There has to be a third thing in which we participate together. Something outside ourselves. But when we participate in that third thing, that is what this sharing in common, fellowship, communion, there are all sorts of different words to translate it.

That's what it means. And what do you and I have in common? Well, of course, we have God the Father. We have God the Father, John says. We have God the Son.
We have God the Holy Spirit. Every single Christian, it doesn't matter how young in the faith, or how immature, or how sinful you are, or how weak your faith, we have fellowship together with each other in God.
And the deeper our fellowship with God the Father, the deeper our fellowship with one another. This is the great thing in life. This is eternal life.
It's an enriching, deepening growth in fellowship with the living God. And there's nothing more important. So that's the first point, the importance of it. Secondly, what's the source of this fellowship?
[11:21] And the answer is most obviously the source of fellowship is the God who is light. Remember, what's the message of eternal life that Jesus, the Son of God, himself brought to us?

God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. When I was a child, we sailed on an ocean liner from India to Australia, and I was stuck at the back of the ship, which I loved.
I was quarantined. It wasn't for bad behaviour. I had some disease. And I remember I spent hours looking over the ocean, and sometimes we'd get into port, people would swim alongside the boat and the ship.
And I remember trying to imagine how deep the water was. It's very deep. But you could float on the surface, or you could dive down as deep as you like. I didn't. I didn't dive off the ship.
I'm here today. You'll be most pleased to know. However, I think reading John's writings is a little bit like that. You know, you can swim on the surface, or you can dive down, and it's mind-boggling, mind-bogglingly deep.
[12:29] And take this phrase, God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. That is so simple a child can understand it. And yet it's deeper than any of us can measure. What does it mean?

Let me read you a quote from a very old commentary. He's speaking about God as light. He says, It suggests excellence without limits and without taint.
Isn't that a wonderful quote?
God is light. You see, God is light. This is what the apostles heard from Jesus himself. They didn't make it up. They didn't discover it after a long search.
It's not that God is a light. It's not that God is the light. God is light. And if you ask, what does that mean?
[14:01] Simply it means, In him is no darkness at all. Literally, darkness there is not in him. No, not any at all. There is no shadow.

There is no shadiness. There is no ignorance. There's no change or evil in God. There's no morally dubious part to God.
There's not the slightest imperfection or error. There's nothing possible that needs to be hidden so that we should discover it later. And I hope you can see, even as I'm saying these things, if you're listening attentively, that fellowship with this true God is going to have a moral structure.
And it's going to be a massive challenge to any human being who's not perfect and sinless and spotless. Which means we're all in deep trouble. See, if God is light, he cannot be bribed to look the other way.
And the distance between us and him is the distance between dark and light. And for us to have fellowship with him means something has to happen. However, nothing could be more important and the source comes from God himself.
[15:11] Well then, thirdly, how does it work? Thirdly, I want to talk about the reality. What does it look like? And here, I want to look from verse 6 down to chapter 2, verse 2, this next little section.

And the apostle gives us three marks of what it looks like when fellowship with God is real. Actually, it's very interesting the way John does this. He actually gives, he begins each one of those three by giving us the mark of unreality first.

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If we say, if we say, if we say, verse 6, 8 and 10. But I'm going to put them in the positive. So the first mark of real fellowship with God is that we walk in the light.
Verse 6. If we say we have fellowship with him, with God, while we walk in the darkness, we lie and literally we do not do the truth.
You cannot claim to be a Christian but live as though sin doesn't matter. You can be orthodox, correct and religious and observant. You can have all the talk but without the walk, John says, it's a lie.
[16:19] And walking in darkness means ongoing, continual, habitual saying, thinking and doing anything that's against the will of God. It's not occasionally falling into sin but it's persisting in sin.

It's coddling sin. It's arranging my life around sin. It's minimizing sin or excusing it or justifying it while pretending to others that I'm having fellowship with God.
And John says, absolutely black and white, he says, it's impossible. It's a lie, he says. It has nothing to do with the truth. If God is light, he says, we can't have one foot walking in darkness and one foot walking in the light.
If we walk in darkness at all, we cut ourselves off from him. So Christians can't live in happy coexistence with sin.
We cannot claim to have fellowship with God while we continue to disobey him. It's a very dangerous delusion to get into. If you are walking in the darkness now, and I say this to you, brothers and sisters, if you're walking in the darkness, you cannot be in the light because the first mark of fellowship with God will demonstrate itself at the level of ongoing living change.
[17:39] And that's the point of verse 7, the positive side of this first mark. If we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from all sin.

You'll be greatly relieved to know walking in the light doesn't have to do with being perfect and sinless. Of course. But it's knowing that sin matters.
It's walking in his presence. It's acknowledging my sin before God and bringing it to him so that he can cleanse me. And it means having fellowship with one another.
In other words, the certain sign and mark that you and I are in real fellowship with God is that we have reciprocal fellowship with one another, with other believers.
You with me, I with you. You know, we already in this service have said we believe in the communion of saints. The word communion is the word fellowship.
[18:41] But fellowship, this fellowship is what the church is for. And if we walk in darkness, it always damages and destroys fellowship with other believers.

But if we walk in the light, it always deepens our fellowship with each other. And what happens when we walk in the darkness? Well, we want to hide from each other.
We want to hide from the light. We really don't want to engage with each other. Particularly if those awkward Christians ask awkward questions.
So we withdraw ourselves from honest engagement until we get to the point that we can say to the other Christians in the church, I have no need of you. In other words, avoiding fellowship with other Christians is a sure sign we're walking in darkness.
Strong stuff, isn't it? So here is the first sign of reality of fellowship. We walk in the light with God and each other. The second sign is confessing sin.
[19:45] Now we're all Anglicans here together and so we're very familiar with verses 8 and 9. But I thought we might just read them together. If you have your Bible open there, why don't we do each other the favor and read verses 8 and 9 together, shall we?

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all.
Familiar words. I had a friend who became a Christian when he was working in the Air Force. He was basically a good guy. He hadn't gotten in big trouble. He had a view of humanity that everyone's fundamentally good.
He said, after I became a Christian, he said, it was very eye-opening, he said, I seemed to be more of a sinner than I was before.
He had this growing awareness of his own sin. And it was of course because he was walking in the light and he was having fellowship with a God who is light. But here is the second mark of reality of fellowship.

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[20:51] This is how it works. The second mark of reality is that we don't pretend that everything is okay when we know it's not. We confess our sins to God. We know, I don't have the power to change myself.

And the only way through is to confess myself sins to the living God. Because you see, fellowship with God is not always comfortable. And he peels back the layers and shows us that we've redefined sin.
And it doesn't really matter how we've managed to hide it from other people and justify it. But God reveals our sin to us. And the real test is, how do I respond when my sin is exposed?
This is the mark of reality with God. Do I cobble together a quick DIY cover-up operation? Or do I get out a big bucket and put it in the big bucket which I call my weaknesses or my brokenness? Or do I say, well I'm not really as bad as some people are? Because when we do all those things, the only person we manage to deceive really is ourselves. But confession is very important.
[21:59] You see, confession is not grovelling. It's not self-loathing and hatred. It's not mustering up a measure of self-misery.

It's literally speaking the truth to God and to one another. It's bringing my sin into the light of God and calling it what God calls it. It's very hard for us, isn't it?
I mean, we live in a culture which has perfected the non-confession confession. Don't you think? It will soon be called the Rob Ford confession.
And I don't have anything against him. It's just he's the latest. You know that sort of confession? I've made a mistake but nobody's perfect. I've got it under control and nobody can judge me.
I've been under a lot of stress and I've been pushed over the line and I'm getting help with my issues. The other one I thought of last night was Lance Armstrong. There was a fantastic non-apology apology.
[23:00] He said, I regret any stress I've caused. He's not sorry for the lies he's told. He's sorry that he's been caught. The word here to confess means literally to say the same thing as.

We just say the same thing as God does. We agree with God's diagnosis. We step into the light. I take personal responsibility for what I've done.
And I respond to the truth and beauty of the light of God. And it's not just a general confession. You look at the confession we say when we gather here Sunday by Sunday.
It's pretty thorough. But I think we need to be specific. Anything that you know or I know that creates a barrier between me and God. We've got to allow God to deal with it radically.
And because he's the light, he promises two things in response. One is outward and one is inward. And outwardly he says, I will forgive you your sins. They're gone.
[24:00] They're done. No debt. And inwardly he promises to cleanse us from all sin. An inward process that begins, that makes us more like Jesus.

So that we become gradually cleaner and lighter and truer and wiser. And of course, none of us will ever be without sin until we get to heaven.
But walking in the light is growing in confession and forgiveness and cleansing. Here's the reality of fellowship with God. We walk in the light with him and with one another.
We confess our sins. We don't hide them. And we take hold of his promise of forgiveness and cleansing. Fourthly and finally, what's the cost of fellowship with God?
This is wonderful stuff. How can God who is light have fellowship with us? And have you noticed that from verse 5 to 2-2, it has the blood of Jesus through it all.
[25:04] Our section began with Jesus coming to earth. It finishes him in chapter 2, verse 2, acting as our advocate with the Father. And in between, in verse 7, it is the blood of Jesus which cleanses us from all sin.

Because such is God's desire and commitment to have fellowship with us. But he sends his one and only Son, the one whom the Father embraced from eternity past.
The one who he had enjoyed and had fellowship with. And Jesus came and gave himself as a propitiation for sin. And on the cross, the eternal fellowship within the Godhead is breached and broken.
As Jesus takes our sin into himself, the fire of God's light consumes and burns against our darkness. And on the cross, Jesus is put out of fellowship so that we might be welcomed back in.
This is what it costs God to have fellowship with us. He gave up fellowship with his eternal Son. He gave up his Son from the security of glory to bear our shame, to take our guilt and weakness, so

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that we could walk in the light of his grace and truth.
[26:30] And I think this has massive implications. Let me just try and spell out one or two. What that means is that our fellowship with each other, our communion with each other and with God, doesn't arise from within ourselves.

We don't have to create it. It comes to us from God through the cross of Jesus Christ. It's only the death of Jesus on the cross that can open the door to true fellowship.
And because it's not based on anything in me or anything in you, our fellowship is a supernatural fellowship. It's based on the one who is perfectly righteous, good and trustworthy.
It's a gift from God through his Son. And I think some of us find it easy to turn away from fellowship with God through a sort of inverted pride.
We feel like this. We say, I failed again. I've done it again, Lord. And we think to ourselves, I dare not go back to God until I prove to him that I'm more serious or I'm more prayerful or I can have some control over that sin.
[27:37] Here I am again. But listen to the passage. The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. And Jesus' death is much more powerful than your sin or my sin.

And he is absolutely committed to bringing us back into fellowship with him. And if our fellowship with God the Father is based in him and not on our performance, it means that we are able to have fellowship with one another.
We don't have to pretend that we're perfect. We don't have to pretend that we've got it all together. I want to read to you one more quote and then just finish. This is from the ever quotable German theologer Dietrich Bonhoeffer.
He says, In confession, and now he's talking about confession to each other of sin. In confession, the breakthrough to community, fellowship, takes place.
Sin demands to have a man by himself. And he uses the masculine pronoun. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him.
[28:52] The more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light.

In the darkness of the unexpressed, it poisons the whole being of that person. And this, he says, can happen in the midst of a pious community. He was living in community with seminarians at the time.
In confession, the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. It is a hard struggle, he says, until sin is openly admitted. But God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron.
There's one verse I haven't touched on, and I finish with verse 4. Why does John write this, verse 4? We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.
When we say in the Creed, I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, we're talking about something of great joy.
[29:57] John is speaking about the same joy that he had with Jesus, face to face, in his fellowship. And he says, that can be ours as well, through Jesus Christ.

Not happiness, which goes up and down according to circumstances, but joy, the joy that comes from knowing what God has done to bring us into fellowship with himself, that life, that eternal life, so that he moves from being just the God of light to being God, our Heavenly Father.
So let's kneel and pray.

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