CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

1 John 1:1-10
Key verse: 1:3

“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

 Apostle John wrote both John’s gospel and the epistle of 1 John. The purpose of each book was different. John’s gospel is evangelistic: it was written to reveal that Jesus is the Son of God, and whoever believes in him has eternal life (Jn 20:31). 1 John is pastoral: it was written for believers to have conviction of eternal life (1Jn 5:13). Alfred Plummer (1841–1926), Church of England clergyman and biblical scholar, said: “The former (John’s gospel) was written historically, the latter (1 John) ethically. The former shows the words and works of Jesus in order to prove that he is the Son of God, while the latter shows the words and works that the believers must do.” We are living in a world that is full of lies and uncertainty. Sometimes we feel confused and do not know what we should do. To us, the words of 1 John speak the truth of eternal life. With the assurance of this truth, we can live victoriously as Jesus’ people in this world.

In today’s passage John emphasizes the importance of having genuine fellowship with the Father and the Son. We call this “Christian fellowship.” It is different from any other kind of fellowship because it is with the Father and with the Son. It is three-dimensional and brings true joy, satisfaction and peace. People long for this fellowship. Let us learn the nature of this fellowship and how we can participate in it.

First, the Word of life appeared to us (1-2). Verse 1 starts, “That which was from the beginning….” This reminds us of John 1:1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Here “the Word” is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Alpha, the Beginning, the First Cause (Rev 21:6; 22:13). He is not a created being, but the Creator who gives life to everything that is. In verse 1b, he is called “the Word of life,” and in verse 2, “the eternal life.” This life is not temporal or diminishing, like that of human beings, but eternal life which is indestructible life (Heb 7:16). “The life appeared” (2a) describes Jesus’ incarnation.

John proclaimed his certainty of Jesus’ incarnation, saying, “which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us” (1b-2). The verbs “have heard,” “have seen,” “have looked at,” and “have touched” have deep meaning. The present perfect verb tense indicates something that started in the past at a certain point and has continued on to the present moment. John’s experiences were continuous through common life with Jesus for three and a half years. John’s experiences were not just a distant memory; they had been life-changing and remained in his heart forever. So he could not but witness his experience with Jesus.

John had heard numerous life-giving messages from Jesus directly, including his “I Am” declarations, such as: “I am the Bread of life” (Jn 6:35), “I am the light of the world” (Jn 8:12), “I am the good shepherd” (Jn 10:11), “I am the resurrection and the life” (Jn 11:25), “I am the way and the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6). John had seen what Jesus did. For example, Jesus changed water into wine (Jn 2:9); Jesus gave sight to a man born blind (Jn 9:7), and Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead (Jn 11:43-44). John even saw that Jesus died on the cross and rose again (Jn 20:25). “Looked at” means to observe something with attention and continuity. John and the other apostles were with Jesus constantly as they lived together. They observed everything about Jesus in detail. The more they came to know Jesus, the more convinced they were that he is the Incarnate God. “Hands have touched” indicate intimate experience. At the Last Supper John leaned on Jesus’ shoulder (Jn 13:23). Thomas touched the Risen Jesus’ nail-pierced hands and side (Jn 20:27; Lk 24:39). What John and the other apostles had heard, seen, looked at and touched was so vivid to them and so real that they testified to it throughout their lifetimes and sealed their testimony with their martyrdoms. This is the overwhelming evidence that Jesus is indeed perfect God and perfect man.

Second, fellowship with the Father and with the Son (3-4). What was John’s purpose in testifying about Jesus’ incarnation? Verse 3 says, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” Here we need to think about the meaning of “fellowship,” “koinonia” in Greek. This fellowship is defined as “an association involving close mutual relations and involvement.” Since human beings are social creatures, we create many kinds of fellowship, even comedy fellowships. People usually form fellowships due to a common interest or for mutual benefit. These kinds of fellowships are temporary and shallow, and some can be harmful. But Christian fellowship is different. It is everlasting, blessed, deep and mutually edifying. In it we can find true satisfaction and joy. This is because it is fellowship with God the Father and the Son.

 The archetype of Christian fellowship is found in the Triune God. God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit have fellowship in perfect order and harmony. This fellowship is personal, mutual, and intimate, as well as a dynamic, constant love fellowship (Jn 5:20). This fellowship is based on humility and total submission to one other (Php 2:6-8). In this fellowship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit are absolutely dependent on each other (Jn 5:19,26,30). In brief, self-denial, giving up one’s own right, humility, obedience, respect and love make this kind of fellowship possible.

 God wanted to extend this fellowship to human beings. So he created mankind in his own image and placed them in the garden of Eden. The words, “Let us make man…” (Gen 1:26) reveal that mankind was created out of the loving fellowship of the Triune God. God showed his respect and love for mankind by making him the manager of his creation. At the same time, God established spiritual order between the Creator and creature by giving mankind a command to be willingly obeyed. This fellowship was broken when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, being deceived by Satan. This was the beginning of tragedy;  mankind became corrupt and useless like a branch cut off from the vine. But God did not abandon humankind. In his great mercy, he initiated restoration of fellowship with mankind. He called Abraham into a relationship with him and made him “God’s friend” (2Ch 20:7). God wants to bless all people through him and his descendants. To do that, God worked through the Israelites. They had been slaves in Egypt for four hundred thirty years. They suffered unbearably. At the same time a slave mentality was deeply embedded in their psyche. They were impatient, emotional and unthankful, and easily complained. It is not easy to have fellowship with such people. But God, in his great compassion, entered into fellowship with them. God spoke to them through Moses, redeemed them from slavery, and had hope for them to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The latter part of the book of Exodus, chapters 25-40, instructs them how to build and maintain the tabernacle as God’s dwelling place among them (Ex 25:8). There, God met them and spoke to them (Ex 25:22). It is amazing that the holy, glorious God wanted to have fellowship with such lowly people.

 God’s fellowship with mankind reached its climax by Jesus’ coming down into the world. Jesus gave up all his glory and majesty and put on human flesh to live among human beings. He served all kinds of sinners one by one. For example, Jesus initiated fellowship with a wayward Samaritan woman. Through this fellowship he gave her living water welling up to eternal life. A tax collector, Matthew, was very lonely due to his selfishness and greed. No one wanted to be with him. But Jesus initiated fellowship by calling him, saying, “Follow me” (Mt 9:9). Jesus bore all of his weaknesses and sins until he became a light for the world. Matthew called Jesus “Immanuel,” God with us (Mt 1:23). As Jesus was with Matthew, he was with all of his disciples. They were blue collar workers from the despised region of Galilee, and not well educated. But Jesus was with them and served them one by one. He even washed their dirty feet. Through this fellowship they were transformed into men of God who changed the world. Jesus’ physical presence was limited. After resurrection and ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to be with them forever (Jn 14:17-18). Jesus continues to be with us, his church, as we gather in his name (Mt 18:20).

 In the summer of 1806 five Williams College students met together in a grove of trees near the Hoosic River and discussed the spiritual well being of Asian people. The meeting was suddenly interrupted by a thunderstorm. They took shelter under a haystack until the sky cleared. During that time they prayed for the sending of missionaries. God was with them and inspired them to begin a mission agency. In the following two decades, they sent lifetime missionaries to India, Turkey, Palestine, Hawaii, China and Africa. Within their first 50 years, they sent out over 1,250 missionaries. When God is with us, great things happen, far beyond what we can ask or imagine. It is because God’s wisdom and power are at work. This is why our fellowship with the Father, Son and Spirit is so important. When we see how God has been with his people throughout history, it is clear that God’s heart’s desire is to have fellowship with us. He wants to be with us even in our present crisis.

 Verse 4 tells us that John wrote this letter: “...to make our joy complete.” John was concerned about their spiritual welfare, thinking that the gnostics may have confused them and disturbed their fellowship. If he knew that their fellowship with God and the apostles was fully restored, he would have great joy. This joy comes from God when even one person comes back to him as the father rejoiced when the prodigal son repented (Lk 15:32).

Third, walk in the light (5-10). Thus far John described the nature of Christian fellowship. Now he tells us how we can participate. To have fellowship with God we should know who God is. Verse 5 says, “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” To declare or proclaim is to issue a statement of truth that is beyond dispute. “God is light” is the truth about God which must simply be accepted. This truth is supported by a negative statement: “...in him there is no darkness at all.” Light in essence describes God as pure, holy and perfect. God is purely good; there is no evil in him. Just as good and evil cannot coexist, evil cannot exist in God. God is holy; there is no sin in God at all. God is life; there is no death in God at all. God is righteous and true; there is no unrighteousness or falsehood in God. God is love; there is no hatred at all in God. This means that God does not have even a little fault. When we have a problem, we tend to blame God and become bitter. But when we know God truly, we can fully trust God, believing that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him (Ro 8:28).

To have fellowship with God we should be as holy as God and as true as God. The question is how can we be? Just as knowing God is important, knowing ourselves is also important. In verses 6-10, we can find the word “if” repeated five times, once at the beginning of each verse. Verses 6,8,10 are lies and deceptions about ourselves that hinder us from having fellowship with God. Verses 7,9 tell us how to maintain fellowship with God.

First of all, we need to consider what hinders fellowship with God. Verses 6,8,10 all contain claims about ourselves which are not true. Verse 6 says, “If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth.” What does it mean to “walk in the darkness”? To “walk” indicates lifestyle, and “darkness” means sin. Though they claim with their mouths to have fellowship with God, their actions do not reflect God’s character. They are ungodly and wicked, following their sinful desires. Verse 8 says, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.” These people think they are free from sin because they were forgiven. It is true that we can live in victory over sin, but we are not free from sin as long as we live in the flesh because we have a sinful nature dwelling within us. That is why there are so many exhortations in the New Testament not to live according to sinful desires. Apostle Paul said, “Flee the evil desires of youth and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2Ti 2:22). We need to live daily in the awareness that we are sinners who need God’s help not to fall into temptation and the power of evil.

While verse 8 is a denial of the sinful nature, verse 10 is a denial of sinful actions. This claim involves more than self-deception; it makes God out to be a liar. If God is a liar, there is no basis to believe him. Faith becomes futile and people have no hope. But God is faithful, righteous and truthful. There is no lie or deception in God at all. The fault is always in mankind. The Bible says, “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Ro 3:10). To have fellowship with God, we should humbly acknowledge that we are sinners before God. In one of his parables, Jesus teaches us who can be justified by God. It was a tax collector, who beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner” (Lk 18:13).

Secondly, we need to walk in the light to have fellowship with God. While verses 6,8 and 10 warn about the hindrances to fellowship with God, verses 7 and 9 tell us the blessings of those who have fellowship with God. Verse 7 says, “But 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, purifies us from all sin.” What does “walk in the light” mean? It means to acknowledge that God is light, accept his light and follow him. Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (Jn 8:12). Everything exposed by the light becomes light (Eph 5:13). The more our hidden sins are exposed before God, the more light can fill our souls. Sin is the biggest hindrance in having Christian fellowship. Sin breaks our fellowship with God and others. How can this fellowship be restored? Only Jesus can restore this fellowship. As we come to Jesus with a repentant heart, his blood purifies us from all sin. His blood has power to cleanse all our sins. There is no sin that cannot be cleansed by the blood of Jesus. Then our fellowship with God and with other believers is restored.

Verse 9 explains more the meaning of walking in the light: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” To confess our sins implies a detailed specific confession of our wrong thoughts, words, actions and attitudes. It includes the good which we omit, as well as the evil we do. In the world, when people confess their sins, they are judged, criticized, and condemned. That is why they are afraid to confess their sins. But God is different. God will condemn and judge if we do not confess our sins. But if we confess our sins, God is so faithful and merciful. He forgives all our sins. What is more, he purifies us from all unrighteousness. Then we can grow to be more like Jesus. And our fellowship with God and others can be deeper, more meaningful and fruitful.

As we live in the end of the age, the world is more and more corrupt. Relationships are easily broken. Due to the spread of Covid-19, social distancing has been necessary. People are afraid of gathering and have most of their social interactions online. It is hard to have genuine fellowship, even among believers. Yet we cannot blame the situation; the main problem is the deceptive power of sin. The only way of having genuine Christian fellowship is to restore our fellowship with God, confessing our sins sincerely. As we do, our Christian fellowship can be a great influence in our society. We can be the light of the world and the salt of the earth.