



The New Life in Christ

Lesson 5

Fellowship and Ecclesial Life

When Jesus Christ returns, he will set up the Kingdom of God on this Earth. It will be a wonderful time when those chosen by Jesus to share the Kingdom with him will be made immortal. They will sin no more and they will no longer be dying men and women. All the problems of mortality, such as pain and illness, will be removed. But God promises something even more wonderful than this. He tells us that these people will be made like His Son, like Jesus Christ himself.

“Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we will be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”

1 John 3:2

When we look at the character of Jesus and see how lovely and gracious he is, then we rejoice in the great and precious promise of God that, in the Kingdom, we will be made like Jesus if we believe and are baptized.

The Gospel of John tells us that the most important thing in the life of Jesus was his relationship with God, his Father. He was very close to Him and he said in John 10:30, “I and the Father are one”. Jesus filled his life with the Word of God. He and his Father had the same purpose and shared the same thoughts. He felt the presence of God with him in his life every moment of every day. It is difficult to find the words to describe how close were the Father and His Son. The Bible describes such a relationship as *‘fellowship’*. This is a special Bible word that means ‘sharing together’.

This gives a wonderful picture of life in the Kingdom of God and we can sum it up like this.

- In the Kingdom true disciples will be given immortal life.
- They will be made like Jesus Christ; they will fully share his character as well as his immortal nature.
- This will bring them into perfect unity with God Himself. His ways will be their ways, His thoughts their thoughts.
- So they will be in perfect and complete fellowship with God

However, God’s promise of fellowship with His children is not just for a future time in His Kingdom. When men and women are baptized they begin a new relationship with God and with His Son. Their sins are forgiven and they become part of God’s family, His sons and daughters. Just as human fathers love and care for their children, God cares for His family. He wants His children to be close to Him and have fellowship with Him now in their lives. Yet the fellowship that disciples have with God now is incomplete. Their human failings get in the way and prevent them being completely ‘at one’ with Him. As we have seen, perfect fellowship will only come in the Kingdom of God.

Brothers and Sisters in Christ

When we become part of the family of God we find that we have new brothers and sisters, men and women who have also been baptized into Christ. The name ‘Christadelphian’ means ‘brothers in Christ’ and it is taken from the opening words of the Letter to the Colossians.

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother,
To the saints and faithful **brothers in Christ** at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from
God our Father.”
Colossians 1:1-2

This is why Christadelphians call each other ‘brother’ or ‘sister’. It is recognition of the relationship enjoyed with each other as part of God’s family. This fellowship with each other comes through their relationship with God. Just as we care for our natural brothers and sisters and love them, baptized

people are commanded to love and care for their brothers and sisters in Christ. They share the joy and happiness of knowing that they belong together in God's family.

It is very important to understand that *all* fellowship, including our relationships with each other, is based on a believer's relationship with God.

"That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have **fellowship** with us; and indeed our **fellowship** is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."
1John 1:3

In the New Testament, true disciples of Jesus who live in this way are called 'the ecclesia of God' (Acts 20:28). 'Ecclesia' is a Greek word and in the English Bible it is translated as 'church'. It means 'those called out'. True disciples have been called out of the world to belong to God's family and to have fellowship with Him and with each other.

This is an important point. We have to make a choice; we cannot have fellowship (share things) with the world and pretend to have fellowship with God and His Son. When we are baptized our standards should become quite different from those of unbelievers. The things which become important to us will not be important to them and we will be unable to have fellowship with them. However we shall find that we do have things in common with our new brethren and sisters because we share an interest in the Bible and share a common belief in the Gospel with them. This will help us to build new relationships and have fellowship with them.

"Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?
What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?
What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you."
2Corinthians. 6:14-17

For disciples, life in the ecclesia is helped a great deal by having others who believe the same things and who live nearby. They can talk and worship together regularly; they can help each other out on a daily basis, they can preach together. (Later in the lesson we shall consider those who do not live near other baptized members.)

Sharing Things Together

Fellowship is hard work. We have to learn to live with a new family – and not only to live with them but to love and care for people who may have been strangers to us before our baptism. The word 'fellowship' is only found twice in the King James Version of the Old Testament. One of the occasions is in Leviticus 6:2. Here the word translated 'fellowship' means 'something entrusted to another person'. We should trust our brothers and sisters with our feelings and thoughts. We should open up our hearts to them even though that will make us very vulnerable to them. If they let us down or reject us we may feel hurt and angry with them because we trusted ourselves to them and they failed us.

Sometimes we may find it especially difficult to get on with a particular brother or sister. Our natural instinct is to walk away, to have nothing to do with him or her and only to mix with those who are our 'friends'. This is wrong, we must remember that we are given to each other by God and that living in fellowship with every brother and sister is part of the way God develops our characters. We have to learn to be tolerant, to accept others and their points of view as brothers and sisters in Christ. God has called us to live and work together in this way. He chose each one of us; we are all precious to him. Look at these two passages.

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

Ephesians 2:19-22

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” 1Corinthians 12:27

The believers at Ephesus came from different backgrounds. Before baptism they had nothing in common but then they found themselves to be part of the spiritual house (or temple) that God is building. It is made up of faithful men and women. Each disciple has a unique part to play and is needed for the house to be complete. If we understand how God values every brother and sister like this, then it will help us to appreciate each other and to enjoy fellowship together.

Men and Women – One in Christ

It is important to understand that this fellowship is for both men and women. God makes no difference between them in His desire to have people in His kingdom.

“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.”

Galatians 3:26-29

However, this does not mean that brothers and sisters have equal roles to play in the ecclesia. The Bible teaches us that women should keep silent in the ecclesia and that they should not teach men publicly. (1Corinthians 14:33-35; 1Timothy 2:11-14). This *does not mean* that women are inferior to men in God's sight. Men and women have different roles to play within the ecclesia and its healthy growth depends on both groups being involved in fellowship together. Brothers are responsible for the spiritual leadership of the ecclesia. They take the public roles of preaching and teaching. Sisters are responsible for supporting this work. By the way they dress and talk, by their personal example they can have a very special impact on the behaviour of the ecclesia. They have a role in teaching children in Sunday School, in pastoral work – looking after the sick, visiting the elderly. All of these things are part of our fellowship.

The New Testament has many examples of things we share together in true fellowship. Here are a few of them.

1. A common calling (Hebrews 3:1)
2. The same faith (Ephesians 4:5)
3. The hope of the Kingdom (Ephesians 4:4)
4. Suffering together (Philippians 3:10, 1Peter 4:13, 2Timothy 1:8)
5. Each others burdens (Galatians 6:2)

Fellowship in the Acts of the Apostles

The very first mention of fellowship in the New Testament is in Acts 2:42.

“So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and **fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and the prayers... And all who believed were **together** and had all things in common. And day by day, attending the temple **together** and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. “

Acts 2:41-47

This is a picture of the disciples in Jerusalem after the Day of Pentecost. Notice that fellowship was as important to them as Bible study, the Breaking of Bread service and prayer. From the very beginning of the ecclesia 'sharing together' was part of the 'glue' which helped them to stick together through some very difficult times. Notice the way the word 'together' is used three times to emphasise this point.

This is a very important principle for us today. When we are baptized we should make every effort to attend *all* of the meetings organised by the ecclesia. Sometimes when there are problems we want to stay away from the ecclesia but the message from Acts is that this is exactly the time when we should most want to be *together* with our spiritual family, our brothers and sisters in the Lord.

We are also told that they had 'all things in common'. This does not mean that there was no private property and that the disciples immediately sold everything they had and gave it to the ecclesia. It does mean that they felt a sense of responsibility for each other's welfare and were willing to give what they had if it was needed to help poor disciples. Later on the Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian ecclesia about these things telling them to hold a weekly collection for those in need (1Corinthians 16:1-2). This principle still holds good today and ecclesias should take up weekly collections for the running of the ecclesia and the welfare of the needy.

This fellowship that brethren and sisters in Christ have together is a truly wonderful thing, uniting believers from all parts of the world. They have this in common, whether male or female, black or white. It is a very special relationship that is more important than any other. It brings a responsibility to love and care for each other and to share the wonders of the Word of God together.

Disciples Living in Isolation

There are people who believe and have been baptized but who do not have other brothers and sisters living near them with whom they can have regular fellowship. However, because they are members of God's family, they are *never* really alone because they share the things of their new life with God and His Son and they will feel the presence of the Lord Jesus in their lives.

There are some practical things which will help believers who live isolated lives like this.

- Brothers and sisters overseas will not forget their isolated brothers and sisters but will write to them and try to visit them on Bible Mission visits. Brothers and sisters within their own country should also make a special effort to visit them, to pray for them and to support them whenever possible.
- It is important both to pray and to read the Bible every day, even if this is done alone. If they use the Bible Companion then they know that throughout the whole world their brothers and sisters will be reading the same passages that day.
- Every Sunday, preferably at the same time each week, they should carefully set out the bread and wine to break bread and drink wine in remembrance of the Lord Jesus. They will know that all over the world many thousands of their brothers and sisters will be doing the same thing and this will be a source of great comfort and strength to them.
- They can continue to write to their tutor who will send them Bible study courses and letters.
- They can receive exhortations, lectures and Bible Class papers from the Isolation League in the UK.

To all his disciples, but especially those who feel lonely, Jesus said:

"I will never leave you or forsake you." Hebrews 13:5

So we can say with confidence,

"The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?" Hebrews 13:6

Questions

1. How do we have fellowship with each other?
2. Why should we work hard to have fellowship with a disciple we find difficult?
3. What is the role of men in the ecclesia?
4. What is the role of women in the ecclesia?
5. Why was fellowship important to the ecclesia in Jerusalem (Acts 2)?