

## Fellowship and Truth

A contribution to the Nairobi Statement ([pdf](#))

... 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 ... If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. 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 cleanses us from all sin.

1 John 1:3, 6-7

The life transforming message of the Gospel is that Jesus Christ is the Lord who died for our sins, in our place, and rose again according to the Scriptures. It calls us to repentance and faith in him. It promises forgiveness of sins and eternal life for all who will do so. And it brings us to reconciliation with God and fellowship with each other. The Lord Jesus who is revealed in this Gospel has taught us to believe and obey God's authoritative written word. We gladly do so in response to the Father's love in Christ, submitting to Christ's Lordship and recognising that the Spirit speaks to us through this word. Therefore, it is to the Bible that we turn as we seek to understand the nature of fellowship.

The Scriptures teach us that the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the ground of all genuine Christian fellowship. Not only did Jesus die for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God (1 Pet. 3:18), but in him we have been brought to the assembly of the first born whose names are written in heaven (Heb. 12:22-23). Reconciled to God through Christ and in the Spirit, we find ourselves in the company of others who have also been reconciled. Consequently, genuine fellowship between human beings under the rule and blessing of God is never accidental nor is it insignificant. We are made for such fellowship and at the end he will gather men and women beyond number from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages to stand before the throne and before the Lamb (Rev. 7:9).

The fellowship we enjoy as Christians is distinguished from all other associations by the fact that it is at its heart a common fellowship with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. For this reason it has a particular character. It involves 'walking in the light, as he is in the light' (1 Jn 1:7; Eph. 5:8). Our identity as 'a people belonging to God' is in fact tied to our recognition that we were 'called out of darkness into his marvellous light' (1 Pet. 2:9). In other words, there is a pattern of life from which we have been delivered and from which we must distance ourselves, just as there is a pattern of life for which we have been delivered and which we are called upon to embrace. Our fellowship is characterised by obedience to the word which God has given us.

The God of love who calls us to himself and to each other is also the God of light in whom there is no darkness at all. Those he brings together as his people are certainly not yet perfect. Though they are growing in grace, they still struggle with sin and readily repent and acknowledge their continuing need of the forgiveness and cleansing that is only found in Jesus Christ. But true Christian fellowship takes faithful, godly living seriously and it distances itself from behaviour that is inconsistent with God's character and purpose made known to us in his word. As the apostle Paul asked, 'what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?' (2 Cor. 6:14). Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them (Eph. 5:11).

The character and boundaries of our fellowship are not determined by institutions but by the word of God. Our fellowship is a fellowship in the truth. Together we grow up in every way into the one who is the head of the body, into Christ, as we speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15). Indeed, the church of the living God is described in Scripture as 'a pillar and buttress of the truth' (1 Tim. 3:15). It is the place where the truth matters, where it is guarded and promoted and where alternatives are exposed for what they are — an exchange of the truth of God for a lie (Rom. 1:25). Where the truth is rejected there can be no fellowship and any claim to fellowship that does not have at its heart a willingness to submit to the written word of God and to walk in the light is a dangerous and oppressive illusion. Attempts to replace a common commitment to truth with a common commitment to mission are just as illusory since we are bound to ask 'why this mission?' and 'whose mission is it anyway?' The Christian mission arises out of the truth of the Christian gospel and is ambiguous without it. Furthermore, our fellowship in the truth must not be bounded or hindered by boundaries and structures created by men. Its boundaries are determined by faithfulness to the teaching of Scripture. We will always stand together with those who are willing to conform their lives to the teaching of Scripture and we cannot have fellowship with those who will not.

The authority of Scripture as the written word of God to shape our fellowship distinguishes genuine Christian fellowship from the myriad of counterfeits on offer in our world. Every idea and all behaviour is to be tested by the written word of God which, as the Jerusalem Declaration puts it, 'is to be translated, read, preached, taught and obeyed in its plain and canonical sense, respectful of the church's historic and consensual reading' (§2). Only then will we avoid an accommodation to the world which transforms Christian fellowship into yet another expression of our sinful human natures.

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*Posted November 5, 2013*