

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	1 John		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	2		Gary L.W. Johnson
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FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

If we are to have fellowship with the Living God: The Father – The Son – and The Holy Spirit – we must first *know* the character of God. Sinclair Ferguson, in his excellent book on John Owen and the Christian life, writes: “The Christian life is nothing less than fellowship with God the Trinity, leading to the full assurance of faith. Old Testament believers enjoyed fellowship with God, but not with the degree of *boldness* of which the New Testament speaks, or in the freedom and liberty of the children of God. But now this is the enjoyment of the Christian. His fellowship, or communion with God ‘consisteth in his *communication of himself unto us, with our returnal unto him* of that which he requireth and accepteth, flowing from that *union* which in Jesus Christ we have with him.’ It is alternatively described as ‘the mutual communication of such good things as wherein the persons holding that communion are delighted, bottomed upon some union between them.’ Both the union with Christ which gives the Christian his *status* before God, and the communion with God which is the fruit of that status, are thus subsumed under the notion of communion, and this is the sense in which Owen generally employs the expression.”¹

I. TRUE FELLOWSHIP. It is absolutely essential that we properly understand what this involves – and there are *two* distinct dangers we must be aware of. “The one is the assumption that Christian fellowship is possible other than on the basis of common belief in Christ. Some people would almost go so far as to say that Christian unity means Christians of different beliefs, coming together in fellowship; it is easy enough, they say, to have Christian unity with those of like mind, but the real test of Christian unity is whether we are willing to have it with those with whom we disagree. There is a sense in which this is true; where matters not of substance of the faith are concerned, it is all too easy for us to avoid Christian unity with people whose way of doing things or whose general culture is different from ours, and we need to pull down such barriers. But it is not true that there can be fellowship between persons who disagree on the central affirmations of the faith. There cannot be unity between denominations which differ in their understanding of the way of salvation, and there cannot be unity between those who accept and those who do not accept Jesus Christ – crucified for our sins and raised for our justification – as Savior. There is no common ground in such cases. The other danger is the assumption that it is possible to have a true relationship with God while rejecting Jesus Christ as the way, the truth, and the life. As this Epistle will go on to make clear, the Father can be known only through the Son. There is ‘none other name.’”² Over the last decade or so a number of high-profile evangelicals have sought to make common cause with Mormonism, going so far as to embrace Mormons as fellow Christians.³ But the God of Mormonism is *not* the God of Orthodox Christianity, as Mormons will readily admit. Likewise, the Christ of Mormonism is *not* the Christ of historic Evangelicalism.⁴

- II. GOD IS LIGHT.** Notice that John does not begin with our so-called *felt needs*. He does not offer his readers tips for personal success or how to overcome life's difficulties. No, he directs us to God's holiness. Light is used in Scripture in a variety of ways. It can refer to knowledge, illumination, or guidance. But here it points to God's holiness. John Stott comments: "Of the statements about the essential Being of God, none is more comprehensive than *God is light*. It is His nature to reveal Himself, as it is the property of light to shine; and the revelation is of perfect purity and unutterable majesty. We are to think of God as a personal Being, infinite in all His perfections, transcendent, 'the high and lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy' (Is. lvii. 15), who yet desires to be known and has revealed Himself. The miserable errors of the heretics were due to their ignorance of God's ethical self-revelation as Light. They could never have laid claim to a private, esoteric *gnōsis* into which they had been initiated if their conception of God had been of One who is Light, diffusive, shining forth and manifesting Himself, in whom *is no darkness at all*, no secrecy, no hiding in the shadows. And if God is also light in the sense of possessing an absolute moral perfection, their claim to know Him and have fellowship with Him despite their indifference to morality is seen to be sheer nonsense, as the author goes on to demonstrate."⁵
- III. WALKING IN THE LIGHT.** Over and over again in Scripture, walking points to the general tenor of one's life (Eph. 4:17-19; 5:7-12). Notice the contrast between walking in the light as opposed to walking in darkness. In this context, this refers to sin, especially ignoring or denying our sins. F. F. Bruce writes: "It is in the ethical sense that John here affirms that 'God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.' God, that is to say, is the source and essence of holiness and righteousness, goodness and truth; in Him there is nothing that is unholy or unrighteous, evil or false. He revealed Himself thus in the age of preparation before Christ came, and when the age of fulfillment dawned in Christ, this was the character of God as unveiled in the life that was the light of men. This being so, those whose 'fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ' will in their lives reflect the character of God; they will 'walk as children of light.' Here, then, the first of a series of 'tests of life' is laid down."⁶

CONCLUSION: The great Scottish preacher Robert Candlish noted that it is only when we are walking in the light that we confess our sin. "The sins we confess are so forgiven, that we are 'cleansed from all unrighteousness' with regard to them. This means much more than that we are let off from the punishment which they deserve, and have to answer for them no longer. That is all the absolution for which the church-penitent, at whatever confessional, naturally cares. But that is not what is here held out to us. Our sins are so forgiven as to ensure that in the very forgiveness of them we are cleansed from all unrighteousness, -- all unfair, deceitful, and dishonest dealing about them, either with our own conscience or with our God. The forgiveness is so free, so frank, so full, so unreserved, that it purges our bosom of all reserve, all *reticence*, all guile; in a word, 'of all unrighteousness.' And it is so because it is dispensed in faithfulness and righteousness; 'he is faithful and just in forgiving our sins.' He to whom, as always thus dealing with us, we always thus submit ourselves, is true and righteous in all his ways, and specially in his way of meeting the confidence we place in him when we confess our sins. We open our heart to him; we are always opening it. We spread out our case before him; concealing nothing; palliating nothing. We tell him of all that is sad and distressing in our conflict with indwelling corruption, as well as of all our failures and shortcomings in our strivings after conformity to his law. We speak to him of sloth and selfishness, of worldliness and carnality, damping our zeal, quenching our love, making us miserably indifferent to the good work going on around us, and shamefully tolerant of abounding evil. On the subject of such experiences as these we are coming always to confer with our God, in the light in which he is, and in which it is our aim to walk. We find him always 'faithful and just;'

– not indulgent merely, kind and complaisant, bidding us take good heart and not be so much cast down; -- but ‘faithful and just.’ God is true; true to himself, and true to us; so true to himself and to us that all untruth in us becomes impossible.”⁷

ENDNOTES

¹ Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen On The Christian Life* (Banner of Truth, 1987), p. 74.

² Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1978), p. 107.

³ Richard Mouw, former president of Fuller Theological Seminary, has been at the forefront of this effort. Cf. Bill McKeever, “Richard Mouw – Defending a Brand of Mormonism Many Mormons Don’t Believe,” *Mormonism Research Ministry* (July/August 2016).

⁴ Mormonism emphatically rejects the Orthodox doctrine of The Trinity and declares that Jesus and Lucifer are actually siblings! *The Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (Deseret Book Company, 1992), p. 127, declares, “Unique to LDS theology in modern times is a view of the Godhead as consisting of three separate beings, two possessing bodies of flesh and bone and one possessing a spirit body. An official declaration concerning the Godhead states: ‘The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit’ (D&C 130:22). Latter-day Saints take the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, in a literal, anthropomorphic sense, attributing to God both a human form and emotions. They accept both a ‘oneness’ and ‘threeness’ of the Godhead as taught in the Bible. However, they reject the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, and believe instead that the Godhead is one in mind, purpose, and testimony, but three in number. Thus, they believe that God is spirit in the sense that he is infused with spirit, and in the sense that the Holy Ghost is a spirit, but they do not limit the Father or the Son to incorporeality.” cf. my chapter “The Reformation, Today’s Evangelicals and Mormons” in *By Faith Alone: Answering The Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, edited by G. L. W. Johnson and G. P. Waters (Crossway, 2006), pp. 191-204.

⁵ J. R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1964), p. 70.

⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* (Eerdmans, 1970), p. 41.

⁷ Robert Candlish, *1 John* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 58-60.