

~Other Speakers M-R: Thomas Reade:

39. CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

"Finally, all of you should be of one mind, full of sympathy toward each other, loving one another with tender hearts and humble minds." 1 Peter 3:8

What a lovely object would the Church of Christ present to the world, did all its members live in the spirit of the gospel. The conversion of the world to the faith of Christ would then be hastened, if all who believe in Jesus were cemented together by holy love, and actuated by the Holy Spirit. The declarations of Scripture are clear and decisive on the beauty and blessedness of Christian fellowship. "By this," said our Lord, "shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another." To the Thessalonians Paul wrote; "But I don't need to write to you about the Christian love that should be shown among God's people. For God himself has taught you to love one another. Indeed, your love is already strong toward all the Christians in all of Macedonia. Even so, dear friends, we beg you to love them more and more." "The Lord make you to increase and abound in love one toward another, and toward all men, even as we do toward you." Peter exhorted the Christians, to whom he addressed his epistle, to add "to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity."

Did all the churches of Christ, in the apostolic age, manifest to the world the graces of brotherly kindness and charity? Were there no disfiguring traits in the character of the primitive believers? Alas! we have to mourn over the corruption of the heart, even in the purest age of Christianity! With the apostolic admonition, "Love must be sincere," Paul had to warn the church at Rome, "I beseech you, brethren, mark those who cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which you have learned; and avoid them." For the Corinthians, he drew with the pencil of truth, guided by the Eternal Spirit, the most beautifully finished portrait of Christian love. And yet, over this very church, for which, on some accounts, he could thank God, he had also deeply to mourn— "There are contentions among you." "There is among you envying, and strife, and divisions." "You wrong, and defraud, and that your brethren." "It's not the Lord's Supper you are concerned about when you come together. For I am told that some of you hurry to eat your own meal without sharing with others. As a result, some go hungry while others get drunk." "For I am afraid that when I come to visit you I won't like what I find, and then you won't like my response. I am afraid that I will find quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfishness, backstabbing, gossip, conceit, and disorderly behavior."

Can this be the picture of a primitive church? Alas! it is. If we ask, while surveying these tares, who has done this? Our Lord has told us in his parable; "An enemy has done this?" Satan busily sowed his weeds among the wheat at the very formation of the Christian church. Though admitted by baptism into the society of the faithful, they proved by their works whose children they were. And so it is now. Hypocrites, deceivers, false brethren, heretics, and schismatics trouble the church. This condition of the visible church, painful as it is, verifies the words of the apostle, when writing to the church at Corinth, "In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval." To such faithful souls, Jesus sent a word of comfort by his servant John; "Because you have obeyed my command to persevere, I will protect you from the great time of testing that will come upon the whole world to test those who belong to this world. Look, I am coming quickly. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take away your crown." Truly this is a word in season. Oh! that we may be found faithful when the sifting time arrives.

The images employed to describe the unity of the church are beautiful— The harmony which is experienced in the human frame, where, if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; the union which subsists between the foundation and the superstructure of a building; the tender oneness of the marriage state; are all employed by the apostles to set forth the union of believers in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Head, his people are the members of his mystical body. Jesus is the Foundation, his people, the living stones in the spiritual building. Jesus is the Husband, his people, collectively, form the bride, the Lamb's wife.

Perfection is a plant which bears its fruit in heaven. Here we may and ought to cultivate it with unceasing care, but still the precious fruit can only be enjoyed in the paradise above. While journeying there, "it is absurd to expect perfection; but it is not unreasonable to expect consistency." Did Christians act up to their principles, did they do to others, as they, in reason and justice, would wish others to do to them, we would behold a blessed change in the so-called religious world. Uprightness and sincerity formed the perfection of the Old Testament saints. "Mark the perfect man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace."

Maturity in Christian experience, and ripeness in Christian graces, compose the perfection of believers in

Jesus. "Brethren," says Paul to the Corinthians, "stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults (perfect, or of a riper age.)" And to the Hebrews he writes, "Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature (perfect), who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

Blessed Jesus! your nature was perfect, your soul spotless, your whole life without sin, when you condescended to become man, and to die the just for the unjust, to bring us unto God. Grant that I may be renewed in the spirit of my mind; that I may be transformed into your holy image; and walk before you in newness of life. Give me the graces of simplicity and godly sincerity. Cause me to grow up into you in all things. Enable me to forget past attainments, and to reach forth unto those things which are ahead. Deliver me from presumptuous sins. Strengthen me to fight the good fight of faith. Shield me by your grace; and preserve me, as a vessel of mercy, unto your eternal kingdom and glory.

Next to communion with God, there cannot be a more refined felicity than the communion of saints. Everything holy in principle, and exalted in prospect, is associated with the assurance, that the friends whom we love upon earth, shall be our friends in the presence of God our Savior. Worldly attachments resemble the summer showers, which rapidly swell the brooks, but soon pass away; while Christian friendship, the communion of saints, is like a perennial spring. The love of Christ towards his people is the ever-flowing the ever over-flowing fountain of blessedness, whose refreshing streams are the most abundant when most needed.

Oh! that I may daily partake of these waters of salvation! How sweet it is to taste that the Lord is gracious. His consolations are neither few nor small. When we forsake Him, we forsake our own mercies. And yet, alas! how prone we are to forsake the fountain of living waters, and to "hew out to ourselves cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water." This conduct is our folly, as it is made our misery.

Our roses grow on prickly stems. Everything, even our choicest comforts, have some admixture of sorrow, to remind us of the fall. There is, O blessed assurance! a world where all is perfect, where pleasures flow like a river, pure as crystal, from the throne of God; where Christian friends, united here in Christ, shall meet, in perfect holiness, to part no more. Oh! what a resplendent view is opened to us through the gospel. What pure delights those people lose, who have no relish for communion with God, no participation in the communion of saints. The friends of Jesus, are the friends of each other. They love each other for His sake, who is their beloved and their friend. With united voices they can sing,
"Bless'd be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above."

There is something magnetical in genuine Christian love. It attracts heart to heart. In such a world as this, how invaluable is a Christian friend; one, on whom we can rely, and into whose bosom we can freely pour those thoughts and feelings which occupy our own. This world, like "a peevish April day, is made up of rain and sunshine." Here, we are called to endure; in heaven, we shall be privileged to enjoy. Brethren in Christ, whose hearts are knit together in love, shall, before long, meet around the throne, united to their glorified Head.

How delightful is the thought of being forever with the Lord. How composing under every trial is the assurance of seeing Him as he is, and being made like Him in the perfection of love. O that my heart were more and more assimilated to my divine Lord. Holiness is the health of the soul. Holiness is happiness. Holiness is heaven begun. Heaven must be a place of unspeakable bliss, where God our Savior manifests his glory; where the holiest affections will be in their highest, perpetual exercise; where all the excellent of the earth shall be assembled; and where, the very element of the place, is Eternal Joy!

Bless'd is the tie which closely binds
In friendship sweet two kindred minds;
This sacred chain is light and free;
The joy of Christian liberty.
Jesus, of all the friends, most dear,
Is ever to his people near;
They feel his presence in their hearts,
He never from their souls departs.
In gloom, and sickness, grief, and care,
Their burden he will kindly bear;
And if their sun shines clear and bright,

Christian Fellowship

**Jesus is still their Chief Delight.
How dangerous worldly friendships are,
Of sin and guilt the fatal snare;
While Christian fellowship and love,
Unite us to the saints above.
This grace divine, so freely given,
Cements the Church in earth and heaven;
Oh! may this grace be ever mine!
My Jesus, seal me ever thine!**