

# Life Together...



CALLED INTO  
THE COMMUNITY  
OF FAITH

## Our Common Life in Christ 1 John 1:3,7

The title of this current series is *Life Together: called into the community of faith*. Last week I pointed out that, yes, you were saved as individuals but the Holy Spirit immediately placed you into a body, the Body of Christ. Into this community you were called and in this community you live out your common faith. The idea of a freelance, private, independent, individualistic, Lone Ranger faith is completely contrary to both the spirit and the letter of true Christianity. So the goal of my efforts last Lord's Day was to help you begin to turn a corner in terms of how you actually think about the Church. Indeed, the point of the message last Sunday was this: when it comes to the Church, to think correctly is to think corporately.

Today I want to explore the answer to this question: what is the basis for our fellowship with one another? In other words, what is it that binds us together? What is it that unites us? What is the most fundamental thing that we have in common?

Now in the world of human affairs we join ourselves together for all kinds of reasons. There are thousands upon thousands of clubs, committees, teams, associations, coalitions, guilds, unions, and societies. Some of these organizations are formed around a common concern for environmental, political, economic, or moral issues. Societies are formed on the basis of a common interest. There are groups of coin collectors, airplane pilots, horseshoe pitchers and foosball players. Members of support groups join together because they share a common problem or need. The list, of course, is endless but I think you get the point. The members of these societies are joined together on the basis of some concern, interest, or problem that they share in common.

Now consider the Church, the community of faith. What is it that unites us together? What is the grand commonality we share? Is it Presbyterianism? Is it the Reformed faith? Is it Calvinism? If someone were to do a survey would he discover that a common educational attainment, or economic status, or political persuasion, or ethnic background is the glue that binds us together? Are we joined together because we share a common set of values? Are we joined together because we have embraced a common world and life view? Are we joined together because we affirm a common confession of faith? I suggest to you that while many of the above may justifiably get a few votes in any survey, none of them passes the test as the basic or fundamental commonality.

To get us headed in the right direction we go to our central passage for this Sunday - I John 1:3, 7. *What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ ... but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

Upon the reading of these two verses we immediately notice two references to our life together. The first in verse 3, *that you also may have fellowship with us*. The second in verse 7, *we have fellowship with one another*. But you also notice that both of these references to our fellowship with one another are followed by a reference to our fellowship with Christ. Look at verse 3. *Indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ*. Look at verse 7. *And the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin*. So here we discover that our fellowship with one another flows out of our fellowship with Jesus Christ. Listen to I Corinthians 1:9. *God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*.

What unites us together? What is the glue that binds us together? What is the basic thing Christians share in common? We share a common life in Christ. Let me give you a simple illustration from the world of human relationships. I have one brother – Robert Lynn Ferrell. What, at the most basic level, unites Robert Lynn Ferrell and George Thomas Ferrell? Is it our common love of athletics? Is it the fact that we have the same last name, grew up in the same neighborhood, lived in the same house, attended the same schools, ate the same food, fished in the same creek? No! At the most fundamental level that which binds the two of us together is the fact that we have the same mother and father. Out of the billions of human beings on this earth Bobby Ferrell is the only other person who has Don and Jean Ferrell for his parents. That fact will never change. All those other things enhance, strengthen; indeed, they are a consequence of that one basic commonality. We are brothers, the two sons born of the same man and woman. We are bound together biologically, legally, and emotionally. As believers we share a common life in Christ. Everything else we have in common is a consequence of this fundamental spiritual reality.

Pastor, the example about you and your brother is crystal clear. I've got that one nailed. But this thing about a common life in Christ? That's like trying to pick up a piece of Jello. I'm not sure I've got a grip on it. We share a common life in Christ. You may not grasp this as fully or as quickly as you would like but I do want you to see that it is in fact the case.

The Bible teaches it. John 1:12-13, *But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.* I John 5:11-12, *and the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and **this life is in His Son.** He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.* Leon Morris gets to the point of both of these passages. "The word *children* indicates those who share a common nature. That is what we expect in a family; it is what makes a family. A family is a group of people linked by ties of kinship; they share a common nature derived from their parents. John has the thought that believers are people whose essential nature comes from God ... he speaks of being reborn. The thought is that a divine miracle takes place whereby people are reborn into the heavenly family. In II Peter 1:4 we read of people becoming 'partakers of the divine nature', and it is something like that of which John is speaking here. Believers have the right to a place in the heavenly family because of what God has done in them" (*Reflections on the Gospel of John*, Vol. 1, p. 13).

Our Confession affirms it. Chapter 26 of the Westminster Confession is titled *Of the Communion of Saints*. "All saints, that are united to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit" (I). When we say we are "united to Christ" what do we mean? What kind of connection do we actually have with Jesus? Reformed theology has

resisted certain suggestions that to 21<sup>st</sup> Century ears sound like science fiction. First is the suggestion that we are connected to Christ through some kind of close, intimate personal experience. The problem is that, in terms of our connection to Christ, the Bible speaks not of some momentary sense of communion but of a continual state or condition of fellowship. The second suggestion Reformed theology has resisted is that believers are absorbed with and by the deity. Kind of like being marinated in the Spirit. The Confession takes aim at this suggestion. "This communion which the saints have with Christ, does not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of his Godhead; or to be equal with Christ in any respect" (26, III). Dutch theological Herman Ridderbos concludes, "It has come to be understood increasingly, however, that with these 'mystical' explanations of our connection with Christ one is on the wrong track" (loose quotation from *Paul, An Outline of His Theology*, p. 59).

There are two ways in which Reformed theology has traditionally understood the connection of the believer with Christ. The first is that believers are joined to Christ in a representative union. As we have taught repeatedly, faithfully, and I hope effectively, Christ suffered, died, was buried, and raised from the dead as our representative. To communicate this glorious truth Paul uses the term "for us." Romans 5:8, *while we were yet sinners Christ died for us*. II Corinthians 5:21, *God made Christ to be sin for us*. Galatians 3:13, *Christ has become a curse for us*. Christ did these things "on our behalf" as our representative.

It stands to reason that there is a bond, an intimate connection between Christ and those He represents. Indeed, there is and so close is this bond that it can be said that believers are "in Him." 114 times in the New Testament Paul uses the

term “in Christ” to express this connection. Follow as I read a sampling of these verses. Romans 8:1, *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are **in Christ Jesus**.* I Corinthians 1:30, *But by His doing you are **in Christ Jesus**.* II Corinthians 5:17, *Therefore if any man is **in Christ**, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.* Philippians 1:1, *Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints **in Christ Jesus** who are in Philippi.* Colossians 2:10, *and **in Him** you have been made complete.* Paul uses a family of such terms – “in Christ”, “in Him”, “with Christ”, “with Him” – to express the single idea that what once took place in Christ is applicable to those He represented.

We can see this idea fleshed out most fully in Paul’s explanation of the representative roles of Adam and Christ in Romans 5 and elsewhere. Adam and Christ are progenitors, originators, the singular forefathers of two nations or families of men. Picture if you will two masses of humanity. In front of each mass is a great figure - the patriarch, the leader, the king, the spokesman - who represents everyone who is identified with him. Adam stands before one nation. Christ before the other. Indeed, so closely are the people identified with their representatives that they are said to be “in” them - either “in Adam” or “in Christ.” In the actions and decisions of each of these representatives lie the fortunes and fate of all who belong to them.

We were ruined in Adam. Romans 5:12, *Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.* Adam as our representative fell and we fell “in Him.” We were restored “in Christ”, the Second Adam. I Corinthians 15:22, *for as **in Adam** all die, so also **in Christ** all shall be made alive.* II Corinthians 5:14-17, *For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died;<sup>15</sup> and He died for all,*

*that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf ...* <sup>17</sup> *Therefore if any man is **in Christ**, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.* Christ as our representative paid the penalty for sin and fulfilled the just demands of the law and we are declared righteous as we are in Him.

Adam and Christ represent distinct nations, families, environments, worlds, kingdoms. One is the kingdom of darkness, sin, and death. The other of light, holiness, and life. The chosen of God, the elect of God, the saints, the people of God have been transferred out of one into the other. This is what Paul is referring to in Colossians 1:13-14, *For He delivered us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, **in whom** we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

From God's perspective when we are united with Christ we are identified with Him in all the particulars of His dealing with sin. Romans 6:3 says, *all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death.* We were identified with Christ in His death. It is as if there on the hill of Golgotha we hung with Him. Romans 6:4 says, *we have been buried with Him.* We were identified with Christ in His burial. It is as if we were placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathaea with Him. Romans 6:4 says, *as Christ was raised...we too might walk in the newness of life.* We were identified with Christ in His resurrection. It is as if when He arose on the first day of the week we arose with Him (see Eph. 2:5). Ephesians 2:6 tells us that God *seated us with Him in heavenly places.* Technically, ideally I am seated in Washington, DC on the floors of both houses of Congress in the persons of my elected representatives – Joe Barton, Kay Bailey Hutchison, and John Cornyn. It is in this representative sense that we

are to understand how we can be seated in heavenly places. So, beloved, you are joined, you are connected to Christ in a representative union.

Believers are also joined to Christ in a vital union. Now if something is vital it is, like the air we breathe, necessary to the maintenance of life itself. What kind of life is it that we have entered into as Christians? I came to know Christ; I was born again on Sunday May 15, 1973. My physical body was as alive on May 14, the day before my conversion, as it was on May 16, the day after my conversion. So we're not talking this physical life in and of our earthly bodies. In view is what we call *spiritual* life.

Romans 6:11 teaches that believers are *alive to God in Christ Jesus*. What does this mean? As those who have experienced the regenerating, life-giving grace of God we now have the capacity to respond to and enjoy fellowship with the one, living and true God. We have been granted new capacities, a new allegiance, new affections, new desires, new perspectives, a new status, new motivation, newfound freedom all as a result of God's grace. We have been made both capable and willing to submit ourselves to God. Being *alive to God* is to delight in Him. God, as He has revealed Himself to be, is agreeable to our souls. Being *alive to God* is to have regard to Him. We have a hunger for His Word and seek to conform to His will. Being *alive to God* is to have concern for Him. We have an interest in His honor and glory in our lives and among men. This is the life created in us by the Holy Spirit (John 6:63). This is the life sustained in us by that same Holy Spirit who indwells us. In this sense we are joined to Christ in a vital union.

The Bible gives several metaphors to help us understand this. One is that of the



vine and the branches from John 15. Jesus said, *"I am the vine, you are the branches"* (John 15:5). It doesn't get much clearer than that does it? When we were in Tennessee I trimmed up some of the shrubs around my mother's house and piled them next to the street to be mulched. It only took a matter of hours before the leaves began to shrivel up. They had been cut off from that which sustained life. Another image is that of a body. I Corinthians 12:27 says, *Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it.* Again, that's pretty plain isn't it? All the various parts of your body share a common life. We are joined to Christ in a vital connection.

Now here's the point that all of this has been leading to. I want to loosely quote A. A. Hodge, one of the old Princeton theologians, in his commentary on the Westminster Confession:

*"Since all true believers are thus intimately united to Christ as the common Head of the whole body, and the Source of a common life, it follows that those same believers must be intimately united together. If they have but one Head, and are all members of one body, they must have one common life, and be members one of another. The view of Rome is that individuals are united to the Church through the sacraments, and through the Church to Christ. The true view is, that the individual is united to Christ the Head by the Holy Spirit and by faith; and by being united to Christ he is, by the very nature of the case, united to all the members of Christ's body, the Church ... They have a common Head, and common duties with respect to him; a common profession, a common system of faith to maintain, a common gospel to preach, a common worship and service to maintain. They have a common life, and one Holy Spirit dwelling in and binding them together ... "* (*The Confession of Faith*, p. 324). It is this life together that we will be exploring over the next few months.

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Today we want to explore the answer to this question:

***What is the basis for our fellowship with one another?***

(What binds us together? What is it that unites us?)

In the world of human affairs we join ourselves together for all kinds of reasons.

Now consider the Church, the community of faith.

***What is the grand commonality we share?***

**I John 1:3, 7,** *What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ ... but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

Example: Robert Lynn Ferrell and George Thomas Ferrell

**As believers we share a common \_\_\_\_\_ in Christ.**

Everything else we have in common is a \_\_\_\_\_ of this fundamental spiritual reality.

**The Bible teaches it** (John 1:12-13; I John 5:11-12).

**Our Confession affirms it** (WCF, Chapter 26, I).

“All saints, that are *united* to Jesus Christ their Head, by His Spirit” (I).

When we say we are “united to Christ” what do we mean?

There are two ways in which Reformed theology has traditionally understood the connection of the believer with Christ.

**1. Believers are joined to Christ in a \_\_\_\_\_ union.**

“For us” passages (Rom. 5:8; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13)

“In Christ” passages (Rom. 8:1; I Cor. 1:30; II Cor. 5:17; Phil. 1:1; Col. 2:10)

Paul uses a family of such terms – *in Christ, in Him, with Christ, with Him* – to express the single idea that what once took place in Christ is \_\_\_\_\_ to those He represented.

**Representative roles of Adam and Christ**

In the actions and decisions of each of these representatives lie the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ of all who belong to them.

We were \_\_\_\_\_ “in Adam” (Romans 5:12).

We were \_\_\_\_\_ “in Christ”, the Second Adam (I Cor. 15:22; II Cor. 5:14-17).

**2. Believers are joined to Christ in a \_\_\_\_\_ union.**

Romans 6:11 teaches that believers are *alive to God in Christ Jesus*.

As those who have experienced the regenerating, life-giving grace of God we now have the capacity to \_\_\_\_\_ to and enjoy \_\_\_\_\_ with the one, living and true God.

Being *alive to God* is to \_\_\_\_\_ in Him.

Being *alive to God* is to have \_\_\_\_\_ to Him.

Being alive to God is to have \_\_\_\_\_ for Him.

This is the life \_\_\_\_\_ in us by the Holy Spirit (John 6:63). This is the life \_\_\_\_\_ in us by that same Holy Spirit who indwells us.

The vine and the branches

The body

A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*