

Fellowship (for a Post AD 70 Era)

by Ward Fenley

Among the many questions which arise as a result of the theology of a first-century *parousia* (or coming of Christ), one which deserves our attention is that of fellowship. Fulfilled theology or preterism, like any other belief, has adherents who have gone to certain doctrinal and practical extremes. In fact, many of us have been accused of various extremes and are indeed extreme when compared to traditional theology. For example, the affirmation of a first-century *parousia* is extreme to many traditionalists. The affirmation of the present reality of the kingdom of God is extreme to many traditionalists. The repudiation of pre-millennial dispensationalism is extreme to many traditionalists. Therefore, simply because one holds to a view perceived as extreme by traditionalists does not necessarily make it wrong. Extreme can mean "too much." But it can also mean "to a great degree."

There are some who have taken certain verses and created extreme (and very negative) doctrines out of those verses. One of those is the following:

Hebrews 10:25 not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day drawing nigh.

Some see this verse as indicating a cut-off period for the necessity of fellowship. After all, they argue, since "the day" has come and gone, there is no need to fellowship. This is, however, an easy argument to dismantle. Our first response should be in the form of a question: Should we also not encourage love and good deeds? Most rational thinkers would think it preposterous to not love or encourage loving. We then should cite the previous verse:

Hebrews 10:24 and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works;

In context we see how these elements of fellowship and love cannot be separated:

Hebrews 10:24-25 and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works; (25) not forsaking our own assembling together, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more, as ye see the day drawing nigh.

Once we establish the necessity of "our own assembling," or gathering, as well as love, we must carefully assess the passage and other texts to see how this can and should be fulfilled in a post AD 70 era.

The passage uses a phrase to contrast the forsaking of assembling by stating, "but exhort one another so much more..." This should prompt us ask the question: what should be the primary focus of "assembling?" The answer is: to exhort one another. The Greek word is *parakaleo paraclite*, which is the word used to describe the Comforter, or Holy Spirit, who was sent to comfort the first century saints during the first century preaching and tribulation. So, if we are to comfort one another in a post AD 70 era, what does that comfort entail and what is the *nature* of that comfort in a

21st century computer generation? from

Let's start by approaching the *nature* of exhortation. That is, in an age where technology, satellite communications, and the internet are fundamental means of communication, the nature of exhortation takes on a whole new face. Through the means of real-time chat, video conferencing, and of course cell phone and landline connections, we are able to communicate with others all over the world. Can we actually benefit from these types of communication to the extent that we can call it exhortation? The answer is an emphatic yes. To deny this would be to say that we must deny any positive influence of accessing the preaching of the Gospel by any means other than in-person communication. By "in-person" we mean experiencing the physical proximity of the person. When was the last time you were encouraged by a phone call from a loved one? Or when was the last time you listened to a message/sermon or even a CD recording or mp3 of something which edified you, or comforted you? I believe any medium which builds us up in our most holy faith can be identified as comforting. However, the passage is clear: "forsake not the *gathering*..." It is this word which is imperative to our understanding of the passage and what should be an integral part of the Christian life.

Prior to the inventions of phone, television, and internet communication, the only means of communication was through mail. But mail is not live. That is one distinction that should be made. Live communication is *real*. This distinction is important, for you would never hear Paul saying that a letter communicates the passion, emotion, and depth of actually gathering together. Granted, live chat cannot do this either. Phone conversations convey some of this, but even here a person's presence and person are lost. After all, eyes speak volumes of a person. Let's consider video communication. Video has it all. Or does it? If video (or visibility and audibility) which contains the sights and sounds of the person to whom you are listening, or with whom you are communicating, is one of only two ways (the other being physical presence) to have fellowship, how do the blind and the deaf have fellowship? This boils down to the immutable reality of the person. All video and audio is merely a representation. But nothing can re-create the real person. A deaf and blind person would be excluded from the benefits of fellowship if fellowship was dependent upon a person's ability to perceive things visually and audibly.

There is something about a person's presence (beyond sight and sound) that makes that person unique and *real*. A person has a presence that video and audio cannot replace. A part of a real person is presence, smell, touch. Even the timbre of the voice cannot possibly be matched by even the most advanced audio. No digital reproduction can re-produce exactly what you are experiencing in any given place. After all, that person is where you are, in the same room, under the same tree, in the middle of the same field. Without even touching that person, we can *feel* the person, metaphorically speaking. When that person is near you, their presence is near you. God uses the senses to reach us through every person with whom we communicate, or fellowship. Isn't it fascinating that the Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*? The same word is used for communion:

2 Corinthians 6:14 Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?

Fellowship and communion are synonymous. But of the senses we experience while with another person, there is something distinctly unique to a person's presence. Granted, it is possible to have fellowship (be comforted) through the phone, internet, chat, or even video conferences, and these all would seem to qualify as fellowship. For in all of these types of communication comfort may be found. But I think we all would agree that the ideal form of communion or fellowship is when we actually gather together. It must be pointed out, however, that our physically gathering together must not diminish the greater significance of our actual spiritual union in Christ and in each other. "For in Christ you are all one," says Paul (Galatians 3). But God has graciously given us the privilege to be able to experience the beautiful representation of what we always have in Christ by giving us each other's physical presence (or for that matter, *virtual* presence). Therefore, as God's children, we are in the presence of each other regardless of our physical location, and certainly regardless of whether we can physically see or hear. As you consider these things, grow in your thanksgiving for, and in your pursuit of, the comfort He and His children give us through presence with each other. For in that very presence we have the magnificent representation of our union with God and His people.