

“The Fullness of Fellowship” (II)
Colossians 4:10-14 (NRSV)

When I became more serious about my Christian faith during my university years, I discovered a **new kinship with other believers** who were my brothers and sisters in Christ. My heart was not only freely drawn up to God but, ineluctably, out to them. They loved the same things I loved. They wanted to talk about the same things I wanted to talk about. They understood what I understood. I was experiencing, of course, the friendship, or what the Bible calls the Holy Spirit’s “koinonia” – translated “fellowship” -- that every believer experiences as an outgrowth of knowing Jesus Christ.

My new life in Christ became the basis for **lasting friendships**. And, this shared mystery of Christ is also the basis for my relationship with my wife, Colleen. In him, our hearts beat together. She is not only my wife, but also my best friend, my confidante, my counselor and my joy. We share what we read together; we often think about the same things together. I sometimes jokingly say to her, “See, I didn’t only marry you for your good looks, but also for your excellent brain.”

I’ve just read something similar that **C. S. Lewis** shared about his relationship with **Joy Davidman**, an American, whom he met in Oxford and to whom he was happily married for only four brief years during his mid to late fifties until she died of cancer:

A good wife contains so many persons What was not [Joy] to me? She was my daughter and my mother, my pupil and my teacher, my subject and my sovereign; and always, holding these all in solution, my trusty comrade, friend, shipmate, fellow soldier. My mistress, but at the same time all that any man friend (and I have had good ones) have ever been to me... (A Grief Observed, 1960,1964, p. 39-40).

In Jesus Christ one can develop **amazing, mutual, soul friendships** with others that are among our dearest treasures. Christian friendship is one of the principal boons of knowing Christ. The dynamics of Christian friendship or fellowship were beautifully explained by the apostle John in his first letter: “...we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you may also have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn. 1:3). Fellowship with God spawns fellowship with others, especially with other believers.

The key to the quality of our earthly fellowship is the quality of our fellowship with God. **Those with the richest fellowship with God can have the richest fellowship with each other.** They share the **same view of reality** as they look at and live in the world around them. They **share the same view of self and others**, as they are fully aware of the reality of sin and the goodness of God’s forgiveness and grace as it affects the human personality. They **share the same values and ethical standards**. They **share the same love** for Christ, his Word and his church. And they share the same hopes and dreams, the same cause – all of which make for an exhilarating, satisfying mutuality.

This is what helps us to **instantly connect with another Christian** even if we only meet them once, briefly. For example, an American businessman, **Allan Emery**, tells a moving story of a brief meeting he’d once had with a subway conductor whom he’d caught whistling a refrain from a hymn amidst the rush of the Thirtieth Street Station in Philadelphia that remained with him for the rest of his life (*A Turtle on a Fencepost*, 1979, p. 75-78). Sometimes, hardly a word is spoken, but there is an immediate sense of oneness and the ability to communicate on the deepest level. You sense that you both belong to the same family.

In Colossian terminology, **“the fullness of Christ floods our souls and overflows to others.”** If the others are believers, their lives also overflow. There is mutual recognition and mutual refreshment that results in deep, satisfying friendship and fellowship with each other. In the New Testament we find that there are **over 100 different, named Christian friends associated with the apostle Paul**. He named **sixteen different friends** in the conclusion of his Letter to the Romans alone. Here in his Letter to the Colossians, he remains true to form, naming **ten others** in his concluding words. This, along with what we can cull from their backgrounds and from the nature of the greetings they ask to be sent, suggests the overflowing fullness of fellowship in Christ that was evident in the early church.

1. Fellowship that crosses racial and religious barriers.

We’ve already heard about **Tychius**, “a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord” and **Onesimus**, the converted slave, now “the beloved brother, who is one of you,” who will bring this letter to the Colossians and who “will tell you all the news about me” (4:7-9).

Now Paul turns his attention to **six others** who ask to be included in the concluding words of his letter, to send their own greetings. **Three were Jews and three were Gentiles.** The three **Jews** were: “**Aristarchus**, my fellow prisoner [in Rome], **Mark**, the cousin of Barnabas, ... And **Jesus who is called Justus** (4:10-11a). Paul said of them, “These are the only ones of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me” (4:11b). The three **Gentiles** were: **Epaphras**, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus.... **Luke**, the beloved physician, and **Demas**” (4:12a, 14). Language, national animosities, and differences in religion and culture had divided the world of that day (as they still seem to do) into **hostile camps** that could only be held together by force. **Here within Christian companionship both camps were walking and working together – in an amazing unity!**

From the very beginning Jesus Christ had demonstrated that **this was the intent of the gospel.** When **he crossed both foreign and gender barriers** in reaching out to **the Samaritan woman**, as recorded in John’s Gospel, chapter 4, the woman was amazed, and the Jews, who heard of it, even more so. **Hatred between Judea and Samaria had lasted over 400 years.** While the Jews had kept their racial purity during their Babylonian captivity, the Samaritans had lost theirs by intermarrying with the Assyrian invaders. In Jewish eyes, this was unforgivable. Also, the Samaritans had built a rival temple on Mount Gerizim – only to have it destroyed by the Jews in Maccabean times. In Jesus Christ’s time bitter hatred reigned supreme. A Jewish prayer even said, “... and Lord, do not remember the Samaritans in the resurrection.”

Added to this was the fact that **the Samaritan was a woman.** Strict rabbis forbade other rabbis to greet women in public. Some Pharisees were called “the bruised and bleeding Pharisees” because they shut their eyes whenever they saw a woman and so stumbled into corners of buildings, incurring so-called pious bruises. But Jesus not only spoke to the woman; he used the woman’s drinking utensil, thereby becoming ritually unclean.

Jesus leapt far beyond the conventional barriers of his day. He reached out and touched all kinds and various conditions of people. And in doing so, he modeled one of the supreme glories of the church. This is what happened in all the places his gospel was preached.

Jews learned to reach out and to touch the lives of Gentiles. The apostle Paul led the way. Admittedly it wasn't easy. There were lots of questions and plenty of roadblocks along the way. But it gradually happened, more and more, until it became obvious that there was no other way.

This is what happened in Rome as well. The Gentiles in Rome were ready to mix, but it was not so with the Jewish believers who legalistically demanded that the Gentiles be circumcised and follow Jewish ceremonial law. When the apostle Paul first came to Rome, these legalistic-minded Jewish believers gave him a cool reception, even rejecting the authenticity of his missionary charge. “[But,] writes Paul, “[there are three] of the circumcision among my co-workers for the kingdom of God, and they have been a comfort to me” (4:11b). These three were receptive and loving; these three understood and practised the gospel of grace. No wonder Paul wanted to add their greetings, along with his, to the largely Gentile church in Colossae. These three had Colossian fullness in fellowship.

It is impossible to hold racial prejudice in the heart and be Spirit-filled. Such an attitude goes against everything Jesus Christ taught and embodied. Whenever a Christian refuses fellowship with other healthy, Spirit-filled believers, no matter what their denominational, ethnic, or cultural background, there can only be one conclusion: something is wrong in his or her relationship with God. When we have fullness of fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ, we have fellowship (and friendship) with one another regardless of background. These three Jewish believers in Rome were experiencing fullness of fellowship in their local church; it must have touched their church fellowship and that spiritual fullness clearly overflowed to the church in Colossae.

2. Fellowship that transcends grievances.

Believers at their worst are capable of holding on to grievances. I don't care what the scenario might be, it just happens.

Two congregations, located only a few blocks from each other in a small community, thought it might be better if they'd become one united body, and thus become one larger, more effective congregation, rather than two struggling churches. But they weren't able to pull it off.

Some didn't want to lose the former "family feeling." Some didn't want the church to be any larger. Some couldn't agree on the way the new congregation ought to recite the Lord's Prayer: one group of people preferred to say, "forgive us our trespasses" while another group of people preferred to say "forgive us our debts" and another group wanted to say "forgive us our sins." So one church returned back to its "trespasses," while the other returned to its "debts"!

Even believers can be stubborn, unchanging and unforgiving. Yet some, equally strong-minded individuals, say like the apostle Paul and Mark, are able to forgive and forget, and forge ahead to new adventures.

Earlier, **Mark** had accompanied **Paul and Barnabas** on the latter's first great missionary journey when they set out from Antioch. After ministering for some time in Cyprus, we're told **Mark abandoned Paul** when they reached the shores of Pamphylia (Asia Minor), returning to Jerusalem. We don't exactly know why. We can guess from Paul's writings that the hardships they endured were incredible, with stress very much like that experienced by soldiers in combat. Later, with that abandonment in mind, when Paul was planning another journey, although Barnabas insisted that Mark be asked to go along, Paul refused. The result was an infamous separation as Barnabas Mark with him and Paul took Silas. Certainly, Paul wasn't running some "Holy Land Tours"; he didn't want anyone along who wasn't prepared to pull his/her own weight and be faithful, in spite of the odds. But now, twelve years later, **Mark was with Paul in Rome, ministering to him in his imprisonment.** And Paul gladly sent Mark's greetings along with his own, commending him, saying, "... if he comes to you, welcome him" (4:10c). In the accompanying letter to Philemon he called him one of his "fellow workers" (Phil. 24). And later, in the sunset of his ministry, he said to Timothy, "Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry" (2 Tim. 4:11).

There was no way that **these two** who both loved God and were walking in fellowship with him would not have fellowship with one another. That is what true fellowship brings! If two believers cannot be reconciled, then either both or one of them is not in fellowship with God. Is there someone that you will not forgive – that you have no desire to forgive, even though time has gone on, or he/she has sought your forgiveness? If so, you need the fullness of Christ. If you are full of Jesus Christ, you will be like him, forgiving.

3. Fellowship that is large-hearted.

Finally, I want us to note that **there is expansiveness in the fellowship** of these three Jews and three Gentiles who are named in Paul's list of those who want to send their greetings. Most of them had never been to Colossae, but they loved the believers there anyway. They understood that they were all part of one another. What Paul said about **Epaphras**, who had been there, suggests something of what they were like:

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything God wills. For I testify for him that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and Hieropolis. (4:12-13)

Epaphras had come all the way from Colossae to Rome to consult with Paul because he was concerned about the heretical, Gnostic teaching that was taking place and robbing the Colossians of their spiritual fullness. His evident, continual exercise of "agonized" prayer for them demonstrated his profound concern for these new Christians. Further, Paul could see he'd "worked hard" in practical ways for the overall well-being of the Colossians, as well as for two neighbouring churches. Obviously, Epaphras cared!

When you are in full fellowship with Christ you naturally take on something of other people's pain or distress. Your heart becomes enlarged to take in the heartaches of others.

Phillips Brooks, the celebrated preacher of Boston, and author of the immortal Christmas carol "O little town of Bethlehem," put it this way:

To be a true minister is to always accept someone else's happiness and sadness. The one who gives himself to others can never be a wholly sad person; but no more can he be a person of unclouded gladness. To him shall come with every deeper consecration a heretofore untasted joy, but in the same cup shall also be mixed a sorrow that was beyond his power to feel before. (The Influence of Jesus, 1875, p.191)

That is the way it was with Epaphras and his co-workers. His enlarged heart made him open to the burdens of others.

Also fullness in fellowship encompasses so-called “misfits.” Paul concluded this set of greetings with, “**Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you**” (4:14). Luke was the only Gentile writer of any book in the New Testament. He was a much-loved Christian, physician and devoted friend, as well as amateur historian – all in one! **But Demas was another story.** Later, Paul would write of him, “Demas, in love with this present world, has deserted me...” (2 Tim. 4:10). Perhaps Paul was already aware of his spiritual slide because he was the only one of the six about whom there was no comment included with the greeting. Mind you, Christian fellowship is not perfect; it is always being stretched by troublesome participants.

Edwin Markham once wrote:

Some draw a circle that shuts people out;
 Race and position are what they flout;
 But Christ in love seeks them all to win,
 He draws a circle that takes them in!

There’s a new song by Gordon Light that’s gaining popularity in the United and Anglican churches (unfortunately, it’s not in our book):

Draw the circle wide.
 Draw it wider still.
 Let this be our song, no one stands alone, standing side by side,
 draw the circle wide.

God the still point of the circle,
 round whom all creation turns;
 nothing lost, but held forever,
 in God’s gracious arms.

Let our hearts touch wide horizons,
 so encompass great and small;
 let our loving know no borders,
 faithful to God’s call.

Let the dreams we dream be larger
 Than we’ve ever dreamed before;
 Let the dream of Christ be in us,
 Open every door.

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Remember, our Lord took and still takes in those who disappoint and hurt. Only consider, if you will, his own, rather surprising, rag-tag team of disciples. Christian fellowship makes us bigger people who have a greater and greater capacity for real compassion and care.

In the gospel, we have something wonderful to offer to the world: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 Jn. 1:3, NIV). We offer first **fellowship with God** – not just knowledge about God, but a relationship with him. The gospel also offers a **fullness of fellowship among God’s people**.

This dynamic fellowship overcomes barriers, transcends grievances, and produces largeness of heart.

May it be so!

Amen

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