

“The Core Of Christian Fellowship”
Br. Ted Smith

Usually we find these words on our convention programs: "A welcome awaits all believers in the ransom, and those who love God and the appearing of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." How full of vibrant meaning are the words "the appearing of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ"! He is already present and we watch with thrilling interest the fulfillment of prophecy in our day indicating that He is reigning in the overthrow of Satan's empire preparing for his complete assumption of power for the blessing of all mankind.

Over the years we have seen advertisements for some book or course of study concerning the supposed "secret wisdom of the East;" or "Secrets entrusted to a few;" or the unpublished facts of life." One ad was very cleverly worded: "There are some things that cannot be generally told--THINGS YOU OUGHT TO KNOW. Great truths are dangerous to some--but factors for personal power and accomplishment in the hands of those who understand them. Behind the tales of the miracles and mysteries of the ancients, lie centuries of their secret probing into nature's laws --their amazing discoveries of the hidden processes of man's mind, and the mastery of life's problems. Once shrouded in mystery to avoid their destruction by mass fear and ignorance, these facts remain a useful heritage for the thousands of men and women who privately use them in their homes today." This ad appeared in PREVENTION magazine, August, 1959, page. 97. This is very clever propaganda--appeals to our ego--we are protected from such subtle deceit!

Ours is a favored lot--we have had revealed to us the wisdom which is from above, the secrets of the Divine Plan. These secrets are so delightfully simple, so rational and so satisfying to our desires for something better than we find in ourselves or in the world around us. We do not try to hide our secrets, but shout them world-wide, in simple English--but these secrets are so unexpected that they attract only those who have the "blessed eyes and the blessed ears."

I have had occasion to think about our Christian fellowship--the tie that binds our hearts beyond the fellowship we have because of an appreciation of redemption through Christ Jesus. What is this higher fellowship beyond that of all other professed Christian people?

Individually we spend time and effort in study of God's Word and the Harvest Message. And we do the same as Ecclesias and when we come together in conventions. In convention gatherings we are not all engaged alike socially--some are very busy in meeting

everyone at conventions; while others are somewhat reserved by nature. BUT there is a strong tie that holds us all together, despite our differences in temperament. What is that tie? What is the CORE of Christian fellowship we all as Truth people enjoy?

We think the answer is a mutual appreciation of the HIGH IDEALS of our "HIGH CALLING" and a mutual appreciation of God's lovingkindness in providing restitution for mankind. Important for us to be aware of this and think it through until we understand it thoroughly. We should bear in mind that we are all idealists at heart--we associate ourselves together because of our High Calling now and appreciation of restitution later on for mankind.

We have already mentioned that we are not all alike as conversationalists at convention time. This should not alarm us when we know about the CORE of our Christian fellowship. People in worldly associations have the same problem--the reserved are encouraged to branch out; and this advice is good for us as Christians too. Rich is the blessing we experience just to be in the company of one another, even if we do not talk very much; but we experience more blessing if we try to overcome our natural reserve and try to become acquainted with one another.

We benefit greatly if we breathe more deeply of our holy atmosphere; or more plainly speaking, if we become more deeply conscious of that which has attracted us all as a magnet. Then we know less of one another according to the flesh, and more of one another according to the Spirit--our thoughts, words, and acts, in association with one another function on a higher level. Paul spoke in Eph. 3:8, and 9 of "the unsearchable riches of Christ" and of the "fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God." We have fellowship in these heavenly truths--we have tasted of these riches--we have a communion which is incomprehensible to the natural man.

These wonderful truths have been revealed to us in the Harvest Message; and the early church enjoyed much of the pure truth which we enjoy today. All down through the Gospel Age, the Lord's people were provided with enough truth to nourish them, regardless of the conditions under which they lived. However, we know that down through the centuries, God's Word became mixed with Papal error; and it was necessary to have a cleansed sanctuary in the end of the age--we had to have a fresh start, a pure message.

When we are born into the world, we accept conditions without much thought. But when we delve into Church history, we discover that in our day we have Christian knowledge of

finest quality. A diamond of finest quality is called a diamond of "first water." Our truths are diamonds of "first water"--we have literally a whole library of "first water."

The Harvest Message is made up of MANY truths of TREMENDOUS value. As compared with other Christian people, we are living in brilliant sunlight and they are dwelling in faint moonlight. If we fully realize this, we should be in awe as concerning what we have and know that our fellowship is on an exceedingly high plane. As to the precious doctrines of the Divine Plan, our Pastor said his work was not so much origination as harmonization--putting in order the teachings of the Scriptures. Yes, "harmonization" is the proper thought and what a delight this "harmonization" is!

In addition to the doctrines of the Divine Plan, the Harvest Message contains explanations of prophecy pertaining to the end of the age and the beginning of the Millennial Age. Lines of thought, logical and dove-tailing with one another, give us assurance of our position on the stream of time and the season in which we are living. We are assured beyond all reasonable doubt that we are living in the closing period of the old order, and that the new order is in the process of being established in the earth. The expression "The Kingdom of Heaven Is At Hand" is full of potent meaning to us.

BUT we must make a difference between dogmatic doctrines and teachings on prophecy. This is essential to our balance and happiness as individuals, and essential to the harmony and solidarity of our fellowship with one another. The CENTER of our relationship is composed of the doctrines of the Divine Plan.

Shortly before 1914 our Pastor reasoned on the possibility that some expectations might not pan out perfectly--he called our particular attention to the fact that reasoning on, and knowledge of prophecies are not in themselves the Gospel. Something vital here is for us to grasp from our Pastor's attitude. We would like to quote from his article entitled "LET YOUR MODERATION BE KNOWN" (Reprint page 5249; Z. 6/1/'13) under the subheading "Meditate on These Things": "We urge, moreover, that a knowledge of the times and seasons connected with the divine plan of the ages is helpful, encouraging and inspiring. Nevertheless, such knowledge is not of itself the Gospel. If every date of the chronology and every prophecy were blotted out, we should still be joyful in the Lord, and should still rejoice in his glorious Gospel of which Jesus and his great sacrifice constitutes the center, and our promised participation with him as his members in the blessing of all the families of the earth constitutes the circumference.

"This is the good tidings of God's grace in Christ--whether the completion of the church shall be accomplished before 1914 or not. Let us preach the message of God's grace,

and let our hearts be stimulated with God's message through the prophets, to the effect that the blessing is nigh at hand. Let our moderation be manifest to all, and let the fact that we know only in part and understand only in part help to keep us humble and moderate in word and deed and thought. Thus we shall best serve the interests of our Master and his cause, and be most in harmony with the teachings of the Word."

Another reference of like importance is found in the article entitled KNOWLEDGE AND FAITH REGARDING CHRONOLOGY. This is found on reprint page 5367 (Z. 12/15/'13). Starting on page 5368, second column, par. 1 and 2 he started out by saying, But let us suppose a case far from our expectations: Suppose that A. D. 1915 should pass with the world's affairs all serene and with evidence that the 'very elect' had not all been 'changed' and without the restoration of natural Israel to favor under the New Covenant. . . ." Then he ends up this paragraph with these words, "One of the strings of our 'harp' would be quite broken!"

But 1915 did not pass with the world's affairs all serene did it? No, the great World War #1 began in 1914, showing that the Pastor was on the right track; but it is taking more time for the complete change over than he anticipated.

The special point to consider is in the following paragraph: "However, dear friends, our harp would still have all the other strings in tune and that is what no other aggregation of God's people on earth could boast. We could still worship a God so great and grand that none other could compare with him. We should still see the grandeur of his salvation in Christ Jesus--'a ransom for all.' We should still see the wonders of 'the hidden mystery,' our fellowship with our Redeemer in 'his death' and also 'his resurrection' to 'glory, honor and immortality'--'the divine nature.'"

This does not mean that in our Christian fellowship we are to stifle discussion or that we cannot think or that we cannot have any opinions. It does mean however that we should never lose sight of the very center of our Christian fellowship--that it is the GOSPEL (the good tidings of God's grace as it is found in Christ Jesus). It is lamentable that when some brethren have a difference of opinion, they are inclined to blow it up into something big- they make a hobby of their opinion, constantly agitating their opinion as though it were something extremely vital to understand; and the result is that our fellowship suffers. If we remember the primary reason for our being together—if we remember that we are bound together by a mutual love of the Gospel, then we will AUTOMATICALLY avoid these extremes.

I don't think there is any reason for a difference that is so vital that it need spoil our fellowship in the Truth. We have the Gospel in all its beauty and entirely--any possible difference would be of only minor importance. I should like to mention incidentally that there are two attitudes regarding differences on prophetic matters, one of which I think is very harmful and the other one is proper. The first attitude is critical toward our Pastor's presentations--an attempt to show that our Pastor's views are misleading and unscriptural--this to my mind is most offensive. The other attitude is the proper one I think, and that is that since our Pastor has died it is necessary for us to think and evaluate what he has written and attempt to arrive at correct conclusions in the light of developing world events. And we must give one another liberty of honesty of thought, and we must not try to restrict one another or overpower one another in expressing opinions, or be grieved if we have honest differences IN THE TRUTH.

Let me illustrate--today we differ with one another on whether the stone has struck the image or not. Both of us have honest opinions and we both are endeavoring to have the right thought from what Brother Russell has said and in the light of world events as we see them. This is having a difference IN THE TRUTH, and is perfectly proper and we should not use pressure upon one another if we cannot convince one another of our particular viewpoint. There is nothing vital that will have a harmful effect upon our characters or upon our activity in the Lord's service, or upon our proper holding of the doctrines of the Divine Plan. (Incidentally the writer holds to the view that the stone did strike the image in 1914.) We may not realize it, but we Bible Students not only have the best there is in understanding of the Scriptures, but we should attain to the highest degree of conduct in the discussion of religious subjects--we must be intelligent, reasonable, self-controlled and courteous.

It is important for us to remember that the Harvest Message is the means provided by God to give us direction and strength to make our calling and election sure. As we have changing experiences we have a CONSTANT source of strength and direction. Even if some of our brethren go off on a tangent, we do not need to feel stranded. The same is true if a movement or publication becomes shaky--need not feel dismayed or bereft of Divine guidance. The Lord uses members of the Body to minister to the Body, but the STANDARD IS THE TRUTH--not some brother, magazine or organization! To the extent a brother or a magazine or an organization serves in harmony with the Harvest Message, they are helpful, but, not otherwise. The Bereans were "noble" because they recognized a standard for guidance. We have a HARMONIZED BIBLE as a standard for our guidance and obedience--this enables us to recognize the difference between Truth and error when they are read or heard.

Now let us consider for a few moments the superior qualities of our religion. First let us analyze the views we hold concerning our Heavenly Father's purposes and intentions toward the human race. Let us contrast in our minds, our views with the indistinct notions which are held by other professed Christian people. Naturally we can touch only a few points as the Truth is so vast in its scope of meaning.

The earth was created for the specific purpose of becoming the beautiful and delightful dwelling place for mankind. When it is perfected, it will be kept that way perpetually and it will defy description in mere words. Perhaps some writer will be fairly bursting to find adjectives to picture to the mind the tranquility, the beauty and the peace of God's glorious footstool. Some sections of the earth today give us a slight sip of future glories of the perfected earth. We have beautiful Balboa Park in San Diego, California; we have alpine lakes, reflecting evergreen trees, and you have to check to make sure which is the reality and which the reflection; we have majestic mountains, and the peace and quiet of wooded spots. I can remember years ago when returning from a trip to California--I parked along the highway and stepped back into the woods, and the peace and beauty overwhelmed me for a few moments. Eventually the WHOLE EARTH will be like this.

Then there is the beauty and fascination of the restless ocean--I can remember watching the waves roll up on the shore, and the thought came to me--I wish I might go on for all eternity, as a personality, the same as these waves will probably roll up on the shores of the ocean for all eternity!

When the soil and weather are favorable, how delightful is the sight of growing orchards and thrifty crops! Down in Southern California, I have seen hundreds of acres of oranges, lemons and walnuts--not a weed to be seen anywhere, and the soil cultivated to perfection!

Our religion teaches us that the desert shall blossom as the rose and the earth will bring forth its increase. There will be no extremes of climate, no storms, no earthquakes, no volcanoes--WHAT A BELIEF--THIS FORMS A PART OF OUR FELLOWSHIP!

Now let us refresh our minds on our belief concerning mankind when restored to liberty of the sons of God. How comforting is the doctrine of restitution!--"Blessed are they that mourn!" "No lion or ravenous beast"--nothing to mar the happiness of mankind restored. No vices to tear down character. No oppression or dictators or selfish kings; no wars to terrorize or destroy.

God's spirit is to be poured out--men are to be actuated by the spirit of righteousness and lovingkindness. What a delightful state of society!--all will be educated with the wisdom which is from above!; all will be happy in exercising the Golden Rule and loving their neighbors! All will be worshipping God with every fiber of being in passionate fervor. Will that be a time of "life, health, peace, happiness, security"? Yes, but much more--man will be brought to perfection of character, when he is filled with reverence, righteousness and the spirit of love.

Brethren I am not satisfied with the expression, "life, health, peace, happiness, security" as a balanced description of man's future state in perfection. Something is missing if fail to mention the most important part--his God-like character. Man in selfishness can desire "life, health, peace, happiness, security"--but well balanced men will appreciate the possession of God's spirit as the superior part of their perfection and restitution.

Every man will dwell under his own vine and fig tree--how satisfying to actually possess a home and the means for growing luscious, health-sustaining foods for all eternity! The "Do it yourself" idea will be universal and not the exception--man will long enjoy the works of his hands. Man was created to be active, mentally, physically and socially. Activity will be his constant delight for all eternity. He will do creative work for the blessing and enjoyment of his fellows. All will be singing praises as they work and rest together--what a society! No wonder the Redeemer will see the travail of him soul and be satisfied! All these prophetic pictures are or become a part of the CORE of our fellowship--we are the most fortunate people in the world today.

Now let us consider the HIGH IDEALS of our High calling as an extremely important part of the fellowship of saints. When we analyze the designs of God am worked out through Jesus, we see the primary characteristic in the Heavenly Calling is the spirit of sacrifice in behalf of others. Jesus had this as a part of his native state. We receive training and gradually have this characteristic developed in us, and it is a slow process. I am sure that our respect for the loving purposes of God in behalf of mankind, and in behalf of his church, and respect we have for the high ideals of the Heavenly Calling, as we are "workers together with God" are parts of the strong tie that bind us together in Christian Fellowship.

As we speak of these things, our Redeemer's magnificent life of love for us comes to mind. And our love to him in return, is a part of our fellowship together--this is a combination of admiration and gratitude.

Now we pause long enough to briefly summarize the various elements of our Christian fellowship: **FIRST**, our appreciation of God's purpose to have a perfect earth, a footstool made glorious for man's eternal home. **SECOND**, AN APPRECIATION OF **GOD'S PURPOSE** to restore man to what was lost, and bring to perfection his character, to dwell in love to fellow man and God for all eternity. **THIRD**, a mutual appreciation of the high ideals of our high calling, especially the example of our Head. **FOURTH**, an appreciation of the Redeemer's love in giving himself as the ransom sacrifice. If these four elements are basically the core of our Christian fellowship, then we can test ourselves to see if our spirits witness with one another.

As to the perfecting of the physical earth--we do not know how much we will have to do with that. We do know what it is like now with extremes of weather, erosion of soil, dangerous convulsions of nature, etc. What a delight to know all this is to be changed for man's benefit! From **THIS** garden, man will never be driven out! **WE FELLOWSHIP ON THIS HAPPY PROSPECT!**

In Rom. 8:19, 22 Paul tells us the human creation is groaning and waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God. The Apostle John teaches us that we are the sons of God. So then, the human creation is waiting for **OUR** manifestation, when we shall be with the **HEAD** in glory! Messiah will be manifested for the very purpose of doing away with all the causes of man's groaning. In some respects man doesn't even know that he is groaning; and if he does know, he does not know why. All he knows for sure is that he is born into this world just as it is.

Let us now briefly touch upon a few of the conditions of man's groaning and see if we do not have in our possession that which rejoices our hearts, enabling us to sing together as we travel the Valley of the Shadow of Death. If we travel and stop at the border of a nation such as Canada or Mexico, we are asked questions and have our baggage examined--doesn't this give us a rude jolt and make us feel sad? We are all from a common mother, we are all the same human beings having the same needs, desires, sorrows, joys, and in need of the father-hood of God. Yet here we are, all divided up, on a national scale into antagonistic communities! What a comfort the Truth gives us--**ALL THIS IS TO BE CHANGED AND WE WILL HAVE A PART IN BRINGING ABOUT THESE CHANGES!**

Then again--think of a political campaign: mud-slinging, name calling, wire pulling--it is a shock to see such a spectacle, degrading of human dignity! How happy to know that this is all to be changed, and we are to have a part in the change!

And think of the tragedy or sudden death--a husband dies and a young mother is left with a family to raise and shoulder the responsibility ALL ALONE! All these tears will be wiped away and we will introduce these humans to REAL LIFE FOR THE FIRST TIME! Then the inhabitants will not have to say, "I am sick," but "I am well FOREVER."

Then think of the countless misunderstandings due to man's fall and imperfections--leading on to divorces; friends become deadly enemies; and all go down into death with these misunderstandings and hatreds! How thrilling to believe that we will bring these people back from death and straighten out all these tangles of human relationships! WHAT A FELLOWSHIP WE HAVE!

History reveals that man, beginning with Cain against Abel, has always been pitted against himself. Now the world is divided into two great camps, glaring at one another, ready and willing to press the buttons which will start a war of mutual extermination. War!--how awful the thoughts connected therewith! How we rejoice that man will eventually "learn war no more!" The instruments of war will be changed to instruments of peace; and we will be behind the scenes, elevated to positions of power to bring about this desire of all nations!

We could go on and on in this vein--ignorance, poverty, sorrow, tears, "man's inhumanity to man"--all are to be corrected by the Messiah, Head and body. Do we catch the MIGHTY IMPACT of this hope in our hearts?! Jesus did! The Apostles did! Our Pastor did! And this is our present inheritance and a part of our Christian fellowship!

And now a few words about the high ideals put before us when we are engaged in God's service--the service of the Truth and the service of God's people. We are ambassadors for God--we hold forth the word of reconciliation to all who wish to draw near to God and become his people by a full consecration and entry into the Narrow Way. We set aside our desire of approval from our neighbors, and preach the Word regardless; and we do this unto God in reverence and gratitude! We give testimony for God in the world, not fully knowing the effects or reasons, but only that God wants it done.

We are to "comfort all that mourn" and give special attention to those who give evidence of having spiritual minds. We have this ministry as individuals and as Ecclesias, on a local and international scale--this is a fellowship of the highest order! Our service to one another involves ideals of the highest order--"a new commandment I give unto you." "He that is greatest, let him be your servant." Not to please ourselves! "Be all CLOTHED with humility!" Nothing in our Christian service is calculated to appeal to pride of heart.

Jesus picked out his apostles from the unusually common walks of life --fishermen, and Matthew was a publican. And in the personnel of the Lord's people today, there are not many wise, not many noble, but chiefly the poor of this world, but rich in faith." Among these we find attractive HEARTS--we do not miss high education, polished manners, oratory, fine clothes. We can appreciate these things, but we do not miss them if we do not possess them--"God seeth not as man seeth! And in our choice of brethren as speakers in local gatherings and even in conventions--very few have unusual speaking ability, education or training. But such have HEART training, and that is what appeals to us! Even if some have only a minimum of talent, such are not disqualified from service of the Lord's people.

Then in doing good to one another--do we let attractiveness of body or surroundings determine if we reach out to do good? No! Our ideals ignore outward appearances! In bearing the burdens of one another--do we pick out only an elite few, to attract notice to ourselves? Not Doubtless most burden-bearing is known only to those directly involved. Our hearts glow with admiration when hear of the good deeds done--not for show, but for the blessing of those in need!

In the choice of meeting places there is no evidence of pride or show. We use places that are respectable and convenient. We do not miss trained choirs, magnificent church buildings, elegant furnishings and decorations. And at Easter time, the sisters make no special effort to show off their new bonnets!

Our Berean studies are another evidence of our high ideals. In the making of the truth our own, we show our earnestness. We are not leaving 'm our spiritual nourishment up to a clergy class--lazy people like to shift burdens. True Bible Students are not lazy people!

And now a few words regarding our fellowship together on prophetic subjects. The CORE of our fellowship is the Gospel--this binds us together --a people as diverse otherwise as could possibly be. Our Pastor tried to make this clear to minimize the effect of differences of opinion, especially on prophetic subjects. But do we have fellowship on prophetic subjects--in ADDITION to our fellowship in the Gospel? Do we have ANOTHER fellowship that is different? Yes, and it is highly pleasing to us!

Let us illustrate these two fellowships we have together. Supposing we were expecting to take a voyage around the world--a conducted tour with all expenses paid. Would we not have pleasure together as we anticipated this unusual prospect of a trip around the world? We would pore over the description of the trip itself--where we would be going, the places we would be seeing, the strange people and sights in the various parts of the world,

the accommodations, etc. Truly we would enjoy this prospect together. This well illustrates our FIRST fellowship--our fellowship in the Gospel itself--the CORE of our fellowship.

Then supposing we got word that within the next three months we should actually begin our world tour. We would feel a certain excitement and we would make sure that we had all our preparations made for the beginning of the voyage AT ANY TIME, not knowing the EXACT DAY. This would be a fellowship together of, let us say, HEIGHTENED ANTICIPATION! Even though the time lengthened out to a full three months, we would not care, as it was worth it to know that the trip was NEAR AT HAND! It was worth it to be able to understand all the bustle and activity around us as preparations for the starting of the world trip.

And so it is with us, as we study the Harvest Message--we find not only the GOSPEL fully explained, but ALSO the prophecies explained, enabling us to interpret the signs around us as signifying that THE TIME IS AT HAND! What a fellowship this is IN ADDITION to our fellowship in the Gospel! As the Pastor expressed it--"a knowledge of the times and seasons connected with the Divine Plan of the ages is HELPFUL, ENCOURAGING AND INSPIRING,"--BUT THIS FELLOWSHIP IS NOT THE GOSPEL ITSELF.

All the signs around us indicate that our voyage is about to begin!--that the Divine Plan is progressing according to prophecy. Do we repine that our voyage has not started as soon as we had at first anticipated? OF COURSE NOT!

We have learned that the great Master knows his own business of running the Divine Plan better than we do; and we do well to be thankful for what crumbs of information he is pleased to give us concerning the events of the closing of the Gospel Age and the beginning of the Millennial Age. If we are meek as we should be, then we will be in a better heart condition to enjoy the voyage when our change does come.

And what are the signs around US indicating that the Bridegroom is present and that the Marriage of the Lamb is soon to take place? To enumerate all the signs would take many pages, so we will limit ourselves to just five: 1. the end of the Gentile Times in 1914; 2. the budding of the fig tree; 3. the waves dashing upon the rocks; 4. the great world-wide "shout;" 5. the most important of all--"that wise and faithful servant" serving us with "things new and old."

THE WORD OF TRUTH

The Word of Truth is like a stained-glass window rare,
We stand outside and gaze, but see no beauty there,
No fair design, naught but confusion we behold;
'Tis only from within the glory will unfold,
And he who would drink in the rapture of the view
Must climb the winding stair, the portal enter through.
The sacred door of Truth's cathedral is most low,
And all who fain would enter there the knee must bow
In deep humility. But once inside, the light
Of day streams through and makes each color heavenly bright,
The Master's great design we see, our hands we raise
In reverent ecstasy of wonder, love and praise!

(Poems of Dawn, page 6)