

The Way to Fellowship
1 John 1:5–10
March 12, 2017

Fellowship with God and with His people is not an option for the more serious minded Christians. It is sometimes thought that those less inclined may still call themselves Christians while pursuing lives that have little to do with Jesus Christ. The intentional fellowship with God through Christ, for them, just doesn't hold much importance. Is that an exaggeration?

Just take a look at the high percentage of people in our country that call themselves Christians. Three-fourths of the population makes that claim. Yet if that is biblical Christianity, then we must question whether God is holy and the cross of Jesus necessary.

And it's not just in the United States. We can take a look at countries that once had strong gospel work, like Germany, Britain, and the Netherlands, but over the years, drifted into merely professing Christianity while gutting it of any substance.

The Apostle John saw the early traces of that same kind of thinking. At one point, some that associated with the Ephesian church now followed a different teaching and different way of life. They thought themselves superior to those remaining in the church. Their view of God had changed. Their consideration of the necessity of the Incarnate God dying on the cross as a Substitute for them before God's wrath, had been laid aside for a more therapeutic, softer kind of religion that gave little to no thought about sin. Oh, they still claimed fellowship with God but not fellowship rooted in the redemptive work of Christ. Was that Christian? John said "no."

We denigrate Jesus dying on the cross when we give credence to that kind of Christianity. We can't change the way that the world has redefined Christianity to avoid calling God holy, sin-sin, and Jesus on the cross necessary. But we can affect the way that the church views biblical Christianity. That happens when we let the Bible alone shape our understanding and practice of the Christian faith as relationship to God through Jesus Christ. John calls this relationship *fellowship* and he centers it in Christ alone.

Fellowship with God through Christ leads to actively pursuing Him. Saving grace does not leave us passive in our faith. It engages us in fellowship with God and His people. What does the way to fellowship look like?

I. Premise for life

John starts his letter by reinforcing that Jesus, God's Son, has come in the flesh so that we might have fellowship with Him and with His people (1:1–4). Yet that central message to all of Scripture hinges on one thing, that **"God is Light."** He doesn't start with God is love or God is generous but God is Light. What does he mean?

1. God is Light

"This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all." Everything else in his letter is a commentary on the implications of that statement. *Light* is used to explain the nature and character and practice of God throughout Scripture. David declared, "The Lord is my light and my salvation" (Ps 27:1). "For You light my lamp, the Lord God illumines my darkness" (Ps 18:28). "Though I dwell in darkness, the Lord is a light for me" (Mic 7:8).

And prophesying about Christ, “The people who walk in darkness will see a great light; those who live in a dark land, the light will shine on them” (Isa 9:2).

The New Testament writers do the same. Christians are called “the light of the world” because Jesus is their light (Matt 5:14). Jesus said, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life” (John 8:12). John the Baptist “came as a witness, to testify about the Light, so that all might believe through him. He was not the Light, but he came to testify about the Light” (John 1:7–8). Paul told the Ephesian church, “For you were formerly darkness, but now you are Light in the Lord; walk as children of Light” (Eph 5:8).

God as Light conveys two critical truths: *light as revelation* and *light as holiness*. Jesus as “the Light,” reveals God to us. “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained [exegeted] Him” (John 1:18). We don’t discover God. He reveals Himself, He makes Himself known through Jesus Christ declared in Holy Scripture (Heb 1:1–4). You don’t hunt for light. Light exposes itself. That’s why this term conveys God revealing Himself instead of mankind making up their ideas about who He is. That’s also why we hold to *sola scriptura* as foundational, because we believe that what God has revealed about Himself is enough.

But tied to this revelation of God as *light*, is *light as holiness*. God has revealed Himself as holy and pure. He’s not like the other gods throughout the ages—sinister, capricious, dark, foreboding, malicious, unpredictable, and self-consumed. He is pure, unalloyed, transparent, brilliant, and all-glorious light. He is the Light that brought Isaiah to cry, “Woe is me!” and the Light that humbled the Christian-ravaging Saul of Tarsus. God as holy exposes our sin, guilt, and shame. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains why it is critical that we see light as holiness. “If you do not start with the holiness of God you will never understand God’s plan of salvation. . . . without starting with holiness there is no meaning in the cross” [*Fellowship with God: Studies in 1 John*, 108].

2. No shred of inconsistency

In contrast, the Bible often speaks of the human condition of bondage to sin as *darkness*. “For you were formerly darkness” (Eph 5:8). We were “darkened” in our understanding, “excluded from the life of God” (Eph 4:18). But in God “**there is no darkness at all.**” So there’s no mysterious lurking of the sinister; no foreboding issues in His character; no tricky, duplicitous actions; no change in who He is; no deceitfulness; no shifting away from what He has promised. There’s no darkness. He is who He is.

3. Why this premise?

What you believe about God determines what you believe about sin, Jesus, and the cross. If God is vague in His revelation and not Light or if He is somewhat murky and shadowy instead of the brilliant Light of holiness, then it is easy to construct our own way to God or to excuse and ignore sin. And it’s quite easy to put aside any thought of God Incarnate dying a bloody death at the cross. *If God is not Light*, then we can agree with Alan Jones who wrote, “The Church’s fixation on the death of Jesus as the universal saving act must end, and the place of the cross must be reimagined in Christian faith [*Reimagining Christianity*, 132]. He calls the substitutionary death of Jesus at the cross a “vile doctrine” [p. 168]. If God is not Light then he is correct. But since “**God is Light,**” then we desperately need the crucified Son.

If God is Light as in holiness but not Light as in revelation, then we live with hopelessness, feeling the weight of sin in the face of a holy God but seeing no way to be relieved of its guilt and reconciled to God. So we try acts of merit, elaborate ceremonies, rituals, sacrifices, asceticism, and anything else that we think will relieve guilt. Luther became a monk, fasted until he almost ruined his health, and lay naked upon the cold stone floors of the monastery as an act of penance to find favor with God. But he only found it in the revelation of the gospel of Christ as the righteousness of God (Rom 1:16–17). The Light of revelation takes us to Christ and His cross where we become holy.

II. Faulty conclusions

If you try to tamp down this revelation **“that God is Light,”** you will come to some faulty conclusions about faith and religion, and particularly, about fellowship with God. Wrong views of the God who is Light lead to making a god of your imagination that makes thinking about him comfortable without having to confront the reality of your sin. Or it leads to concluding that God is unknowable, so why bother at all? John addresses three ways, each beginning with **“If we say that,”** through which faulty conclusions about the revelation and nature of God affects us (vv. 6,8,10).

1. Practice reveals profession

The most common faulty conclusion is to *assume* relationship to God. It happens when people are around Christians, the church, Christian music, and Christian discussions but have not come to repentance and faith in Christ. It’s all about talk but nothing about walk. **“If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”** It’s the kind of Christianity that one can claim and basically forget until there’s an emergency or a box has to be checked at the hospital before surgery that your religion is “Christian.”

But the problem is that of saying one thing—**“we have fellowship with God”**—and living contrary to that profession—**“yet walk in the darkness.”** Talk is cheap. The gospel, though, is not about talk but about *walk*. Life in Christ is about practicing the truth. The word that John uses, **“practice,”** is literally, *doing the truth*. The gospel brings us into relationship with Jesus Christ, and that begins the walk in the light. John is declaring that the gospel truly believed is to be lived. To **“walk in the darkness”** is to conduct your life without regard to the holiness of God and the necessity of the death of Christ at the cross, or with the consciousness that Jesus came to free us from slavery to sin (Rom 6:17–18). That doesn’t mean that we never falter along the journey or fall into some sinful patterns. But if we can continue walking in darkness (present continuous action) without regard to living in holy relationship to Christ, then John concludes, **“we lie and do not practice the truth.”** Our walk reveals a false profession of Christ.

2. Denial exposes deceit

“If we say that we have no sin [so it’s looking at one’s present condition], we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.” Some of those following the false teachers in Ephesus concluded that they no longer had sin or that they had reached such a state through their mystical religious practices that sin in the body really didn’t count as sin, since it wasn’t in the spirit. Yet to deny sin in our lives or to treat sin as no big deal or to deny that specific sins made clear in the Word of God is *really not what the Bible is*

talking about is self-deception. God is not fooled by such denials or creative interpretation of His revelation in Holy Scripture. It's delusional living.

I recently had a conversation with someone whose daughter professes to know the Lord. Yet she is *creatively* reinterpreting what God says about marriage, fidelity, and purity to accommodate her desires. She doesn't balk in the least in calling herself a Christian, yet she refuses to call what the Bible declares sin to be sin. In that sense, despite the clarity of Scripture, she is saying, **"We have no sin."** She's not alone.

Could it be that this young lady has gotten wrapped up in her sin and trapped for a season but still be a Christian? Yes, I think that's quite possible. But if the practice of denying sin continues then it appears that John is saying that she moves from a Christian temporarily caught up in sin to one that has professed to know Christ yet by her works denied that she ever truly knew Him (Titus 1:16). John declares in such case, **"the truth is not in us."** He's not talking about an abstract philosophical idea, but **"the truth"** refers to the gospel, the revelation of God in Christ, who because **"God is Light,"** died an atoning death on the cross to restore relationship to God and to make us children of light.

Forgiveness through Christ is not a license to pursue sin. It's the divine gift to fight sin and to live as holy people that belong to a holy God (Titus 2:11–14). That doesn't mean we no longer struggle with sin but rather, as His people, we seek to live holy lives.

3. Delusional perfectionism attacks God

"If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." The language is precise. Here is one who surveys his life and concludes that, at this stage, he has not sinned. Ancient Gnosticism so focused sin taking place in the body and not in the spirit, that sin was no longer sin since the body was unimportant and evil in itself. They could sin at will while claiming their spirits free from sin. That's classic antinomianism. Gnostics have their kin in modern Christian Science adherents, as well as religions that blend Eastern religion with a dabble of Christianity. They claim that they do not sin simply because they refuse to claim sin. If you call it something other than a transgression against God, then one can claim that he has not sinned.

Claim to perfectionism declares that person to be the light rather than God. It makes God a liar because He has declared, "There is none righteous, not even one; . . . for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:10, 23). Yet when they deny that they have sinned. **"His word is not in"** them, so they are without Christ and the gospel.

John writes to encourage us not to sin (2:1). Yet in reality, we still struggle with sin. It's the daily warfare for the Christian. So we learn to live daily in the grace of forgiveness through Christ. We learn to war daily so that we might live holy lives. Without that consciousness of sin crouching at the door (Gen 4:7), we become haughty and self-dependent. We get locked into this world as though it's ultimate, while forgetting to live in view of the "not yet" that is to come. How do we change that?

III. Disciplines to practice

We are to learn to live with consciousness that **"God is Light."** That's John's pivot to move us toward daily disciplines that keep us focused on Him. So he lays out two daily disciplines that we're to practice. In both we see the pleasure of God.

1. Walk with Christ

To counter professing Christ while living contrary to the light of the gospel, John tells us, **“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.”** Keep in mind the two implications of God is Light: revelation and holiness. That helps us to see what he means by walking in the light. *First, we’re to walk or to conduct our lives with attentiveness to the revelation of God.* Where do we find that revelation? It’s not in our imagination, but rather it’s in the pages of God’s Word. God has given us stories, law, poetry, prophecy, gospels, letters, and even apocalyptic (highly imaginative, symbolic) writing that is His truth, so that these various genres from the Word might stick in our minds and keep us walking in the ways of God.

Second, we’re to pursue holiness in our daily living since our God is holy. “Pursue . . . the sanctification [holiness] without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14). We’re holy in Christ, so we’re not trying to come up with new sets of laws to regulate life. To be holy is to live as one redeemed by Christ, it’s living with Him as Lord in daily life. Holy living gives attention to God’s commands, not for merit but to please Him.

The natural outgrowth of walking in the Light is **“fellowship with one another.”** If we’re in fellowship with the Lord—the implication in walking in the light—we’ll also be in fellowship with one another in the body of Christ. But if we’re not walking in the light then we cannot manufacture fellowship. So the more that the gospel roots deeply in us and affects character and conduct, the more we grow in our fellowship with the saints.

Walking in the light means that we’re Christians, not some special, unusual kind of Christians. *God’s provision* for us to walk in the light is the ongoing application of the work of Jesus at the cross, **“and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.”** We walk in the light *because* of the blood of Jesus. The redemptive work of Jesus continues purifying us from sin’s stain and power. So this counters the one who professes to be in fellowship with God while walking in darkness. They have not known the effects of Jesus’ cleansing blood. But those who walk with Him continually do. As Lloyd-Jones quaintly put it, “. . . in a sense Calvary is always accompanying you” [142].

2. Agree with God

So, some say that that have no sin, but that’s not true of those who know the truth in Christ. **“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”** What is confession? It’s not getting in a box with a drawn curtain and speaking to a priest on the other side. Confession means that we agree with God with reference to our sin. Since **“God is Light,”** we’re living in the light of His revelation, both in the Word and in the reality of His holy character. Consequently, we keep a short sin list, as it’s been put. We keep agreeing with God about our sins, that they are *sinful* and wrong and unbecoming of us as His children.

What happens if we neglect agreeing with God about our sins? We’ll grow more callused toward sin, inevitably falling into more stubborn patterns of sin. *Confession* must be part of our daily discipline. It humbles us. It keeps us depending upon the grace of God. It keeps us attune in spiritual warfare. It keeps us living in the promises of God instead of trusting in our ingenuity. “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way,” the psalmist prayed (Ps 139:23–24). That’s our prayer and practice.

God's promise as we confess our sins is His faithfulness and righteousness in removing the guilt and purifying us in sanctifying grace, that we might live as a holy people.

Here's the pattern for those who are in fellowship with the Lord: walk in the light of this God who is Light and confess your sins as those agreeing with God who is Light. A faithful walk with Christ and regular confession of sins leads to living to the glory of God. That's the way of fellowship with God and one another.