

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Website: [www.churchredeemeraz.org](http://www.churchredeemeraz.org)

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**Pastor/Teacher**

**Gary L. W. Johnson**

## The Fellowship of the Local Church

Most of you are old enough to remember *Woodstock*, some of us come from the generation that saw Woodstock as the symbol of the turbulent '60's. The myth of Woodstock has been perpetuated by many in the mainstream liberal media, and especially among the Hollywood elite now mid-age baby-boomers, who nostalgically would very much like to recapture their youth by glorifying Woodstock as the personification of freedom. To them, the event represented informality, spontaneity, self-expression and a liberating sense of personal freedom. It was nothing of the sort. "A muddy, disgusting mess," is what folk-singer Judy Collins called it. More graphic was the assessment of Keith Richards, a member of the Rolling Stones who said: "Woodstock was one hundred thousand people stoned out of their heads wanting to get laid." Woodstock was, in fact, a tragic and demoralizing event that actually expressed the emptiness and sense of alienation that epitomized the times.<sup>1</sup> It is alarming and disturbing then to hear a well-known church growth leader make this amazing statement. "We baby boomers aren't coming to church to become members. We're coming to experience something. What we're hoping for is some kind, human touch...Secretly, I think we thirty-something folks believe that much of Woodstock is what the Church, in a certain sense, ought to emulate. The Church ought to be celebrative, informal and spontaneous...the theology of Woodstock is the dream of a generation...the church's failure to appreciate the impact of Woodstock could cause it to miss a wonderful opportunity in communicating the gospel intelligibly to an entire generation."<sup>2</sup> Should Woodstock serve in any way as a positive reference point for the church? Sadly, this is exactly how many people in our Evangelical Churches think when it comes to what constitutes worship, fellowship and the whole notion of Church.

Over the past decade I can't begin to count the number of trendy church flyers that I have received that advertise their worship services as "fun" and highlight how exciting they are. The preaching (if you could call it that) likewise is described as *practical* and *relevant* and will not be judgmental or heavy-handed. This concept begins with the notion that God is very benign and should *never* be thought of as angry. The consequences this has on worship and the life of the church are perilous. If we begin, for instance, with the assumption that Jesus' first concern is my personal happiness (as I define happiness), then this will serve as a filter in how I read the Bible. Due to the widespread influence of the Health-and-Wealth preachers that crowd the airwaves of so-called "Christian television," this is exactly how Jesus is portrayed. People treat the Bible like a road map to personal fulfillment or like a manual for fixing life's problems. In fact, given the therapeutic mindset that has gained ascendancy in our culture, even our evangelical churches can find themselves culturally conditioned to read the Bible through a paradigm that is quite foreign to historic Christianity. This helps to explain how people today can defend decidedly unbiblical notions (i.e., homosexuality is simply an alternative lifestyle) by selectively appealing to the Bible and the re-interpreting of everything through that particular grid. Due to the hermeneutic of self-centeredness, our narcissistic culture has been seduced into believing the lie that God is some cosmic bellhop eager to do our bidding.<sup>3</sup>

In one of the recent polls that we have alluded to, 75% of the Evangelicals surveyed could not give even a brief doctrinal explanation on what it means to be an Evangelical Christian. What's wrong? Evangelical Churches have jettisoned theology and, as such, lack discernment. This is a spiritual capacity, the ability to see *through* life, to see it for what it really is. Christians who have been taken captive by our therapeutic culture imagine that the chief end of man is not to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, but to improve our own private inner disposition, and that the church exists to provide them with personal satisfaction and to give inner tranquility to their hectic lives. They want psychological wholeness, marital bliss and integrated families. If God fails to provide us with this kind of prosperity and success (consumer's satisfaction) then we become cynical and disillusioned. The best description for what I am describing is "Mall Christianity."<sup>4</sup> In the mall, everything is for us, for our comfort and enjoyment, for our satisfaction, and so many Christians have come to assume that it must be so in the Church as well. The pattern of this world is seeking to conform the church, and it is hard to recognize the world's schemes and even harder to dislodge them from the Church once it has taken root. "Indeed, without a powerful theological vision as its antithesis, these cultural currents are impossible to resist."<sup>5</sup>

The Scriptures have much to say about worship and fellowship, but we cannot begin to even scratch the surface in this brief series. However, we do well to stop and consider the words of David Wells, "The purpose of worship is clearly to express the greatness of God and not simply to find inward release or, still less, amusement. Worship is theological rather

than psychological.”<sup>6</sup> Wells, in a chapter entitled “A Tale of Two Spiritualities” draws an accurate picture of the difference between classical spirituality and post-modern Spirituality and how the two express worship. In classical spirituality worship, as expressed in its hymns is God centered and Cross-focused with God’s holiness at its heart. In Post-modern spirituality (which characterizes much of contemporary evangelicalism) worship is primarily psychologically designed around the therapeutic. God is portrayed exclusively or predominantly in terms of the positive functions He serves for ourselves. Principally these are that He relieves negative feelings like anxiety and doubt. Wherein, then, lies the difference between a classical and a post-modern spirituality? The latter begins, not so much with sin as morally framed, but with sin as psychologically experienced, not so much with sin in relation to God, but with sin in relation to ourselves. It begins with our anxiety, pain, and disillusionment, with the world in its disorder, the family or marriage in its brokenness, or the workplace in its brutality and insecurity. God, in consequence, is valued to the extent that he is able to bathe these wounds, assuage these insecurities, calm the fears, restore some sense of internal order, and bring some sense of wholeness. As one praise song puts it:

He heard my cry and came to heal me,  
He took my pain and He relieved me,  
He filled my life and comforted me,  
And His name will shine, shine eternally.

This psychologizing of sin and salvation has an immediacy about it that is appealing in this troubled age, this age of broken beliefs and broken lives. The cost, however, is that it so subverts the process of moral understanding that sin loses its sinfulness, at least before God. And whereas in classical spirituality it was assumed that sinners would struggle with their sin, and feel its sting, and experience dismay over it, in post-modern spirituality, this struggle is considered abnormal and something for which divine relief is immediately available. That is why the experience of Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Owen (to mention only four who are representative of classical spirituality) is so remote from what passes as normal in the evangelical world today. Another difference is that the one spirituality is built around *truth*, but the other is defined by its search for *power*. In a charismatic setting this search takes the form of powerful encounters, dramatic experiences of the supernatural, healings of both physical and emotional kinds, and the exercise of the other gifts. But outside charismatic circles, the search for power is most often construed in therapeutic ways: The power to conquer anxiety, to find enthusiasm for a new week, to repair the broken connections within the self, and to piece back together ruptured relations. It is the power to restore one’s daily functioning. It is power for survival. There is yet another difference. In classical spirituality, access to God’s presence is gained through believing his Word and trusting in the work of the Christ of that Word. While these beliefs are not denied in post-modern spirituality, they are not the key that opens the lock. Access in post-modern spirituality, Wells notes, comes much more through the emotions and through bodily actions. The raising of hands, palms upward, swaying to music, the arms outstretched to heaven, the release of inward emotion, this is what opens the door to the divine reality. While everyone even remotely within a biblical frame of reference affirms both God’s love and his holiness, this post-modern spirituality greatly enlarges his love. It is because he is loving that we can hope for some sense of inward calm and order as his gift to his children. And while his transcendence and immanence are alike affirmed, it is his immanence, his relatedness that is preeminent. What is so striking about the hymnody—if that is what it is—of this post-modern spirituality, however, is its *parasitic nature*. It lives off the truth of classical spirituality, but frequently leaves that truth unstated as something to be assumed, whereas in the hymnody of classical spirituality, the truth itself is celebrated. The one rejoices in what the other hides. That seems to be the most obvious conclusion to be drawn from the fact that the large majority of praise songs that Wells analyzed, 58.9 percent, offer no doctrinal grounding or explanation for the praise; in the classical hymnody examined it was hard to find hymns that were not predicated upon and did not develop some aspect of doctrine. But that is not all. Not only is the praise in this post-modern spirituality often shorn of theological scaffolding, but what it facilitates is deeply privatized worship. One indication of this is that the Church, the collective people of God, features in only 1.2 percent of the contemporary praise songs; what dominates overwhelmingly is the private, individualized, and interior sense of God. By contrast, 21.6 percent of the classical hymns were explicitly about the Church. The texture of the songs in the post-modern spirituality, furthermore, is more therapeutic than moral.<sup>7</sup>

Our word *communion* is derived from the Latin *communio* which in turn is the equivalent of the Greek KOINÆNIA, the word we use to express fellowship. W. Robert Godfrey tells us that this word means being together and participating together in various concerns and activities. It means hearing and responding to the Word together. It means supporting one another in prayer. It means sharing financial resources to provide for the poor and to accomplish the work of the church. The central form of fellowship is found in the public worship of God. As we join our voices, hearts, ears and minds together, fellowship takes place in the highest degree.<sup>8</sup> What does the creed mean by the expression “communion of the saints?” What is the nature of this communion? How is it expressed and maintained? We need to be clear on what the Bible teaches on this subject. Many Christians, I am afraid, think that *fellowship* is simply a kind of social interaction that takes place over a cup of coffee in front of the church, before or after a church service. True biblical fellowship is vital to the church’s (and the individual Christian’s) spiritual health. It is, therefore, important that we understand what the Bible teaches about Christian fellowship.

## I. FELLOWSHIP: TWO-DIMENSIONAL

Communion assumes relationship. Marriage certainly captures this important feature of communion. There is an old Latin expression used in marriage that reads UBI TU CAIUS, EGO CAIA, “Where you are Master, I will be Mistress.”<sup>9</sup>

- A. Vertical. This is what 1 John 1:3 is accenting. This verse in essence describes a true believer! Fellowship with God means that we have a living relationship with Him (cf. 2 Peter 1:3-4). It is the kind of fellowship which commits believers to a life of obedience and holiness (cf. 2 Corinthians 6:14).
- B. Horizontal. This is the plane of fellowship believers have with each other. Note that this involves more than simply enjoying each other’s company. Among other things it involves our corporate worship together (cf. Hebrews 10:23-25). Contrary to the claims of George Barna (that we have examined in this series), we cannot go off and practice our Christian faith by ourselves. This kind of religious individualism is entirely foreign to the New Testament. “The fulfillment of Christian joy,” wrote Bishop Westcott, “depends upon the realization of fellowship.”<sup>10</sup>

## II. FELLOWSHIP: NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Christian fellowship has distinctive features. It aims to edify and to be edified. It is characterized by the desire to help and to receive help. Three specific things help to define the true meaning of fellowship.

- A. Means of Grace. J.I. Packer has captured this important aspect of fellowship: “Through fellowship, one’s soul is refreshed and fed, and by the effort to communicate one’s knowledge of divine things, one’s own grasp of them is strengthened. To have God’s children praying for you, caring for you as a fellow-believer, and sharing their experiences of trial and triumph with you brings vast enrichment; and your support of others in the way that others have supported you will mature you as well as benefiting them. Paul’s constant pleas that Christians would pray for him as he prays for them (Romans 15:30; 2 Corinthians 1:11; Ephesians 6:19; Colossians 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 3:1f.; Philemon 22; cf. Hebrews 13:18) and James’ injunction, ‘confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed’ (5:16), confirm this. Christian fellowship is a means of grace that we neglect to our poverty and our peril.”<sup>11</sup>
- B. Test of Life. Fellowship as described in 1 John is doing righteousness, loving the brethren, walking in the light and keeping God’s Word. This is what it means to “abide in God” (1 John 2:7-17) and this is the essential meaning of fellowship. In other words, it is the manifestation of our Sonship (1 John 1:7).
- C. Gift of God. “The primary object of the death of Christ,” wrote Charles Hodge, “was the communication of the Holy Spirit. He redeemed us from the curse of the law, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit, Galatians 3:13-14. It is the gift of the Holy Ghost secured in the covenant of redemption by the death of Christ that applies to us the benefits of his mediation. As the gift of the Spirit is secured to all the people of God, they are KOINÆNOI, joint partakers, of the Holy Ghost, and thereby made one body. This is the ground of the communion of saints in which the church universal professes her faith.”<sup>12</sup>

CONCLUSION: Remember the words of 1 John 5:21, “Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.” Biblical worship is not designed to make us feel good. It is not meant to be shaped by the particular culture that God has placed us in. In fact, we are called upon to live as strangers or pilgrims and to do so in reverent fear (1 Peter 1:17). Should we not bring this attitude of reverent fear with us when we come together to worship God? God calls upon us to sanctify His name when we draw nigh (Leviticus 10:3). How can we do that if we tailor our worship to fit the whims and fancies of the world around us? “The fear of God,” declares MacArthur, “was a central doctrine in the early church, as in the Old Testament. Unbelievers and believers alike were taught to fear Him. None but a rank fool would deal frivolously with God. It was that very fear that drew people for salvation and kept them obedient. Salvation doesn’t come from wanting to join the fun and end emotional pain—it comes when the heart cries out for deliverance from sin!”<sup>13</sup> If we would seek to sanctify God’s name when we come together, we must, as Jeremiah Burroughs wrote, “take heed of making *self* your end. There are some that are not so base and low in their hearts as to make the praise of men their end, but they aim and look at themselves. That is, they look at their own peace and satisfying their own consciences in the performance of duties. Now, though, it’s true that when we perform duties of God’s worship, we may expect to receive some good to ourselves, and we may be encouraged to the duties by the expectation of good to ourselves, yet we must look higher. We must look to the honor and praise of God that the name of the blessed God may be honored.”<sup>14</sup>

I can do no better in summarizing the importance of the communion of the saints than to quote Chapter 26 of the Westminster Confession of Faith: all saints that are united to Jesus Christ their head by his Spirit, and by faith, have fellowship with him in his graces, sufferings, death, resurrection, and glory. And being united to one another in love, they have communion in each other’s gifts and graces: and are obliged to the performance of such duties, publick and private, as do conduce to their mutual good, both in the inward and outward man. Saints, by profession, are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing

such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities. Which communion, as God offereth opportunity, is to be extended unto all those who in every place call upon the name of the Lord Jesus. This communion which the saints have with Christ doth not make them in any wise partakers of the substance of his Godhead, or to be equal with Christ in any respect: either of which to affirm is impious and blasphemous. Nor doth their communion one with another, as saints, take away or infringe the title or property which each man hath in his good and possessions.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> The turmoil of the '60's and its implications for the church are dealt with in an excellent manner by Kenneth A. Myers. All God's Children and Blue Suede Shoes: Christians & Popular Culture (Crossway, 1989), pp. 119-155.
- <sup>2</sup> Doug Murren, The Baby Bommerang (Regal Books, 1990), p. 52, as cited by D. Webster, Selling Jesus: What's Wrong with Marketing the Church (IVP, 1992), p. 65.
- <sup>3</sup> Noted sociologist Robert Bellah detected this trend well over a decade ago. "Most of the participants in this study saw the church as a means to achieve personal goals. Bellah notes a similar tendency in "many evangelical circles to thin the biblical language of sin and redemption to an idea of Jesus as the friend who helps us find happiness and self-fulfillment." As cited in Charles Colson, Against the Night: Living in the New Dark Ages (Vine Books, 1989), p. 99.
- <sup>4</sup> In the Sept. 12, 1994 issue of Christianity Today, the lead article "Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation," drew heavily on the solutions offered by George Barna. The individuals interviewed advocated, among other things, "an emotional experience of God is more important than its theological content," and that, "According to the experts [George Barna], it is no longer enough to present the gospel's propositional truths [sorry, Paul, John, Peter and the rest of the Apostles your *method* is outdated]. What will attract Xers, they say, is a strong, caring community of people who can be trusted [don't the Mormons fit this description? What's the difference between kind hearted Mormons and caring Christians?]."
- <sup>5</sup> David F. Wells, God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 51. This is the sequel to his No Place for Truth: Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology? (Eerdmans, 1993). I cannot recommend too highly these two books. I am deeply indebted to Wells' analysis of the present state of Evangelicalism.
- <sup>6</sup> David Wells, Losing Our Virtue: Why The Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 40.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid pp. 41-46.
- <sup>8</sup> W. Robert Godfrey, "TV Church" in Modern Reformation (Nov/Dec 1993), p. 20.
- <sup>9</sup> Those of you familiar with Roman history might remember that *Caius* and *Caia* were two names deemed fortunate by the Romans. At the celebration of marriage when the bride first entered the bridegroom's house, she would be asked by him who she was and this is the response she would give. cf. H. Witsius, Sacred Dissertation on the Apostles' Creed II (rpt. P&R, 1993), p. 378. The word "Mistress" in common vernacular denotes a woman who is involved secretly with a married man, someone the French call a paramour (a lover). Originally, however, the word was used of the Lady of a household.
- <sup>10</sup> B.F. Westcott, The Epistles of St. John (rpt. Eerdmans, 1966), p. 13. Michael Scott Horton writes along similar lines: "It is probably not an exaggeration to say that the independent, sectarian spirit in American evangelicalism has shown itself to be the most divisive and anti-catholic force in the history of Christianity. If we are to be biblical Christians, not only must we approach God correctly, we must approach him together." "Gnostic Worship," Modern Reformation (July/Aug 1995), p. 21.
- <sup>11</sup> J.I. Packer, God's Words: Studies of Key Bible Themes (IVP, 1981), p. 196.
- <sup>12</sup> C. Hodge, I & II Corinthians (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 689.
- <sup>13</sup> J. F. MacArthur, Jr., Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes Like the World (Crossway, 1993), p. 63.
- <sup>14</sup> J. Burroughs, Gospel Worship (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), p. 118.