

## The Fellowship of the Saved: 1 John 1

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I've been having flashbacks from my childhood recently. All these people in Iowa, walking our streets, knocking on doors, asking people questions--it's bringing back a lot of repressed memories. I grew up a door-knocker. Not for political campaigns, no. We door-knocked for salvation.

But the strategy was similar. We'd target a certain neighborhood we thought had a large amount of undecided souls, then go knock on doors. We had classes that trained us. When they answer the door, we'd ask our question: "If you were to die right now, do you know *for sure*--WITHOUT A DOUBT--that you'd go to heaven to be with God?!"

Talk about a conversation-starter! If they didn't slam the door on us, call the cops, or just politely say "No Thank you", they might give some sort of an answer. Usually something like, "I go to so and so church." And that's all we needed, like the taste of blood to a shark, we went in for the kill. Oh, but your church isn't our church! "Does your church baptise correctly? Or worship correctly? We'd flip to different scriptures that would proof-text the reasons why our church was the only one who had it right.

The goal was to end our door-knocking conversation heading with that stranger to our church, where we had the baptismal warm and ready to save that stranger that very day! It rarely happened, but we were fervent nonetheless. We were well-meaning, at least I think we were, good people who genuinely believed we were doing God's will.

My problem was--I didn't like door-knocking strangers, so I avoided it the best I could. And then I felt guilty. Was their damnation on my hands? Was my fear keeping them from hearing the Gospel? I carried this guilt with me to college.

Until, when I was in college, I came across our passage for this morning, 1 John 1. It's a letter, presumably from the Apostle John who wrote the Gospel, and it's the first text that a student of New Testament Greek translates. The Greek is simple, that's why they let beginners do it. It's repetitive, straightforward, easy vocab and grammar. I remember our Greek translation class in college, sitting behind Marti, translating this chapter verse by verse. But as I was translating the book of 1 John, my understanding of salvation began to open up, and my world was shaken.

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We're going to spend the next three Sundays going through this small book of 1 John. Stuck way in the back of our Bibles, we rarely study this passage outside of Bible College or Seminary. But we are missing out!

It is small, simple, and straightforward, but what it says about salvation and about our calling as church--this is deep and life-changing.

Our series is called “The Fellowship of God”. “Fellowship” is a favorite word of the author of 1 John, his preferred word for the church. “We have fellowship with God and Christ Jesus,” he writes in the beginning of this letter. And then, he spends the rest of his letter explaining what this means.

On the next three Sundays, we will explore what it means to be the fellowship of God, as we look at three characteristics of our church life together--Saved, Called, and Sent. This is, what we call, “Stewardship season.” Some of you may have bad flashbacks when you hear that word--stewardship--reminding you of churches you used to be a part of that filled you with guilt over how much you give--or how much you didn’t give!

But I assure you, we do not transact in guilt here! For us, this is a time to celebrate what God is doing at NCC, a time to focus on the life of our church and how we can commit to support that life through our prayers, gifts, and talents.

On the welcome table are fresh copies of our 2020 ministry budget. The back page has the Excel spreadsheet that shows the budget numbers laid out, but the first two pages are what is called a “Narrative Budget.” It lays out the various ministries--how much we spend and why--through a narrative, telling us about what happens here at Norwalk Christian Church. If you’re a member or our guest, we encourage you to pick one of these up. It’s a great way to learn more about what we do in fellowship together.

Next week we will have our annual congregational meeting, where we will vote on this 2020 budget and elect church members to serve on our board. It’s exciting to see how many people step up to serve our church in these ways. And then, two Sundays from now, we will have what we call “Commitment Sunday.” We will be providing next week “Commitment Cards” where you can, if you so chose, make a pledge financially to support the ministries of this church in 2020. But it also will have a space where you can express ways you’d like to get more involved in the life of our church. I hope we all prayerfully explore how God is calling us to serve.

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That’s my public service announcement. But back to my door-knocking flashbacks.

And I know what you’re thinking: *Why would anyone, in their right minds, go knock on doors talking to strangers about church?* See, Salvation, for us was this transaction--here’s what you have to do to be saved. It was a “get out of hell free” card. And if you didn’t do what you were supposed to do, then you were not saved. As the saved, it was our job to tell everyone the truth. Because if we didn’t, then their soul might be on our hands.

I would guess that most of us do not believe that here, or not anymore, but are we exactly sure what we *do* believe about salvation. We don’t like the fear and the guilt--we REALLY don’t want to go door-knocking--but what is salvation?

1 John 1 is all about salvation. Yet, it doesn't mention baptism or hell once. Instead, it talks about a journey.

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have *fellowship* with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 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.”

Those are very simple verses to translate from Greek to English--but what they say is pretty life-changing? If we walk in the light--as God himself is in the light--then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, God's son, cleanses us from all sin.

It's talking about a journey.

When were you saved? That's a question we used to ask a lot. It assumed a date, a place, a time. But ask the author of 1 John that question, and he'd look at you a little puzzled.

When were you saved? I don't understand the question. I'm not saved--I'm walking in the light. I'm not perfect--I still sin and, by the way, if you say you do not sin, you are a liar and the truth is not in you. I'm not saved--but I am being saved. I'm on a journey, a journey with Christ.

Maybe there was a moment when you choose to live your life for God. But that isn't the end. It is the beginning of a journey of becoming like Christ.

But we aren't there yet. And guess what--I don't have to be, because salvation isn't about a destination, it's about the journey--about walking in the light.

This message from 1 John changed my whole understanding of salvation and of God. God was no longer this log-keeper, keeping record of when we did right and wrong. Instead, God was the Creator that invited us on a journey to become more like Christ.

God is assembling a traveling group we call the Church. And we are walking together in the light. Together, we transform our hearts to worship and testify to what God is doing in this world. Together, we practice what it means to have joy in the midst of our sorrow. Together, we learn how to bear one another's burdens. Together, we practice forgiveness and love and grace. Together, we practice generosity. Together, we work for justice, among ourselves and in this whole world.

We've thrown aside guilt. Guilt does not belong in the light. We've thrown aside fear--for perfect love--God loves--casts out all fear. We've given up the pressure of being perfect and getting everything right, and we join with God, and with all the saints who have gone on before us, on this journey in the light.

And if we knock on doors, if we invite people in, it's not so that they can avoid eternal punishment--it's so they can experience the eternal love of God and the fellowship of a people, called out by God, to transform this world.

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That's the kind of fellowship we're about here at NCC. As you teaching people English, you're going on a journey with these women. You're getting involved in their lives. You're helping their kids with school. You're helping them navigate a community that is not always welcoming--intentionally or unintentionally--to people who come from different places and speak different languages. And every time you teach them a new world, or help them learn a new piece of the culture they live in, or open up a door to a new opportunity--you are shining more light on them and sharing the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that's that's the kind of fellowship that you have as you walk alongside our youth and children, be it here in youth group or at school--you listen to their struggles, you teach them to pray, you love them even when they mess up. We create a space for love and grace--for welcome and home--we join them on their journey. And we shine light on their lives, as we share the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And I think about those of you who serve, maybe it's by working for justice through AMOS or other groups, or with the Mobile Food Pantry or Norwalk Food Pantry, or in Lion's Club, or the Chamber, or Rotary, or at Helping Hands, or through making prayer shawls--you serve in so many places and ways, why?

Because you have learned that being on a journey towards salvation is about giving of yourself as Christ gave himself for us. It's not about getting things right, but it's about living a life of service, so that all people may see the light in the midst of the darkness of life that too often overcomes us. And as you serve, you shine God's light, and share the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Brothers and Sisters--members of the Fellowship of God here a Norwalk Christian Church, those who are being saved--we are not perfect, and praise God, we do not have to be. But we are in the light, as God is in the light. We are on a journey together, and we have fellowship with one another!

May we always continue on this journey together, as we share God's saving light and love with all we meet. Let the fellowship of God say, Amen. Amen!