

The Church - A Fellowship Covenant

Last week we began our study of the Church, or Ecclesiology, and how it is based on a covenant relationship we have with Christ. We examined the fact that Christ maintains His commitment perfectly in spite of our failings to keep ours. Today, we are going to start looking at the nature of the commitment *we are supposed to have* in Christ's church. As a child of God, we have a *personal* walk with Christ. But in the church, we also have a *corporate* identity with Him. We are a people, a household, a body. Many Christians will work at growing in their walk with Christ by studying and attending church, but working at fellowship is often overlooked and under-developed.

The *ekklesia*, or church, does not mean a building. It refers to a called-out assembly, a people summoned together for a purpose. Fellowship is one of several central purposes of a church (we will look at the other ones in the next few weeks).

The New Testament word for fellowship, *koinonia*, means more than shaking hands and chatting over coffee. It means participation, sharing, mutual investment, and spiritual intimacy. It is the church functioning as one body joined together not by background, ethnicity, or personality, but by a shared salvation and a common Savior. It is not a gathering of spectators or consumers. It is a covenant of saints. Christ died to create a unified church made up of people from every tribe, tongue, and background, who are reconciled not only to God, but *also to one another*. It is about not only what we are saved *from*, but what we are saved *into*. God did not just rescue us from wrath; He adopted us into a family. He did not simply call us to repentance; He called us into relationship with Himself *and* with His people. When you were saved, you were not only born again: you were born into a family. This is the essence of the *fellowship* of the covenant. It is not man-made and it is not optional.

This kind of fellowship doesn't come

naturally. It must be protected from pride, xenophobia (fear of people different than you), and division. It must be nurtured through humility, shared prayer, mutual service, and real love. It requires that we be intentional: not just about *attending* church, but about *being* the church.

Dr. John Fawcett was a pastor who understood this fellowship deeply. He was the pastor of a small church at Wainsgate, and was called from there to a larger church in London in 1772. He accepted the call and preached his farewell sermon. The wagons were loaded with his books and furniture, and all was ready for the departure, when his parishioners gathered around him, and with tears in their eyes they begged him to stay. His wife said, "Oh John, John, I cannot bear this." The good pastor exclaimed, "Neither can I and we will not go. Unload the wagons and put everything as it was before." His decision was hailed with joy by his people, and he wrote the words of the hymn *Blest Be the Tie that Binds* in commemoration of the event. The story goes on to say that Fawcett and the small church were blessed and soon grew much larger than ever dreamed.

Gal 6:10 As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all *men*, **especially** unto them who are of the household of faith.

1. Paul's yearning for the saints -

We can see the bonds of fellowship in the relationship that Paul had with the churches he wrote to. Even though the Apostle Paul spent time alone in prison cells and distant from the churches he planted, he never lost his deep love for the people of God. His epistles were not dry theological treatises. They were filled with affection, longing, and joy. In Paul, we see a pastor's heart that ached, not just mentally or emotionally, but went further in the deepest seat of feeling.

Phil 1:1-5 Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all

the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons:

2 Grace *be* unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and *from* the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 I thank my God upon every remembrance of you,

4 Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy,

5 For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now;

Writing to the church at Philippi, Paul opens with a blessing of grace and peace, but quickly turns to thanksgiving. Every time they crossed his mind, Paul rejoiced. Their fellowship in the gospel from day one brought him more than satisfaction. It brought him joy in prayer. When you have gone through trials and been blessed by God you have undoubtedly rejoiced in prayer. We might *casually* thank God for the blessings *others* have received, but have we *rejoiced* in prayer? It is a little less likely since we didn't have the experience of their trial. Do we get excited about others' spiritual successes? What Paul felt was not the joy of sentimental friendship or shared interests. It was spiritual joy, rooted in their partnership in Christ's mission.

Paul's love was not abstract. It wasn't vague affection for some theoretical idea of a church. It was personal, prayerful, and powerful. He remembered their names. He carried their needs into the presence of God. He felt connected to them, even from a distance, through the bond of gospel fellowship. Listen to how Paul expresses it in his letter to Philemon.

Phm 1:1,2,7 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy *our* brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,

2 And to *our* beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:

7 For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.

The word "bowels" here refers to the seat of deep, inner emotion. Today we might say "deep in our heart," but for Paul it went way deeper than the heart. He felt it in his "gut." Paul is saying, "Your love doesn't just lift spirits. It reaches down into the core of who we are and brings life." True fellowship refreshes us not just mentally, but in the deepest part of our being. When the saints are together in the Spirit, burdens are lifted and joy returns.

Paul's yearning was not one-sided. He didn't view himself as the sole giver or teacher. He longed for *mutual* encouragement.

Rom 1:9-12 For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers;

10 Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you.

11 For I long to see you, that I may impart unto you some spiritual gift, to the end ye may be established;

12 That is, that I may be comforted together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me.

Even though he was the Apostle to the Gentiles who penned half the New Testament, he *still* needed the faith of other believers to comfort him. That's the essence of Christian fellowship: we all need one another. Paul's example destroys any idea of rugged, solo Christianity. He didn't just want to preach at them. He wanted to be with them, to be strengthened together, and to weep, rejoice, pray, and worship with them.

2Cor 7:8-9 For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent, though I did repent: for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though *it were* but for a season.

9 Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing.

Paul showed his love on a personal level which we can see at the end of many of his letters where he names church members by name and what they mean to him.

Do we approach the local church as an optional add-on? Or, do we feel like Paul, who longed to see them, thanked God for them, and prayed with joy because of them? Church is not just something we go to and fellowship is more than a program. Church is a people we belong to.

The fellowship Paul cherished and longed for with the saints wasn't merely emotional or social. It was theological. It was only possible because believers had been called to think, love, and act with the same mindset, the mind of Christ.

Phil 2:1-7 If *there be* therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies,

2 Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind.

3 *Let* nothing *be done* through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

4 Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal

with God:

7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

Paul appeals to their shared experience of Christ: consolation, comfort, spiritual fellowship, and deep compassion. These are not external forces or institutional structures, but internal transformation by the Spirit. Vs. 5 says that we have the mind of Christ and with that mindset we are able to have for each other with the love that Jesus has us. The unity of the Church is created by thinking like Jesus. According to vs. 7, Jesus, though fully divine, did not cling to His status or rights. He lowered Himself for the sake of others. He became a servant to lift us up. That attitude of humble, self-sacrificing love is the very heart of Christian fellowship. Church unity is preserved when we remember we are not here to be served, but to serve. That's not just good practical advice. It is Christ's example, and we are called to follow it.

2. Intimacy of fellowship -

In what ways do we create the intimacy of fellowship?

- Don't be a xenophobe

Maur Villamater, who was one of our dear members, shared an insightful moment from her time teaching English as a Second Language. In one of her classes, people from different nationalities were grouped together to practice their English. But something deeper happened than just language learning. They began to delight in one another's stories. They were fascinated by each other's cultures, asking questions, sharing customs, and forming unexpected bonds. This is what the church fellowship can be.

One of the biggest challenges we face in building genuine Christian fellowship is not racism in its most overt forms, but something more common: *xenophobia*,

the fear of strangers, of "otherness." It's not always loud or angry; sometimes it's subtle and instinctive. People often withdraw from what they don't understand. They hesitate to engage with those who are unfamiliar: people who are different in background, accent, appearance, or culture. Race just becomes the most *visible* and convenient line to draw.

Gal 3:26-29 For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

27 For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.

29 And if ye *be* Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Rev 14:6,7 And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,

7 Saying with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.

This passage doesn't erase human distinctives. It redeems them. Paul is not denying biology or heritage or culture; he is denying superiority. He is proclaiming that no cultural, economic, or gender barrier can override the unifying power of faith in Jesus Christ.

In Christ, we have put on a new identity. We have "put on Christ." That means when we look at one another, we don't just see ethnicity, status, or gender. We see family. We see a fellow heir of the promise. We see someone clothed in Christ. This kind of unity isn't natural:

it's *supernatural*. It is the work of the Spirit in the Church. It is precisely why the Church must never reflect the tribalism or divisions of the world.

Rom 3:22-23 Even the righteousness of God *which is* by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:

23 For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God;

Rom 10:13 For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.

Acts 10:34,35 Then Peter opened *his* mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons:

35 But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.

- Fellowship in the Biblical truth

1John 1:3,6,7 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship *is* with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

6 If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth:

7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

- Fellowship in soul winning when we share the Gospel

Phil 1:5 For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now;

- Fellowship in giving

Rom 15:26 For it hath pleased

them of Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor saints which are at Jerusalem.

The word *contribution* is not just referring to financial support, it is based on the word *fellowship*. Paul rejoiced in the fact that they were partners. There is a comfort knowing that others are equally invested and committed in the progress of the ministry.

- Fellowship in suffering

2Cor 1:7 And our hope of you *is* stedfast, knowing, that as ye are partakers of the sufferings, so *shall ye be* also of the consolation.

- Fellowship in ministry

2Cor 8:23 Whether *any do enquire* of Titus, *he is* my partner and fellowhelper concerning you: or our brethren *be enquired of*, *they are* the messengers of the churches, *and* the glory of Christ.

3. We must be proactive -

Fellowship doesn't happen by accident. It doesn't flourish simply because we sit in the same room for an hour each week. Fellowship, in its Biblical form, requires intentionality. It is based on a *deliberate* effort to know, serve, and walk with one another in the covenant life of the church.

Let me ask you: What do you really know about the person sitting in the pew next to you? Do you know when they were saved? Do you know how they were saved? Have you ever asked them what their spiritual goals are, what their struggles are, or what brings them joy in Christ?

Sometimes the most sacred conversations don't happen at the altar. They happen at the dinner table. I'll never forget when we were at a Thanksgiving dinner where our brother Charles Ayora, from Kenya, came. We learned things we

never would have known otherwise. It was the first time in his life he had ever eaten turkey. He also shared stories of his childhood. Like, how he would work and sprint back and forth to school, often without wearing shoes, just to preserve them. That kind of story changes the way you see a person. It deepens love, breaks down assumptions, and builds lasting fellowship. But here's the thing: we wouldn't have known any of it while just shaking hands at the greeting time in church. We often pray for God to build the church. But what if part of the answer is as simple as taking time with each other and opening, our schedules, and our hearts? Biblical fellowship is daily, not weekly.

Acts 2:41-47 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added *unto them* about three thousand souls.

42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles.

44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common;

45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all *men*, as every man had need.

46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart,
47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

Notice that word: daily. These believers didn't just worship together on the Sabbath; they shared life. They shared their burdens.

Gal 6:2 Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of

Christ.

Their unity wasn't just felt. It was practiced. It wasn't occasional. It was consistent. Fellowship was not an afterthought. It was one of the pillars of early church life, alongside doctrine, prayer, and worship. It was church.

We live in days of spiritual pressure, moral compromise, and increasing isolation. In Hebrews Paul doesn't just tell us to show up to church.

Heb 10:23-25 Let us hold fast the profession of *our* faith without wavering; (for he *is* faithful that promised;)

24 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:

25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some *is*; but exhorting *one another*: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

Paul told us to consider one another, to think actively about how we *provoke* one another to love and good works. That means taking *initiative*. That means texting someone after a hard week, or dropping a card in the mail, or sharing a meal, or praying for someone by name. It means refusing to be a passive observer in the body of Christ and choosing instead to be an active participant in the mutual edification of the saints. Don't wait for someone else to make the first move. Be the one who reaches out. Don't assume fellowship will happen just because you're present. Pursue it deliberately.

The early church was powerful not just because they had miracles and apostles but because they had one another. They knew it and they acted like it.

Our fellowship is vertical, as is often said, with God, but it is also horizontal, with each other. Last week, we talked about the marriage covenant of Christ with the church. We can apply that same principle to our fellowship together. Let

me suggest a fellowship covenant that we can use:

Church Membership Vows

Will you _____, take your church to be your church; to live together in the holy covenant of membership? Will you love, comfort, honor, and keep your church and be faithful to your church as long as you live?

Do you _____, take your church to be your church, from this day forward, for better or worse, in good and bad times, when the treasury is full and when it is empty, when it is healthy and growing and when it is weak and struggling? Will you love it and honor it and serve it until death, as God is your witness?

— Jim Kane in SermonCentral.com

You've seen the beauty of the fellowship we should have in Christ. But, maybe you've never truly experienced it, because you've never entered into the covenant yourself. This kind of love, unity, and belonging isn't something we manufacture. It begins with a miracle when you believe the gospel and are born again. Jesus Christ died on the cross to save sinners, all kinds of sinners, and that includes you.

No matter your past, your nationality, your reputation, you are invited to turn to Christ as your Savior, be eternally forgiven, and to be born again into the family of God. You are invited to become a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister in the family of God.

Perhaps you are already a born again child of God, but are you living like it? Have you allowed fear, pride, or busyness to keep you distant from your brothers and sisters in Christ? Do you show up to church out of routine, or do you come ready to build, to love, to encourage, to connect? God is calling you to more. He's calling you into fellowship that refreshes the bowels of the saints, that lifts weary hearts, that strengthens the whole body. Maybe your first step is an invitation to lunch. Maybe it's starting a new habit of prayer for someone in this room. Maybe it's joining in with a ministry where you'll rub shoulders with people different from you

but equally saved by grace like you. Maybe there is something between you and a brother to take care of. Whatever it is, don't delay. The Church doesn't grow just by adding people to the membership roll, It grows from the connection between the members.

Gal 6:10

1. Paul's yearning for the saints - Phil 1:1-5, Phm 1:1,2,7, Rom 1:9-12, 2Cor 7:8-9, Phil 2:1-7
2. Intimacy of fellowship - Gal 3:26-29, Rev 14:6,7, Rom 3:22-23, 10:13, Acts 10:34,35, 1John 1:3,6,7, Phil 1:5, Rom 15:26, 2Cor 1:7, 8:23
3. We must be proactive - Acts 2:41-47, Gal 6:2, Heb 10:23-25