

Things to Know about Fellowship

Fellowship with God's people is a wonderful thing. I remember so many blessed times from my youth in church: men's football on a Saturday afternoon, fishing trips, coffee and tables of goodies after a communion service, Christmas Eve candlelight services. Most of the time we speak of fellowship, we use the word in its light and casual sense. That is probably why people might be tempted to treat it lightly. Those who listen to God's Word and attend to preaching will have a more mature understanding of fellowship. Fellowship is so much more than all the things I mentioned before. The lack of fellowship contributes to spiritual weakness. Too often, we only begin to sense the need of fellowship in times of trial and try to make do with a few hasty bonds we manage to create on such short notice.

1. Fellowship of the Spirit.

Psa 8:3-5 When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained;

4What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

5For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

Heb 2:9-11 But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man.

10For it became him, for whom *are* all things, and by whom *are* all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.

11For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified *are* all of one: for which cause he is not

ashamed to call them brethren,

1Cor 1:9 God *is* faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord.

Eph 3:8-19 Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

9And to make all *men* see what *is* the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ:

10To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly *places* might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God,

...

14For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,

15Of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named,

16That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;

17That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love,

18May be able to comprehend with all saints what *is* the breadth, and length, and depth, and height;

19And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.

2. Fellowship of the table

As we come together to share in the Lord's Supper, it is called communion in the Bible.

1Cor 10:16-17 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of

Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?

17For we *being* many are one bread, *and* one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.

The word *communion* is elsewhere translated *fellowship*. There can be a tendency to diminish the significance of communion completely because we want to avoid the notion of some mystical power in the Lord's table. However, communion *was* given as an ordinance so it actually is serious business if we fail to come together to do that. The key words here are *come together*. It requires **being present**. In communion, we are remembering not only that Jesus died for us, but that our unity is based on the blood He shed on the cross for us. Communion is something that should not be done flippantly, but it is part of the nature of the sacrificial feasts of the Old Testament.

When we think of fellowship, we are often talking about coffee times and church dinners. We try to be careful to not let church be all about that kind of fellowship. Sometimes people think that church is supposed to be all about coming to render homage to God. Some might think that if we do anything else than spend all our time worshiping God we are being idolatrous or worldly. While we might have problems with turning a church into a nightclub atmosphere, we want to recognize that there are dozens of times where worship with God is in conjunction with the people of God feasting together. Praise the Lord and pass the salt! Fellowship is *part* of worship.

As you read through the Bible, look at how often feasting accompanies spiritual events. Saul was chosen king at a Jewish feast. David was anointed at a Jewish feast. There were three feasts that were mandatory for all Jews. Our communion is a commemorative feast. The early church met regularly to break bread. Our lunches are not just some nice little add on...they are actually essential. When we get together for coffee or

church dinners, that is *also* part of worship.

There should be a sense of longing to get together, not an *avoidance* of being together. This was what Paul expressed about visiting the Romans.

Rom 1:10-12 Making request, if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God to come unto you.

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

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

3. Fellowship of Christ's sufferings.

There is another more serious aspect of fellowship. The Bible speaks of the fellowship of the sufferings of Christ. It is how the all the martyrs counted it a joy to give their lives for Christ.

Phil 3:8-10 Yea doubtless, and I count all things *but* loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them *but* dung, that I may win Christ,

9And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:

10That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death;

1Pet 1:6,7 Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations:

7That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold

that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ:

The sufferings, however are specifically for the benefit of others,

2Cor 1:5-6 For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.

6And whether we be afflicted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation, which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer: or whether we be comforted, *it is* for your consolation and salvation.

Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.

– Helen Keller

Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my experience, has been through affliction and not through happiness.

– Malcolm Muggeridge

At the Nicene Council, an important church meeting in the 4th century A.D., of the 318 delegates attending, fewer than 12 had not lost an eye or lost a hand or did not limp on a leg lamed by torture for their Christian faith.

People bond through the suffering they experience together.

4. Fellowship of Labor

Fellowship *regularly* refers to *working* together, not just feasting together: Epaphras Col 1:17, Tychicus Col 4:17, Philemon, Apphia, Archippus Phm 1:1,2, Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas Phm 1:24, Timothy 1Thess 3:2 are called fellowlaborers.

Phil 4:3 And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and *with other* my fellowlabourers, whose names *are* in the book of life.

Col 4:10-12 Aristarchus my fellowprisoner saluteth you, and Marcus, sister's son to Barnabas, (touching whom ye received commandments: if he come unto you, receive him;)

11And Jesus, which is called Justus, who are of the circumcision. These only *are my* fellowworkers unto the kingdom of God, which have been a comfort unto me.

12Epaphras, who is *one* of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.

1Cor 3:9-11 For we are labourers together with God: ye are God's husbandry, *ye are* God's building.

10According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.

11For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

5. The fellowship of the Church is a gift from God, some assembly required.

Sometimes Christians might bristle at being pressured over coming to church but look carefully at Heb 10:24-25.

Heb 10:24-25 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works:
25Not 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.

First, we are supposed to *provoke* people. We are not supposed to *tempt* them to come to church with how they will be *benefitted* by coming to church. If you feel provoked, then we are doing something right! You are required to *give in*! Next, it says that we are supposed to not give up on *assembling* ourselves together. If you have a bunch of loose gears scattered around your house you do not have a machine until you *assemble* them together. The word *church* was used to translate the Greek word for an *assembly* no doubt to distinguish it from other kinds of *assemblies*, such as a school assembly, or a state legislature. Israel could be referred to as the church in the wilderness because it was an assembly. When it came to the New Testament times, the word *church* took on a more significant meaning of an assembly which has covenanted together to perform the Lord's work...but it is a church because it *assembles* as part of *doing* that work.

Acts 2:42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Prov 27:17 Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend.

Prov 18:24 A man *that hath* friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend *that* sticketh closer than a brother.

Prov 18:24 uses the word *friends*, but make no mistake about it, it is talking about fellowship. It is fellowship because it involves friendship that *shows* itself

friendly. To *show* friendliness you have to *show up* and be engaged. Fellowship must be proactive. This kind of friendship is not the kind that is exercised in occasional moments separated by years and miles apart. That is certainly not the way a fellowship of believers can continue to exist. It is shown, or demonstrated each day and sticks closer than a brother.

You might have a friendly relationship with your doctor, but you have to be prepared to get out the pertinent information he needs because he doesn't want to take the time to fellowship with you. Church is a place where you don't go to get the information you need and then get out, it is a place where you fellowship and share yourself by sharing all kinds of filler conversation that *also* tells a story. What do you know about your brother in the pew next to you? When were they saved? How were they saved? What are their spiritual goals?

I remember in the early days of the church there would be those who came and looked around and didn't see anyone, but that's because people came in shifts on different Sundays during the month. They got discouraged by the lack of people and didn't come back. Then there were those who visited and felt that someone was cold towards them. They were a visitor so they didn't feel that they had a prerogative to meet them. This happened on several occasions. I had to laugh because the person they were talking about was also a visitor and had no reason to take the lead in greeting others either. I would joke that everyone should show up at the same time, see each other, greet each other, and then they would all keep coming back.

6. Organic Fellowship.

Communion, coffee breaks, and church dinners are planned times of fellowship, which is good, but fellowship is more than that.

It was very interesting for me to introduce the English word fellowship to one of our Egyptian brothers. It's not that

he didn't know what fellowship is, it's just that he hadn't gotten that word yet. As he tried to figure out what I was trying to describe, he guessed that fellowship meant *friendship*. That was a pretty good guess and from there I was able to build on the significance of the word *fellowship*. Fellowship is more than friendship. You can be a friend from afar. I have friends that I haven't seen in years. Fellowship entails more than just being friends, it requires participation. We have described fellow laborers, those who labor *together*, and the fellowship of suffering, those who participate *together* in the sufferings of Christ. The spiritual fellowship we have requires not just having a spiritual nature in common, but exercising our spirituality *together*.

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

Eph 2:19-22 Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God;

20And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner *stone*;

21In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:

22In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.

Fellowship is organic. What we mean by organic is very important. Organic farming does not use chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Stated this way, it is a little misleading because even organic fertilizers are chemicals. What they mean is to not use *synthetic* fertilizers, but fertilizers that occur in nature. One of the reasons that organic farming is so attractive is that organic fertilizers contain more nutrients that occur in

nature than synthetic fertilizer.¹ I had the joy of cleaning out the cow barn of my farmer cousin. He had a special manure spreader that he would drive around as that natural fertilizer was flung out across his fields. He taught me the first lesson of driving that tractor was to not turn on the spreader when the wind was at your back. There is obviously more to organic farming than just chemistry. There are benefits from organic farming, but sometimes it can be "aromatic." Fellowship is organic, and it *also* is not all just pleasant times, but we stick together.

Organic relationships refers to relationships that happen gradually and naturally rather than suddenly and synthetically, developing naturally over time, without being forced or planned by anyone. It is not like the relationship a telemarketer tries to establish:

“Hello, Paul, how are you today?”

If I took them seriously I might respond, “Oh, I’m feeling a little cranky, I had a case of bronchitis last month and I have a lingering cough. Have you ever had anything like that? By the way, how are *you* doing and your wife and kids? Have you read any good books lately?”

Fellowship happens more by the *unplanned* moments of the natural give and take of experience. Plants naturally grow toward the sunlight for the nutrients it builds by the mystery of God from the natural light of the sun. Organic relationships grow as *we* respond naturally, in the back and forth relationship we have with each other and from the many details of life that we aren't even aware of. It reminds me of my Spanish teacher, Mr. Fierro, prompting me to guess at what the word *sonrisa* meant. *Sonrisa* sounds like the English word *sunrise*. He let a grin spread on his

¹This a very large simplification of the issue and the chemistry of farming is very, very sophisticated.

face and said it was like a sunrise. *Sonrisa* means *smile*. So very much is communicated in a smile. Just as plants grow toward the sunlight, we grow toward the warmth and the light of the sunrise on each other's face. It's hard to pat someone on the back, put an arm around the shoulder, or have a good laugh with them in an online meeting.

When I offer pre-marital counseling, I try to give people insights on how to have success together in marriage. All the while I do that, I know that there are just so many things that they won't be able to understand what I am talking about until they actually have to live with each other day in and day out. The fellowship of marriage and the fellowship of the saints can only grow organically. Marriage is not created by contract, but by covenant. A contract requires consideration, the money or thing that you are giving in order to get something else in exchange. A covenant requires something else.

Marriage is not a contract; it is a covenant. In a contract, the two parties remain separate (Party of the first part and party of the second part). Like salad dressing, oil and water, shaken up and mixed together, but never really one. Left alone and still, salad dressing will eventually separate into their original respective parts. In a covenant, the two become one and the same. The Marriage Covenant is a lot more like mashed potatoes. How do you make mashed potatoes? Take two potatoes, skin them alive, cut them up, put them in hot water to soften their temperament, and mash them together into one!

— Contributed by: Johnny Creasong in SermonCentral.com

1Cor 12:24-26 For our comely *parts* have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that *part* which lacked:

25 That there should be no schism in the body; but *that* the members should have the same care one for another.

26 And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it.

You *can* have an *arranged* marriage, but it will be successful if it *grows organically* into a relationship. For a covenant to be effective it should ideally be born of love where we, by choice, intend the best for the other party.

Over time, you find refreshing old memories to be very fulfilling. Then, you go through problems together that not only help you grow personally but in your bonds with each other. Each day, you discover new things to share. There are new things to explore together, movies, museums, historical sites. There are things outside of our expertise that the other can share. There are people to see together, sermons to discuss, Bible reading to discuss, books to discuss, children to discuss, work to discuss, challenges to discuss, painful memories, joyful memories. Like anything neglected, our bonds will only decay if left unattended. These relationships don't happen accidentally. They must be cherished and nourished regularly. This is the way it should be in church. One preacher suggested the attitude of a marriage in having a church covenant by this vow of membership:

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

In 1773, the young pastor of

a poor church in Wainsgate, England, was called to a large and influential church in London. John Fawcett was a powerful preacher and writer, and these skills had brought him this opportunity. But as the wagons were being loaded with the Fawcetts' few belongings, their people came for a tearful farewell.

During the good-byes, Mary Fawcett cried, "John, I cannot bear to leave!" "Nor can I," he replied. "We shall remain here with our people." The wagons were unloaded, and John Fawcett spent his entire fifty-four-year ministry in Wainsgate.

Out of that experience, Fawcett wrote the beautiful hymn, "Blest Be the Tie that Binds."

There is a healthful hardness about real dignity that never dreads contact and communion with others, however humble.

— Washington Irving (1783 - 1859)

Mamie made frequent trips to the branch post office. One day she confronted a long line of people who were waiting for service from the postal clerks. Mamie only needed stamps, so a helpful observer asked, "Why don't you use the stamp machine? You can get all the stamps you need and you won't have to stand in line." Mamie said, "I know, but the machine can't ask me about my arthritis." People still need human contact.

There are those who think they are so clever and claim they want to go to Hell because they want to be with their friends there. There is no fellowship in Hell. The only way to have true fellowship is to join Jesus Christ and be part of the body of Christ. This happens when you deliberately ask Christ to forgive you for being a sinner for "once

and for all." (Heb 10:10,14) Once a part of that body, you need to take time to nourish it and cherish it so it can grow into the fullness of what Christ has for you.

Rom 13:11-14 And that, knowing the time, that now *it is* high time to awake out of sleep: for now *is* our salvation nearer than when we believed.

12The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armour of light.

13Let us walk honestly, as in the day; not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying.

14But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to *fulfil* the lusts *thereof*.

1. Fellowship of the Spirit. Psa 8:3-5, Heb 2:9-11, 1Cor 1:9, Eph 3:8-19
2. Fellowship of the table - 1Cor 10:16-17, Rom 1:10-12
3. Fellowship of Christ's sufferings - Phil 3:8-10, 1Pet 1:6,7, 2Cor 1:5-6
4. Fellowship of Labor - Phil 4:3, Col 4:10-12, 1Cor 3:9-11
5. The fellowship of the Church is a gift from God, some assembly required. Heb 10:24-25, Acts 2:42, Prov 27:17,18:24
6. Organic Fellowship - Gal 6:2, Eph 2:19-22, 1Cor 12:24-26, Rom 13:11-14