

THE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE OF FELLOWSHIP:
IT'S REALITY AND NECESSITY

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INTRODUCTION

An old story is told of a preacher who visited a man from his flock who had not attended any Church activities or services for a number of weeks. The preacher gently knocked on the man's door and was invited into the home. The stray parishioner gestured to the preacher to take a seat next to the fire. As they were sitting down neither man had uttered a single word. After a few brief moments of silence watching the fire crackle the preacher moved to the edge of his seat, grabbed the fireplace poker, and began to move a few coals around. He found one coal in particular and moved it out onto the fireplace hearth where the coal initially continued to glow a bright orange. However, after a moment or two, the coal began to dim fainter and fainter. Eventually the coal ceased to glow at all. The coal remained on the hearth as the two men still had not spoken. After a moment or two more the preacher took the poker and returned the cold isolated coal back to the company of the brightly glowing embers. The secluded coal now surrounded by the others quickly returned to a bright glowing ember providing heat and light to these two men. The preacher rose from his chair, put on his coat and hat, and prepared to exit the man's home. Just as the preacher reached for the doorknob to let himself out, the wayward man spoke the first words of the evening's encounter, "nice sermon preacher, I'll see you Sunday."

The message of this metaphor was clear to the wayward man. If he wasn't already, he soon would be just like the dark coal on the hearth without the company of the other coals to keep his fire alive. He needed them and they needed him. This is the essence of Biblical fellowship. In order to effectively survive and positively affect the surrounding environment Christians simply need one another. It is therefore the goal of this investigation to show that

Fellowship is indeed a Spiritual Discipline, foundational for individual and corporate spiritual growth, and critical for effective spread of the Gospel.

BIBLICAL DEFINITION OF AND MANDATE FOR FELLOWSHIP

“So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. 42 They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” Acts 2:41-42 (NASB) These verses penned by Luke provide the mark in time where the Church was birthed. From the very dawn of Christianity God's people were continually devoting themselves to fellowship. The immediate context of Christianity is community and continual devotion to community through the spiritual discipline of fellowship was a necessity for the early Church to survive and even flourish. Duffy Robbins in his book dedicated to mentoring teens explains the necessity of community, “But the Christian life is not a solitary adventure. The New Testament Christianity involves genuine community – not just sardines in the same can, but people “joined” and held together (Ephesians 4:16) through a process of “speaking truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15)” He goes on to add to this understanding, “Simply put, Spiritual growth means a growing sense that one is a vital part of a Christian community.”¹

This genuine community spoken of by Robbins has its' roots in the Greek concept Koinonia (*Stong's 2842*).² Dr. Jack Cottrell explains the essence of this Greek term:

The second believer-to-believer purpose for our assemblies is fellowship. This is the familiar word koinonia, which refers to a relationship of togetherness among individuals, i.e. a close positive association, a sharing, a partnership, a common participation in something. The fellowship Christians have with one another is both a state and an activity. Because we all have the same fellowship with God through Jesus Christ, “we have fellowship with one another” (1 John 1:17). This is a state of being, i.e.,

¹ Duffy Robbins, *A Youth Worker's Guide to Discipling Teenagers; The Ministry of Nurture*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 28.

² Thayer's Greek Lexicon, Electronic Database, Copyright © 2000, 2003 by BibleSoft, Inc.

a common identity and an equal participation in the blessings of salvation shared with all Christians – even those we will never meet and know on this earth.

But fellowship is also an activity. The early Christians continued to devote themselves to fellowship (Acts 2:42). This is something we do with and for our fellow believers, and it is one reason why we assemble together. It is very important that we see our Christian assemblies as fulfilling this purpose.³

The importance of this stated purpose cannot be overstated. The context of community and relationship fostered by the Spiritual discipline of fellowship is crucial for true growth.

James C. Willhoit adds to this understanding by expounding on 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 where Paul is fondly remembering his brothers and sisters that he had to leave behind:

I use this verse at the outset of our section on seeking to enhance remembering in our churches because we are far more likely to remember enfleshed truth, truth in the context of relationships, than mere abstract propositions. Paul's letters display a remarkable consistency, in that truth was never an abstract object but always a very personal subject. The truth of the Gospel had set him free and was guiding his life by changing the lives of people who received it.⁴

The concept of a basketball team serves as a guide. Imagine a basketball team where all the players practice individually never engaging in learning the skills in the context of nearness. To learn and practice team concepts while not participating in the actual framework of the team greatly limits individual and especially the overall team growth. The nearness that is necessary for a basketball team to effectively function is obvious. There are many facets and nuances to an effectively functioning basketball team, even more so in the Church. Albert Barnes explains the concept of fellowship and these nuances from Acts 2:42 in this way:

[And fellowship] The word rendered "fellowship," *koinoonia*, is often rendered "communion." It properly denotes "having things in common, or participation, society, friendship." It may apply to anything which may be possessed in common, or in which all may partake. Thus, all Christians have the same hope of heaven; the same joys; the same hatred of sin; the same enemies to contend with. Thus, they have the same subjects of conversation, of feeling, and of prayer; or they have communion in these things. And thus the early Christians had their property in common. The word here may apply to either or

³ Jack Cottrell, *The Faith Once for All*. (Joplin: College Press Publishing Company, 2002), 456.

⁴ James C. Willhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered; Growing in Christ through Community*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 114.

to all of these things to their conversation, their prayers, their dangers, or their property; and means that they were united to the apostles, and participated with them in whatever befell them. It may be added that the effect of a revival of religion is to unite Christians more and more, and to bring those who were before separated to union and love. Christians feel that they are a band of brethren, and that, however much they were separated before they became Christians, now they have great and important interests in common; they are united in feelings, in interests, in dangers, in conflicts, in opinions, and in the hopes of a blessed immortality.⁵

The Church in essence functions as a family and not as a business or some conglomeration of individuals. The individual members are called to lay aside self and seek to understand individuality in the context of the meta-narrative. Joseph H. Hellerman brilliantly expounds upon this dynamic, “The New Testament picture of the church as a family flies in the face of our individualistic cultural orientation. God’s intention is not to become the feel-good father of a myriad of isolated individuals who appropriate the Christian Faith as yet another avenue toward personal enlightenment.”⁶ He goes on to bring further truth to this subject matter, “What we find in the Bible, rather, is a God who seems at least as concerned with His group (me in relationship with my brothers and sisters in Christ!) as he is with the individual (me in relationship with God).”⁷

From the birth of the Church in Acts until the time where Paul, Luke, Peter, John and others were writing what would become the completed New Testament we see in these very writings again and again the Spiritual Discipline of fellowship manifesting in this grand family. The entire context of the New Testament is literally dripping with example after example of how necessary and crucial that fellowship truly is for the Church.

FELLOWSHIP AS A FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENT IN CHRISTIANITY

Fellowship is foundational to discipleship

⁵ Barnes' Notes, Electronic Database Copyright © 1997, 2003 by Biblesoft, Inc.

⁶ Joseph H. Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family; Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community*, (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 7.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

Having provided the definition and clear mandate to practice the Spiritual Discipline of fellowship, it is now beneficial to examine some of the primary ways in which fellowship establishes a firm foundation for overall spiritual growth. It could be said that fellowship in its' purest form acts as a catalyst in the overall equation of spiritual growth. The first area where fellowship provides a solid foundation for growth is discipleship. The spiritual discipline of fellowship provides the pathway for Christians to grow in the day to day.

A small child is witnessed saying or acting like their mother or father due to the close proximity. The closeness of a parent/child relationship helps to form the worldview of the child. The same could be said of proper *koinonia* in the Church body. Keith R. Anderson and Randy D. Reese explain this phenomenon:

“Follow Me” may be the simplest description of Christian spirituality that exists anywhere, but the simplicity is deceptive. This simple command assumes a complex relationship through which one becomes educated for the reign of God.

That Jesus was a teacher in a world familiar with the relationship and disciple is well documented. That Jesus was a “discipler” of others is also well understood. That Jesus intended a similar strategy for spiritual mentoring for the church is further enunciated in what is called “the Great Commission,” in which it is clear that all disciples are intended to become teachers of faith to the nations:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. (Mt 28:19-20)⁸

Anderson and Reese have a good understanding of the fact that Christianity is an “imitative faith.” In order for this to take place, *koinonia* must be a foundational element. The determination must be made by the individual to enter into this type of relationship. Only then, in the context of deep relationships, can the pattern of Jesus be imitated and fulfilled.

It is no deep psychological secret that human beings adapt and conform to their surroundings. Most times the influence occurs in subtle incremental steps. A person from upstate New York that spends a reasonable amount of time in the deep south will find their

⁸ Keith R. Anderson and Randy D. Reese, *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999.), 15.

speech slowly begin to conform to their new surroundings. Mankind is influenced by those with whom they choose to be in proximity. Paul Pettit explains:

The second most basic, foundational underpinning of the spiritual formation process is the idea of other persons, or those in one's particular community. That is, change for the Christian does not normally involve change that occurs in isolation from others. The change we seek is not change for change's sake. And the change we seek is not solely for self-improvement. Christians are to be in process and undergoing renovation so that the individual believer is able to influence and interact with others in a more Christlike manner. Christians are in process for influence.⁹

Mel Lawrenz agrees, "Spiritual formation happens in, with, and through fellowship. The day-to-day shoulder-to-shoulder contact of believers shapes us. Sometimes contact is a grinding experience where sparks fly and sharp edges are worn off; other times it is more forming and fitting. Whatever the case, fellowship influences."¹⁰ This process of influence that Pettit and Lawrenz explain is exactly that of discipleship. Choosing to engage in fellowship provides the necessary foundation for this process to be maximized.

Fellowship is Foundational for Accountability

James, the brother of the Lord Jesus writes in his epistle:

13 Is anyone among you suffering? Then he must pray. Is anyone cheerful? He is to sing praises. 14 Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; 15 and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him. 16 Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much. 17 Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the earth for three years and six months. 18 Then he prayed again, and the sky poured rain and the earth produced its fruit. 19 My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth and one turns him back, 20 let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins. (NASB) (James 5:13-20)

⁹ Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation; A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic and Professional, 2008), 19.

¹⁰ Mel Lawrenz, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Formation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 98.

Here in this passage one is able to see a clear and poignant example of fellowship and accountability working hand in hand to restore an individual in their Christian life. Some have confused this passage to be speaking of physical sickness. Without going into great detail the original Greek reveals that this passage is speaking of one who is spiritually sick, one who is weary in the faith, one who is considering giving it all up. James writes to his readers that it is possible for someone to be spiritually weary to the point of no return. The clear catalyst again in this redemptive equation is relationship and fellowship. The elders could not have understanding or the necessary contact with the individual to aid in the restorative process unless proximity was the case. One could be accountable to another in this case. The New Testament is replete with “one another” admonitions. This passage in James is one of those admonitions.

The New Testament is also clear that the elders of a congregation are responsible for the flock. Paul charged the elders at Ephesus as he was about to depart with this very responsibility:

28 "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 "I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. 31 "Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. 32 "And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified. (NASB) (Acts 20:28-32)

One could easily ask, “how could the elders be on guard for all the flock,” if there was no basis of a relationship fostered by sincere fellowship. Logic dictates that nearness, proximity, and relationship are necessary for the elders to be on guard and for genuine accountability to be present. This type of accountability can take many forms such as admonishing and also encouragement. Peter K. Nelson gives explanation:

The risk taken in letting anything get in the way of consistent mutual ministry with the body life of the church is serious: it means the loss of opportunities to give and

receive spiritual encouragement, and that, in turn, means spiritual threats of the most serious kind (see Hebrews 3:12-14). Today more than ever, amid distracted lives, church leaders must be bold in helping their people resist the spiritual decline and demise that can come from inconsistent gathering and irregular encouragement. We simply were not designed to stand up and endure in our faith without giving and receiving deep spiritual encouragement on a very regular basis.¹¹

Nelson lays out an excellent explanation rooted in the Hebrews passage as to the way in which God not only designed man but also the Church itself. It is a living breathing organism which is mutually interdependent. Plain and simple, fellowship indeed provides the necessary foundation for accountability in the Body of Christ.

Fellowship is foundational for effective evangelism

The process of “making disciples” spoken of previously in the “Great Commission” follows the formula of teach, baptize, teach. It is clear that the mentor/disciple relationship is the context for “the lost” to become part of “the found.” The primary focus of the gathering of the Church body was to be edified and trained for works of service. In order for the Church to grow spiritually and numerically it is necessary to follow the teach, baptize, teach formula laid out by the Lord Jesus. While Christianity at its most basic level is indeed simple, it is also very complex with many nuances. Christianity has been likened to that of a mine where as one digs deeper and deeper riches upon riches are discovered. The foundational element of this teaching, baptize, teach dynamic is that of fellowship. Especially in the Western World, the context of relationship is the most fertile soil for the Gospel to be spread.

The body of Christ, undergirded by the spiritual discipline of fellowship was designed in a very specific way and for a very specific purpose. The Apostle Paul relates this very dynamic in his letter to the Ephesians:

¹¹ Peter K. Nelson, *Spiritual Formation; Ever Forming, Never Formed*, (Colorado Springs: Biblica Publishing, 2010), 144.

11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, & some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ. 14 As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming; 15 but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love. (NASB) (Ephesians 4:11-16)

The obvious context is that of a body. The interdependence that is beautifully explained by Paul in this passage illustrates not only form but also function. Paul explains the nature of the Church as well as the job description for the Church. The Church is to speak the truth in love, building the body up, and reaching out to the lost to bring them in. Logic dictates that if the Church is going to be effective in reaching the lost that the body must be healthy and focused on its purpose of speaking the truth in love to a world that desperately needs it. The only way that the body as a whole can be healthy and focused is to simply make a consistent concerted effort to be together practicing *koinonia*.

Conclusion & Summary

Return to the metaphor of the wayward parishioner. The message of the cold lonely ember on the hearth certainly made an impact upon this man in that initial moment. That being said, the greatest indicator of the impact was yet to be determined. If the parishioner could have an understanding of all the many nuances and facets of fellowship, he indeed would be motivated to get out of the fireside rocking chair and find warmth, sustenance, and love in that of his brother and sisters in Christ and be better prepared to change the world. If this man could see the complete Biblical definition and mandate that is all throughout the New Testament for fellowship, he would attend. If this man could see that Christianity is practiced in the context of

the discipling relationship, he would engage. If this man could understand that accountability is crucial to making it to the “finish-line,” and that fellowship paves the path for admonishing and encouragement, he would reconnect. And finally, if this man could comprehend that he is part of a dynamic body where he plays a major role in reaching the lost, he would fulfill the commission. The message is clear for the Church today. Each one must realize all these things and take them to heart. If each individual would seek to do so and successfully mature in the spiritual discipline of fellowship, then the prayer of the Lord Jesus might certainly come to be:

"But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves. 14 "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 15 "I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. 16 " They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. 17 " Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. 18 "As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. 19 "For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth. 20 "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; 21 that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. (NASB) (John 17:13-21).

Amen and Amen.

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