

**THE FELLOWSHIP FOR REFORMATION AND PASTORAL STUDIES**

**"DEVOTED TO FELLOWSHIP"  
UNDERSTANDING AND PROMOTING FELLOWSHIP  
IN THE LOCAL CHURCH**

**VOLUME 27 NUMBER 2**

Presented by  
Pastor Brad Powers,

Mitchell Square Baptist Church

October 19, 1998

**"DEVOTED TO FELLOWSHIP"**

**UNDERSTANDING AND PROMOTING FELLOWSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH**

**A. UNDERSTANDING FELLOWSHIP**

What is the point of being organized into local churches? Before I was married, I convinced myself that I related well to everyone. Of course, I was by myself ninety per cent of the time. Once I was married and had children, and found I was alone barely ten per cent of the time, it was much more difficult, and flaws that had been nicely concealed in my character were suddenly blazing pimples on the face of my sanctification. Of course, now that they were on the surface, I was more inclined to apply the cleansing solution.

On the other hand, before I was married, the trials of life caused me to stew in my own juices. No one was there in whom I could confide; I was left with the ability of my mind to come up with responses and solutions, and my track record was spotty at best.

On both counts, it was not good for this man to be alone. Being in relationship provided a good foundation for growth and encouragement, for warning and guidance.

Then there is the church. Some find that other Christians have a knack of stirring up sinful thoughts and actions, and wrongly presume they are more holy if they avoid these people. And underneath our "scrubbed and tubbed" Sunday exteriors are people who are facing huge challenges feeling very much alone. The efforts of the church to label things "fellowship" - a meeting, the hall adjacent to the kitchen<sup>1</sup>, informal assembly as opposed to formal worship - are not always successful in producing fellowship.

Of course, this is no longer a forgotten subject, as attested to by the pile of books on my desk that have at least something to say about the matter, as well as commentaries on the appropriate passages. But as Bridges carefully pointed out, there was still a gap (in 1985) between common use of the term "fellowship" and the much fuller sense of the New Testament; quite possibly that gap still in some measure exists. And even if it is understood that one does not cause fellowship merely by adding coffee and donuts, there is likely a gap between the importance given the matter in the New Testament, and the importance it commonly receives in the church. Therefore there is room for discussion amongst us on this matter on two levels: developing our understanding so that it is as near that of the New Testament as possible both in terms of what it is and why it must be; and on promoting that fellowship so that our *practice* accords with the ideals of the Gospel that spawns it, even if those very New Testament churches failed to live up to those ideals.

**1. The Vocabulary of Fellowship**

Word studies and the like rarely have much place in the finished product of a message, much in the way few model homes leave the hammers and saws on the couch. But in this case I would like to make a brief exception because the variety and frequency of terms used has some impact in itself to underline the importance of the topic to anyone who wishes to profess allegiance to the rule of Scripture.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Jerry Bridges, *True Fellowship: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (NavPress, 1985), p.14. I will refer to this book frequently; note that the same book was also published under the title, *The Crisis of Caring: Recovering the Meaning of True Fellowship* (P&R, 1987). The books are identical, including the pagination.

Jerry Bridges' book is essentially a study of *koinonia*, a helpful analysis of its usage as applied to our walk with God and life in the church. He accomplishes his goal of making his readers think more broadly on the subject. *Koinonia* (with its derivatives)<sup>2</sup> is without doubt the most important key term, and the variety of translations serves Bridges' purpose well. The root idea of "having in common" is essentially a relationship in his view, and the other senses extend from that.

But that is not the only term: there are 17 occasions when *metecho* and its derivatives are used<sup>3</sup>, and generally without much distinction in sense from *koinonia*<sup>4</sup>. In fact the two terms occur in the same context in Luke 5:7,10; 1 Corinthians 9; 10:17-21; 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1 and Hebrews 2:14, showing that it is probably only used for variety: practically speaking, the two terms get at the same thought.

And to these specific terms can be added the family of *syn-* compounds: for now, note the examples in Ephesians 2:5-6 in our union with Christ, and as applied to the Jew and Gentile brought together in Christ in Ephesians 3:6; but there are several other terms, often translated with "fellow-": "yokefellow" (Ph.4:3); "co-worker", (2 Cor.8:23); and "fellow-prisoner", (Ro.16:7) and so on.

In addition, as with many subjects of Scripture, the ideas are conveyed in a variety of contexts, histories, descriptions and exhortations that may use none of the terms: particularly all the exhortations including the phrase "one another" might come to mind.

## 2. The Dimensions of Fellowship

Having put our toolbox away, some tentative framework can be established. The goal of the New Testament writers is to establish the Gospel with its implications in practice, or as John would express it, "we proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us" (1 Jn.1:3). The controlling thought in the dimensions of fellowship is that living as children of God in this "crooked and perverse generation" is not for those without support. One common illustration of the Christian life in the New Testament is that of a pilgrimage, a journey. Travelling alone may be fun and enjoyable for the strong and able, but for many it is a fearful prospect, especially as age mounts and health declines: what if the car breaks down? What if I am attacked? The Christian pilgrimage is not meant to be taken alone; it is so designed that each of us is dependent on the contributions of the others.

The church is designed like a meal where each participant is assigned responsibility for a part of that meal; not one person has a full supper, but when all are brought together, each enjoys everything, from the juice and salad, through main

---

<sup>2</sup>*koinos* "common" usually carries sense of unclean, but see Ac.2:44 and 4:32, "to have in common": this is root of term. Other forms: verb, *koinoneo* (8x), "to share": eg. Ro.12:13; 1 Tim.5:22; *koinonikos*, only in 1 Tim.6:18; *koinonia* (19x, 20 in TR, with Eph.3:9) "fellowship", "partnership", "participation", "communion" etc.; *koinonos* (10x) "partners": see Luke 5:10, in general setting, cf. Phm.1:17; and note two compounds, *synkoinoneo*, Eph.5:11; Ph.4:14; Rev.18:4; and noun form *synkoinonos*, Ro.11:17; 1 Co.9:23; Ph.1:7 and Rev.1:9.

<sup>3</sup> Mostly in Corinthians and Hebrews: *metecho* (8x), in addition to 1 Cor.10 and Heb.2:14 above used in non-church setting in Heb.5:13 and 7:13; cf. 1 Cor.9:10,12: "to share" or "partake"; *metoche*, only in 2 Co.6:14; *metochos* (6x) "companion" or "partner", Lk.5:7; Heb.1:9; 3:1,14; 6:4; 12:8; and in compound form *symmetochos* in Eph.3:6; 5:7.

<sup>4</sup>"Certain expositors prefer to distinguish between *metechain*: "to possess a part of the whole" and *koinonia*: "to have a connection with the whole". The words are however used interchangeably". F. W. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Eerdmans, 1953, p.233 fn.13.

## Παγε 4

course and dessert to the final cup of coffee. It is possible for the one participant to stay home and live off potatoes, but he will not have all he needs, and the meal enjoyed by the rest, though better, is still not complete.

Discussion of the dimensions of fellowship aims at challenging the notion that fellowship can be an afterthought after the details of worship and evangelism are established.

### a) The Early Church was "devoted" to fellowship: Acts 2:42

The understanding that they belonged to this new community was helped by some social realities that accompanied conversion, since it frequently involved complete breaks from family and friends. In our secular age, there is perhaps less obvious impact of religion on many areas of our lives, whereas for those in Jerusalem, or even for those in cities like Ephesus and Corinth so religiously defined, all of life was upset by faith in Christ. In this setting they devoted themselves to fellowship. It is interesting that people who share a common origin get along well when in a foreign setting: various "Canadian" parties are held in American cities for example. I remember meeting a girl in the Spadina subway station during my Seminary days who was in many of my classes through public and high school in Kapuskasing. We chatted like old friends for five or ten minutes. Strangely, those were probably the first words we had *ever* spoken to each other in our lives. But in the wild, immense and slightly terrifying metropolis, small-town northerners had a common bond that was never there at home. So new Christians, although without any background of association with other Christians were driven together by their shared situation.

The apostle Paul made this clear in his ready requests for prayer from churches and individuals. There was no notion of completing his ministry single-handedly; he understood that through their prayers he would be made bold, have opportunity, and remain faithful.<sup>5</sup>

It is also Paul who informs us of the Macedonian's generosity, both in giving to him personally (see Philippians) and also their readiness to give to the troubled Christians of Jerusalem (see 2 Corinthians 8). This latter example is particularly interesting in showing that devotion to fellowship, since everything is against it: they are Gentiles helping Jews, separated by miles and culture, and themselves not entirely free from need! Something of the distinctly *Christian* nature of this fellowship (that is, depending on prior relationship to Christ) comes across.

### b) The Primary notion is that of *relationship*

This leads to an understanding of the point that Bridges makes when he notes that

"fellowship is sharing a common life with other believers, a life that we together share with God the Father and God the Son. *It is a relationship, not an activity...* Those first Christians...were not devoting themselves to social activities but to a relationship...They understood that they had entered this relationship by faith in Jesus Christ, not by joining an organization. And they realized that their fellowship with God logically brought them into fellowship with one another".<sup>6</sup>

And again, Bridges is right when he goes on in later chapters to note that this relationship is *objective* in basis and *subjective* in practice. We *are* children of God, and placed in the body; in that sense fellowship is established when we believe. But the implications of that relationship are challenging to work out. Like other human relationships, for example marriage, both aspects need to be in place for it to be considered healthy.

Hawthorne reflects this thought in his comments on Philippians 2:1 when he says, "In the NT *koinonia* is that fellowship or that close relationship which exists between believers...that community made up of people who are fellow

---

<sup>5</sup>See for example 2 Cor.1:11; Eph.6:19-20; Col.4:3-4.

<sup>6</sup>Bridges, pp.16-17, emphasis his.

members of the heavenly *politeuma*." This leads him to suggest this paraphrase of "if any fellowship of the Spirit": "If you belong to that community brought into existence by the Holy Spirit, and enjoy any fellowship with one another as a result, then live accordingly".<sup>7</sup>

c) This relationship is because of, and expressed through, common experiences

The basic notion of "common" is never too far from the surface. This relationship that we both have, and must foster, with other believers comes about because of what we have in common. Peter writes to those who "have received a faith as precious as ours" (2 Pe.1:1). We are to resist our adversary, "standing firm in the faith, because you know that your brothers throughout the world are undergoing the same kind of sufferings" (1 Pe.5:8-9). Passages like Ephesians 4:4-7 describe this in expansive detail, and insist that this unity be maintained and carefully guarded with "every effort" made.

d) The practice of fellowship involves a common goal: we are partners

A most interesting aspect of fellowship is that which understands it as "partnership": that is, to share a common goal. On the negative side, John warns his readers not to share in the wicked work of the deceiver (2 John 11) by welcoming him into their houses, offering hospitality. On the positive side, Paul writes to the Philippians to thank them for their gracious gift, but expresses it first in terms of partnership in the Gospel" (1:5).

---

<sup>7</sup>Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Word Biblical Commentary: Vol.43: Philippians*, Word Books, 1983.

## Παγε 6

This use of *koinonia* is found in other Greek writings of the period: to share in a common business, or be joint-owners of property<sup>8</sup>. In fact, Luke uses the term in 5:10 to describe the fishing partners about to become disciples (along with *metochos* in 5:7).

There is a challenge here to customary ideas of fellowship in that this partnership does not necessarily require personal contact at all, even if it usually would. Separated by distance, the Philippians are Paul's "silent partners" in the on-going spread of the Gospel, making it possible by their gifts, and sharing in it by their prayers. The idea here has little to do with a sense of friendship and belonging, but the sharing of a goal: the preaching of the Gospel to every creature.

### e) The practice of fellowship involves a common concern for all to complete the journey

Bridges notes that sharing our material possessions and showing concern for one another flows out of understanding our relationship: it is not considered benevolence if a parent provides for his child; in fact, it is considered negligence if he does not. In a business partnership, the income and expenses, the assets and liabilities are shared<sup>9</sup>. This aspect of fellowship is directly based on that relationship.

The implication of this, of course, is that sharing with one another is not voluntary. It is an act of obedience to God performed with a desire for God's glory<sup>10</sup>. Certainly each case must be evaluated, but the notion of "charity" performed because a person happens to be moved by some tragedy or is in a particularly warm and fuzzy mood that day needs to give way to a more solid association with the gift of God in Christ, after the pattern of Paul in 2 Corinthians.

It becomes especially important when it is noted that this use of *koinonia* is one of the most common<sup>11</sup>. It is stated as a command to be made (1 Tim.6:18) and something not to be forgotten (Heb.13:16). And add to this the fact that when Luke wishes to illustrate the fellowship of the early church, this is the point that receives his attention<sup>12</sup>.

But as important as this is, spiritual blessings and resources are also to be shared. It is interesting that the two ideas are merged in both Romans 15:26-27, where the Gentiles contribute to the Jews' material needs because they have shared the spiritual blessings of the Gospel that came from the Jews; and in Galatians 6:6 where the church members are to share "all good things" with their instructors.

Although the vocabulary of fellowship is not always used, surely this is what is meant by passages like 2 Corinthians 1 where God "comforts us [Paul] in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we

---

<sup>8</sup>See Glenn Barker, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol.12 p.307.

<sup>9</sup>Bridges, pp.21-22.

<sup>10</sup>Bridges, ch.8.

<sup>11</sup>Bridges lists several references: Ro.12:13; 15:26-27; 2 Cor.8:4; 9:13; 1 Tim.6:18; Heb.13:16.

<sup>12</sup>See Acts 2:44-45 compared with v.42; also 4:32.

ourselves have received from God". Paul prays for Philemon to be "active in sharing your faith" (v.6, NIV), and commends the Thessalonians that their faith has become known everywhere.

Most notable, perhaps, are the exhortations given to the Hebrews. In 3:12-13 they are to "encourage one another daily" with this goal: "that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart": *not one*. Although Hebrews has much to say about apostasy, the Christian is not cleared if he has avoided that horror: he is to be exercised that none of his fellow-pilgrims (the image in context being the wilderness journey of Israel) fall. Thus they are to refuse to "forsake the assembling of ourselves together"<sup>13</sup>, not for its own sake, but as a means to an end: "let us encourage one another" (10:24-25).

In this context, the author of Hebrews gives a key example from the Hebrews' past (10:32-34) that underlines a point made by Bridges<sup>14</sup> with the help of John Murray's comments on Romans 12:13. Murray notes that Paul does not think merely of supplying their needs, but of becoming *partakers* of their need: making it our own. As a consequence, one will provide what he can, but there is that sense of intimate sharing that should not be overlooked. So in Hebrews 10 they sometimes endured suffering themselves, and other times identified with the sufferers, standing side by side with them, and absorbing the fallout, so that they would be encouraged. It is a common life we share, side by side, on a very difficult path.

### 3. The Foundation of Fellowship: Sharing with...God!

It is time to make explicit the foundation of this fellowship that is extensive and full according to the New Testament usage of this idea. Although the terminology and illustrations may be taken from common life, its proper and effective application depends on being distinctly Christian. There are two aspects to this foundation that I have separated under this heading and the next: that fellowship is first enjoyed with God, but necessarily implying our fellowship with each other; and that this fellowship can only be enjoyed when enabled by God through the Holy Spirit. This foundation serves to further define fellowship, its importance and implications. It also opens some challenging phrases that cannot be fully addressed here; I trust this will not overly weaken the main thrust.

John's first letter presents the interplay between our relationship with God and with each other; in the first chapter that interplay is presented in terms of fellowship. John presents his goal in writing this letter, in this case, as bringing about "fellowship with us"<sup>15</sup>. Writing as an apostle, it seems likely he intends a common faith: he is writing an eyewitness account, so that they will come to the same conclusions concerning Christ, and the same commitment to Christ, to which John and the other apostles came<sup>16</sup>. The fact that this statement *precedes* "fellowship with the Father and with his Son" backs this up. This shared life of believers is from the Father, through Christ, brought about through the proclamation of Christ by the apostles<sup>17</sup>.

---

<sup>13</sup>*episyndagoge*: another "syn-" compound.

<sup>14</sup>Bridges, p.133, quoting from Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Vol.2 Eerdmans, 1968, p.133.

<sup>15</sup>1 John 1:3. Note his statement of purpose in terms of eternal life in 1 John 5:13.

<sup>16</sup>See John's other famous purpose statement in John 20:30-31: "These are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

<sup>17</sup> See Glenn Barker, p.307.

Then further, in 1:6-7 John's parallel catches the reader's eye. When his principle is stated negatively, he shows that this fellowship with God, because of God's nature (v.5), cannot co-exist with a walk in darkness. To claim both are true is frankly to lie. But when he repeats the principle in positive form, the implication stated from "if we walk in the light" is not directly "we have fellowship with God" but "we have fellowship *with one another*". In effect, John is presenting a seamless whole: our fellowship with God is the foundation of our fellowship with his people; even more, our fellowship with his children is the practical demonstration of our fellowship with him! Although the "fellowship" vocabulary does not continue, the interplay between loving God and loving our brother carries the torch for that thought, and continues throughout the letter<sup>18</sup>. Barker quotes from Westcott: "Love of the brethren is the product of the love of God: fellowship with the brethren is the proof of fellowship with God"<sup>19</sup>.

---

<sup>18</sup>See 2:9-11; 3:10-24; 4:7-12,16-21; 5:1-5.

<sup>19</sup>Barker, p.310.

Our fellowship with God comes about through union with Christ. Hawthorne understands the use of "fellowship" in Philippians 3:10 as equivalent to having "died with Christ" in Romans 6. Just as the "power of the resurrection" is known through God's internal work, so is the "fellowship of his sufferings" through which we conform to Christ in his death<sup>20</sup>.

This is also in the forefront of 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, another challenging passage that can only be treated briefly. Paul uses both *koinonia* and *metoche* to describe our participation in Christ, illustrated in the Lord's Supper, in its implications for morality and unity. Both ideas are present: our participation in the Supper is our confession of participation with Christ. That means that we are "one body" with other believers, because we partake of the "one loaf". This means that the implications of my choices for my brothers must be my concern. Even more, my participation with Christ, and my open confession of it, means that I must forego any participation with demons! As in 1 John 1, fellowship with each other, and fellowship with God through Christ are so intricately intertwined that they cannot be separated. Further, that fellowship is defined as necessarily holy fellowship in the interests of building up the body of Christ.

Please be patient with a further statement of this point, since this is a central misunderstanding concerning fellowship that comes dangerously close to putting it in the "desireable but not necessary" category. Paul expresses this in terms of reconciliation in Ephesians 2. A light tap with the preacher's hammer breaks the chapter neatly in two. In "part one" (vv.1-10) Paul neatly describes the terror of our death in sin and the consequences of God's wrath (vv.1-3), followed by a startling and breath-taking display of grace that makes us alive "with Christ", an experience that carefully and systematically unravels every consequence. Then the same ground is plowed again in "part two" (vv.11-22), but this time in "corporate" terms: consequences of sin is alienation from the community where God's promises are possessed and his inheritance a delight. Just as surely, God's grace in Christ carefully and systematically unravels each of these consequences as well, so that Jew and Gentile are reconciled together to God, until the whole "building" that is erected is the Dwelling of God! The double reconciliation has the same foundation (the cross), the same glue (access by the Spirit) and the same purpose (to become a dwelling). Lest anyone think that this is a description of the universal church with little practical implication for local church practice, remember that it is exactly that practice that is Paul's reason for mentioning this: the unity of the Spirit must be kept, so that the gifts can be exercised and the body built up so that God is glorified by his Church (see 3:10,21; 4:1-16).

It is precisely because God has ordained fellowship as described in the New Testament as essential to Christian growth that it cannot be avoided. It is in the arena of church fellowship that a believer's walk with the Lord is forged and strengthened. Recognizing that it must be "in the light", and thus not an excuse for ecumenism, our commitment to one another must be able to be described as "devotion to fellowship" or we are not in line with God's will expressed in the New Testament. Iain Murray rightly finds fault with A. W. Pink in this regard, and notes that his withdrawal from virtually all contact with others cannot be justified, and also affected his writing: it made him more harsh and critical; it robbed him of the comfort that others could have brought, and left him without the benefit of the "cut and thrust discussions with equals", the "iron sharpening iron" that could have refined his personal views that were expressed with too much dogmatism<sup>21</sup>. Our mutual sharing of the Christian life is both the product and the expression of our life in Christ.

---

<sup>20</sup>That is, Hawthorne distinguishes Ph.3:10 from Romans 8:17 where sharing his sufferings means experiencing the same attitudes from the world as Christ did, and the expression in Col.1:24 about filling up the sufferings of Christ. See Hawthorne, pp.144-146.

<sup>21</sup>Iain H. Murray, *The Life of Arthur W. Pink*, pp.208-210.

#### 4. The Drive of Fellowship: Fellowship of the Holy Spirit

One final aspect remains in understanding fellowship, and that is the role of the Holy Spirit. Reference has already been made to Hawthorne's paraphrase of Philippians 2:1. In his view, the phrase "fellowship of the Spirit" here fits with the benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14 as referring to the fellowship created by the Spirit, along the lines of the "unity of the Spirit" in Ephesians 4:3<sup>22</sup>. Whatever the precise understanding of the genitive in these phrases, it is clear that the Spirit's role is both to assure us that God is our Father (Romans 8:15-17) and to place us in the body (1 Cor.12).

In that light, it should not surprise us that the two early references to the church's "commonness" in Acts 2:42 and 4:32 both follow accounts of the outpouring of the Spirit. It has often been noticed that the main impact whenever the filling of the Spirit is mentioned is boldness in preaching the Word; but this implication must not be missed either. Those impacted by the preaching were added to the church. And it is as a consequence of that "fellowship of the Spirit" in Philippians 2:1 that the church was to be "likeminded", and able to work together in the Gospel (4:2-3).

#### 5. Concluding notes on "Understanding Fellowship"

Bridges accurately dissects fellowship as sharing (1) together; and (2) with; each of these he divides again in two: *shared together* are relationship as the organic community and partnership in the same enterprise; *shared with* involves sharing and receiving God's truth and material goods<sup>23</sup>. John Stott puts it this way: the common life of the church is expressed in terms of what we share *in* (i.e. God) and what we share *out*<sup>24</sup>. Packer is even briefer: "Give and take is the essence of fellowship"<sup>25</sup>.

Fellowship was the evidence of the Gospel's power, as well as the means of keeping the believers not only busy, but faithful. Far from being a social time, it was the very essence of the church designed for God's glory.

### **B. PROMOTING FELLOWSHIP IN THE LOCAL CHURCH**

Although the initial impetus for this study on my part came from a number of situations in our church, we are only beginning to take our first baby steps in making an improvement. Because of this the following details may be more vague than I would have hoped, and untested. Please forgive these shortcomings, and accept this as my plea for help in addressing the needs we face. In this way, you can truly be partners with us in the work of the Gospel.

#### 1. Promote the Understanding of Fellowship in the Church

The first step in promoting anything in a New Testament church is to promote its understanding! It is proper for Christian people to respond to the Gospel, to the Word of Christ preached. Having stated the obvious, it is still useful to underline some specific topics in this area.

##### a) Teach from the passages that teach Fellowship

As mentioned in understanding fellowship, there is probably still some gap in most churches between the New Testament's use of "fellowship language" and the thoughts that leap to our minds when the word is mentioned. No

---

<sup>22</sup> Hawthorne, p.66.

<sup>23</sup> Bridges, pp.16-23.

<sup>24</sup> John Stott, *The Spirit, The Church and the World*, IVP 1990, pp.82-83.

<sup>25</sup> J.I.Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.

translation consistently uses one term to translate *koinonia*; while this is proper, it does obscure the connection between Acts 2:42, for example, and the giving in 2 Corinthians 8. The breadth of meaning in this area, and its intrinsic importance must be seen.

b) Teach the principles from which fellowship springs

In his contribution to the book, *Local Church Practice*, Colin Richards presents several practical thoughts concerning fellowship that at least are thought-provoking, if not immediately useful. But from his look at 1 John 1 he draws the conclusion that not only the fact of fellowship in the local church is dependent on fellowship with God; the quality of it is as well. Thus any preaching and teaching that enhances our walk with God in turn enhances our fellowship with one another. The comfort Paul was able to communicate to the Corinthians (see 2 Cor.1 above) came about because, not only had he suffered, but he had handled his sufferings as a man in Christ, learning to rejoice even in tribulations<sup>26</sup>. Consequently teaching believers how to handle the Word, the vital importance and practice of prayer and so on<sup>27</sup> will only serve to enhance the quality of the fellowship we do enjoy; and its obvious usefulness should spawn further devotion to that fellowship<sup>28</sup>.

I realize this might sound rather vague at first, but it is the logical implication of the principles stated above. It is as the "mighty ocean of God's love" rolls over us that we learn to love; and the difference between desiring some fellowship and being devoted to fellowship surely lies in loving as we have been loved. Schaeffer adds a different perspective: our unity with each other comes only as we are mutually submissive to the head. It is a tremendous physical disability when limbs do not respond in harmony with the Head; it is a tremendous spiritual calamity as well<sup>29</sup>.

c) Teach proper means of dealing with squabbles

There remains a persistent belief that Christians and churches (myself excluded) should be incapable of offending people. The disgruntled "I never expected that from a *Christian*" commonly heard is testimony to that belief. How that ever survives a reading of the New Testament is surely a mystery, for had there been no squabbles there would have been few epistles.

Whether that belief is the cause or not, there is little heart for addressing problems: it is far more common to withdraw, either physically removing oneself from the church, or so curtailing activity that for practical purposes it is little different. Consequently the first step in teaching Christians to handle differences is to show New Testament evidence that

---

<sup>26</sup>See his treatment of this matter, for example, in Romans 5:1-5 and 8:18ff.

<sup>27</sup> See for example, Donald Whitney's *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, NavPress, 1991. Although not specifically about fellowship, remember the principles of sharing together for the common goal.

<sup>28</sup> Colin Richards, "Fellowship in the Local Church" in Baruch Maoz, ed., *Local Church Practice*, Carey Publications, 1978.

<sup>29</sup>Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*, Tyndale, 1971, p.166.

it is rather to be expected. After all, as someone has pointed out, the church is the one organization whose membership requirements include an admission of complete failure and a total inability to do anything about it.

Having established that point, it must then be shown that this state of affairs is entirely out of tune with Christ, and entirely out of place in the church. A strange balance, to be sure, but not the only one in making a dwelling for God out of this raw material! James 4 is one place to begin; James takes things that might be considered "every day sins", commonplaces of human condition, and draws them in terrible shades: these fights among us come because we covet and kill like lustful adulterers, toying with the world, which can only mean hatred toward God!

At any rate, Schaeffer again has some thoughts on this: he sees the problem that man interprets man without God, and thus does not account for human sin. Too much is made to rest on people, more than humans can sustain, and so it eventually collapses. But when it is understood that only God can be fully relied on, it enables human relationships to flourish, being able to enjoy what is beautiful without the expectation of perfection<sup>30</sup>.

Fellowship obviously involves communication; this is a topic much addressed in these contexts, with James 3:1-12 and 4:11-12 being notable examples. Whatever means a believer chooses to deal with differences, gossip, malice, slander and grumbling must be excluded<sup>31</sup>.

There is an interesting case history in Acts 6, interesting because it follows on the heels of the statements in Acts 2 and 4 that we have been tracking. The glorious picture in the early chapters begins to unravel in the fifth chapter concerning the gift of Ananias and Sapphira. It comes to a head concerning the provisions for the needy widows in chapter 6. Nevertheless, the solution to the difficulty lay in finding men *full of the Holy Spirit*, who would be able to pass out food! It is not right to insist only on the spirituality of those who would teach the Word; those who engage in the encouragement and operation of fellowship must also be godly.

## 2. Make Better Use of Worship to Demonstrate and Teach Fellowship

### a) The Lord's Supper as teaching tool and active demonstration of fellowship

Obviously I am speaking from my experience; and as the one who leads the church in the Lord's Supper, I am likely incriminating myself as well. Nevertheless, I am not sure that we use the Lord's Supper to the extent we should, and, like fellowship, I am not sure church members generally are that aware of the breadth of meaning in the Supper. In my experience, the celebration of the Lord's Supper is generally funereal instead of solemnly celebratory; and, more to the current point, individualistic instead of corporate. Although generally we are gathered together as a collection of bodies, the emphasis is on quiet self-examination, head bowed, eyes closed: more a pile of bricks than a spiritual house.

Again, it is teaching, more than wholesale changes to format, that is at the heart of the matter; the church is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, whose primary ministry at Pentecost, according to E. F. Kevan, was to "weld the believers, who had until then been so many separate individuals, into the body of Christ"<sup>32</sup>. A consideration of 1 Corinthians 10 above concluded that participation in the one loaf means that we are participants in the one body. In this light, 1 Corinthians 11 addresses the pitiful abuses of the Lord's Supper that earned Paul's rather stern censure: abuses that centred on divisions in the Church! If the supper celebrates the *body* of Christ (in a dual sense), the manner of their eating despised that body. Hence Paul concludes that whatever it is they are doing, it cannot be the Lord's Supper! Once again, fellowship is not merely a secondary conclusion to draw from the Lord's Supper: participation in the body of Christ is the central confession,

---

<sup>30</sup> Schaeffer, p.152.

<sup>31</sup> See also Ephesians 5 where we are *not* to "have fellowship" or be partners with works of darkness; instead, *being filled with the Spirit*, we are to speak to one another usefully, thankfully, submissively.

<sup>32</sup> Ernest F. Kevan, *The Lord's Supper*, Evangelical Press, 1966, p.45.

so that if it is missing it is no longer the Supper. Of course the Lord's Supper is the proclamation of his death; of course it is the celebration of the grace of God in his death, of course it is my repeated proclamation of my faith, that I live only as I feed on Christ; but it is when we are gathered *together* that we make this statement<sup>33</sup>. In that sense, the Lord's Supper is not merely marking my participation in Christ; it is a mark of our *joint-participation* in Christ.

The Lord's Supper helps convey the very nature of the Church, in that it demonstrates its dependence on Christ; the equality of all in that dependence, including leaders; and the unity of the church in its common loyalty to Christ.

How can this be shown? Regular emphasis of this point in introducing the Supper would be a starting point. Underlining that it is for *believers* is important as well: there is no foundation for fellowship without this. Knowledge is necessary so that those who make confession know what they are confessing!

---

<sup>33</sup>Kevan suggests a worthwhile study of the word "together" in Acts to gain an appreciation for the importance of this point! See p.47.

b) Participation in Worship<sup>34</sup>

What is true of the Supper applies to all worship. There is a point to assembling that makes it different from watching a service on television. There is tremendous symbolism in sitting together under the Word; in lifting our voices together to express our common praise to God. There is ample indication that assembled believers are special to God, such as the promise of the Lord's presence with the gathered ones.

It is not necessary to advocate casting aside order to achieve participation; nor is it necessary to agree with those who would curtail preaching time for sharing time. It is far better to understand that participation in worship means the whole of worship. There must be ample time for singing together, singing that is not seen merely as an opportunity to stretch so the preacher can preach longer, with a clear conscience. It is not to be seen as the opportunity to slip out to the washroom, adjust the windows, pop the cough drops, whisper final instructions to the children, or check out Mrs. Jones' latest hat. There should be participation in prayers through careful listening and an audible "amen". The importance of listening together to the message, so that together the church explores the same themes at the same time must be stated. A dear lady (now with the Lord) used to obtain tapes of evening services she could no longer attend. While obviously not the ideal, she knew what the church was learning, and was participating in it as best she could. To hear together, and then respond together through song or prayer or the Supper is to be devoted to both the apostles' doctrine and to fellowship, breaking of bread and prayers.

A word about prayer also: Packer tells us "Free prayer meetings are a classic form of Christian fellowship...Prayer together for each other's needs should always be part of the pattern which the church fulfils of mutual support and help"<sup>35</sup>. Prayer serves as an excellent illustration of fellowship: obvious dependence upon God for our mutual concern. Prayer is often a barometer of the seriousness of our faith: whether the church really believes in the supernatural, and whether the church really exercises mutual care<sup>36</sup>. The church prays both *with* and *for* one another with the aim being spiritual maturity after the pattern of Paul's prayers for the churches<sup>37</sup>.

### 3. Examine the Church for Structural Obstacles to Fellowship

Again, Colin Richards has some opinions on the church's meetings that bear consideration: he challenges us concerning the building in which the church meets: does it become "you in your small corner and I in mine", or does it reflect the togetherness that fellowship implies? Is our emphasis on segregated meetings, or do we make sure the church family is

---

<sup>34</sup> See the helpful study in Wayne Mack and David Swavely, *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church*, P&R 1996, chapter 6. The book as a whole is to be recommended.

<sup>35</sup> Packer, *Your Father Loves You*, June 2 devotional.

<sup>36</sup> Again, see Schaeffer, p.171.

<sup>37</sup> As in Eph.1:15ff.; 3:14ff.; Ph.1:9-11; Col.1:9ff. etc.

together, regardless of age or gender? Do we hold so many meetings that we make it impossible for the members to attend them all? In his view, it would be better to reduce the number but improve the participation. (Sadly, most fear that reducing meetings merely would reduce the number).

The times of our meetings might render it impossible for people to talk afterwards. He means, of course, talking that qualifies for fellowship: we must learn to talk freely of spiritual things in our casual meetings, and as Richards points out, what better time to talk of the impact of the Word than immediately after it has been received?

Perhaps this is the place for a word about spiritual gifts. In the key passages that deal with this topic, the connection is made between the gifts and fellowship<sup>38</sup>, showing that the purpose of the gifts is "to communicate in some way one's knowledge of Christ and his grace"<sup>39</sup>. There is really a double impact on fellowship: greater use of these gifts spreads the load and impacts more people than the elders themselves can do; and "people who are not involved in ministry find it easy to become critical of others, which leads to conflict and division. But when church members are serving each other through the power of the Spirit, a dependence upon one another and a gratefulness for one another develops and people are drawn closer together"<sup>40</sup>.

#### 4. Be Aware of Social Obstacles to Fellowship

There is no escaping the clutches of our society. If the present days are given to individualism and isolationism, then the church tends to exhibit these characteristics. Hospitality, an aspect of fellowship we have not addressed in this paper, must be encouraged not only as a means of personally meeting physical needs of our brothers, but also as a forum for spiritual growth.

While it is a mistake to conclude that fellowship is social activity, it would also be a mistake to conclude that social activity is not useful. The early church was together from house to house. The pattern for families in Deuteronomy 6 is instructive: training involves not only those times of formal instruction and corporate worship, but "accidental" conversations in the course of an average and unspectacular day, the type that make up the bulk of our lives. It is helpful when the church is together; when lessons and practices can be learned by observation as much as communication.

It is always necessary to examine particular circumstances to determine the best cure. Providing for social times is important if there have been some notable trying circumstances of late; if there are substantial numbers of singles or single parents; or if there are some manifestations of the tendency to quarrel. These times can provide a healthy corrective by reminding the members that they are sons and daughters of one Father.

#### 5. Develop the Fellowship of Giving

---

<sup>38</sup>Romans 12:4-13; 1 Cor.12: both passages address the gifts in the context of the body; Ephesians 4:11ff. deals mostly with the speaking gifts, but shows the direction of equipping all the saints for the purpose of mutual maturity. 1 Peter 4:7-11 mentions love and hospitality first, and then encourages use of gifts in service to one another.

<sup>39</sup>Packer, May 25 devotional.

<sup>40</sup>Wayne Mack and David Swavely, p.127.

It is obvious that the ideal in these areas is that much of this would be automatic; but under the heading of walking before running, some special direction may be needed. As a starting point, the idea of giving must be expanded. It means, of course, giving money to help needs: the passages relating to this mentioned above are quite radical in this regard. Already it has been noted that traditional ideas of "charity" do not necessarily apply to giving to brothers in Christ, even if the government does give receipts.

But beyond that, "giving" must become an attitude in those who have "freely received"<sup>41</sup>. Hospitality, again, is notable for the personal involvement in giving: the perspective that makes it stand out is precisely the fact that the meal is shared, not delivered. The mutuality of giving is noted, so that bitterness on the part of those who are always handing out, and dependence on the part of those who are always receiving is avoided<sup>42</sup>. But there is no escaping the fact that the church is bound more closely together when tackling the relief of adversity that has struck one of its own. Out of a tragedy a number of years ago when the death of a 40-year old father of two was followed within four weeks with the death of his aged father came a remarkable outpouring of concern, a pulling together around the grieving family that contributed greatly to the sustaining of their faith. Certainly there is no desire for such tragedies; but in this fallen world they will come. May God develop an understanding and practice of fellowship now that we would not have to be taught in such an extreme manner!

#### 6. Heighten the Sense of Partnership in Missions

The sense of pulling together must also be applied to our support of missions. I suppose a debate could be held on the current system of missions, and on steps to fix it; it certainly could be thought through. But even working with what we have, the sense of partnership needs to be developed beyond a slogan or missions magazine title.

I was delighted last year when our ladies decided to explore the needs some of our missionaries had; one couple labour in a remote northern community where ministry is decidedly difficult, but being in Ontario and not overseas, opportunities to help were more plentiful. This couple have never been to our church; in fact, until a year or so ago, I was probably the only one who had ever met them. But in response to a request, they sent a list of things they could use, and more importantly, a list of things they could NOT use! The church rallied remarkably, and the number of boxes prepared for shipment far exceeded our expectations. Not only that, when more goods came in, two of the ladies decided to make the drive personally to deliver them.

Although this situation lent itself to this kind of thing more than others might, the striking thing was the impact on our church: a cheerfulness in the giving and preparing of the goods; extra attentiveness to newsletters; independently contacting the missionaries; and detailed, thoughtful prayers on their behalf. Generally I see little in "business" models to commend to the church, but the idea of partnership must be enhanced.

#### 7. Produce a Church of "Encouragers"

##### a) Encourage the practice of our faith

The gap between profession and practice remains a stubborn one. Schaeffer gives an example of this as relates to fellowship: evangelicals bemoan the liberal blurring of lines between the saved and lost; but "woe to any church of Christ which is strenuous in keeping this distinction clear, but then shows no sign of the brotherhood"<sup>43</sup>. He goes on to urge the

---

<sup>41</sup> See Matthew 10:8; and note pattern of Paul's ministry as detailed in 2 Corinthians 11:5ff. and 1 Thessalonians 2, amongst other examples.

<sup>42</sup> See 2 Corinthians 8:13-15.

<sup>43</sup> Schaeffer, *True Spirituality*, p.169.

Church not only to be "legally right", but to produce an atmosphere conducive to the practice of the faith.

b) Encourage those undertaking specific service in the church

Eric Lane wrote of a church member's responsibility to his pastor in terms of giving them honour and esteem, as Paul directed<sup>44</sup>. In the course of that discussion, he made this point, which I present in part:

---

<sup>44</sup>See 1 Thes.5:12-13; 1 Tim.5:17

This means the members should pray for them both privately and in the prayer meeting, and give them all respect and encouragement in the work...How rarely does a member come and discuss with the pastor the word he has been preaching, and share any blessing he has received or confess any sin of which he has been convicted! It is no wonder if ministers become discouraged and dry when week after week the people leave the church without even a remark...No minister wants flattery - or if he does he is a fool...What he wants to know is what *effect* his ministry has had...However gifted he may be he will lose confidence in his preaching and the result will be dryness. Of course the people will complain, but the fault will be theirs... The better a minister does his job, the more help he needs from his church to maintain that efficiency. The harder an ox or farm labourer works, the more important to feed and rest him and give him good equipment. The servants of God merit as much care as that given to cattle and farm labourers<sup>45</sup>.

The purpose of this quotation is not to elicit sympathy for the work of pastors, or give them excuses for dry sermons. Rather it is to confess that (again, in my experience) he has a point: there have been times of heavy discouragement with some situation when a prayer offered up at Prayer Meeting for the pastor rescued me from self-pity, and reminded me that our strength comes from the Lord. Although there is much about the whole matter of preaching that I am at a loss to explain, I find there is a connection between preaching well and addressing a group who loves the Word! Thankfully in my experience it has not been rare that a member has acknowledged a blessing or a conviction from the preached Word - not in a sense of flattery, but with enough specifics to understand that they were actually searching the Word and allowing it to search their hearts.

But even that is not so much the purpose of this quotation; rather it is this: if even preachers, who (after brother Martin's paper last month) spend much time grappling with God in prayer and in the study of his word benefit from words of encouragement, and if even Paul himself looked to his churches and companions for relief in his distress<sup>46</sup>, then how much more our people? How much more that Sunday School teacher who balances a long week at a job and a busy family schedule in order to teach a class? What about those who labour in "obscure" (non-teaching) positions? Why do deacons only receive comments when the building is too cold, and pianists only when they begin to bang out the fifth verse of a four-verse hymn?

If we recognize that no service that has a spiritual goal will ever be easy in this sin-stained world, then we will recognize the point of this paper: fellowship means never being alone.

### c) Encouraging those in various trials

This point has probably already been made in the course of the preceding discussion, but it is worth special note. In the desire to emphasize the corporate, do not lose sight of the struggling individual. The pattern of Titus 2 is important, though again the precise vocabulary of fellowship is absent. The Christian faith is to be passed on by example and precept within the context of working together under the government of the grace of God, driven by our glorious hope of Christ's return.

I have been burdened for a number of situations in our church where members, members whose attendance record is excellent, including mid-week meetings, feel very much alone in the difficulties they face. That this is the case irks me,

---

<sup>45</sup> Eric Lane, *Members of One Another*, Evangelical Press, 1968, pp.59-60.

<sup>46</sup> See 2 Cor.1:8-11; 7:5-7; Ph.4:1; compare John's experience: 3 John 2-4.

because I know it should not be the case; this is what we have been speaking of: no one is to be without brothers and sisters to bear them up. On the flip side, no brother or sister is without obligation to do what he can to share others' burdens. For as the apostle Paul wrote,

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, *and each member belongs to all the others.*" [Ro.12:4-5]

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

*I wish to acknowledge the help of Mrs. Susan de Graaf, a member of my church. Every pastor needs a member who loves books, buys books, reads books...and lends books! Mrs. de Graaf not only let me use some of her books, but delivered them to me with bookmarks at appropriate sections!!*

*On Fellowship:*

Bridges, Jerry, *True Fellowship: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia*, NavPress, 1985; aka. *The Crisis of Caring*, P&R Publishing, 1987.

*On Church Practice, with substantial reference to Fellowship:*

Kevan, Ernest F., *The Lord's Supper*, ch.3 "Fellowship", Evangelical Press, 1966.

Lane, Eric, *Members One of Another*, Evangelical Press, 1968.

MacArthur, John, *The Body Dynamic*, Victor Publishing, 1996.

Mack, Wayne A. and Swavely, David, *Life in the Father's House: A Member's Guide to the Local Church*, P&R Publishing, 1996.

*This is a practical guide that addresses most questions with good balance. Although coming out of MacArthur's circle, in my view it is more useful than MacArthur's book.*

Various Authors, *Local Church Practice*, ch.7 "Fellowship in the Local Church", Colin Richards, Carey Publications, 1978.

*Other General Works to which reference was made:*

Murray, Iain H., *The Life of Arthur W. Pink*, Banner of Truth Trust, 1981.

Packer, James, *Your Father Loves You: Daily Insights for Knowing God*, Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.

Schaeffer, Francis A., *True Spirituality*, Tyndale House Publishers, 1971.

*See chapters 12 and 13 especially.*

Whitney, Donald S., *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, NavPress, 1991.

*In addition, a number of commentaries on the applicable texts were used; these are noted in the footnotes if direct use was made of their contributions.*

