

Worship (29) Corporate - Fellowship

We have spent some time on the topic of corporate worship during the previous messages in this series on 'Worship'. We started by identifying the local church as the focus of corporate worship. From there we saw a number of things. We saw we are to meet on the Lord's Day. We saw that preaching is to be central. We saw that our response to preaching will include confession and contrition regarding our sin and commitments and covenants to obey. It will also include thanksgiving and praise to God for His goodness and greatness. This praise will lead into music which we looked at in detail. It will also include using our bodies rightly in worship, giving sacrificially with right motives and making public professions of faith.

What we have seen is how we respond directly to the Lord with other believers.

However, the Bible shows us that there is a way in which we worship God which is indirect, but nevertheless an act of worship. It is how we respond to others. In other words – how we treat other believers, and in fact, unbelievers, will return to God as worship. We want to look at how our horizontal actions – with one another, become vertical acts of worship indirectly.

We want to look at our responsibilities to one another in two sections – fellowship and discipleship. I have previously said from the pulpit that we should go through the New Testament and seek all the 'one another commands'. Over 27 of them are found in the New Testament. In fact, you can group those one another commands essentially under two headings – fellowship and discipleship, and sometimes they fall under both. We'll look at fellowship tonight and discipleship in the next message, and sometimes they fall under both.

Let's begin with what fellowship is not. Fellowship is not merely friendliness. It is not merely having some friendly conversations with other believers after a service, though I would say that, if you are not even doing that, your Christian life is in deep trouble. Though we may talk about fellowshiping afterwards, or having a fellowship evening, fellowship is not limited to having conversations over tea, coffee or a meal.

The word for fellowship in the New Testament can mean a number of things. It can mean commonality, sharing, oneness. It can mean partnering, participating, partaking. It can even mean giving, sharing with others.

The main idea of fellowship seems to be this: Believers partake of Christ, which means we are profoundly connected. We are not simply related, we are connected.

The Bible describes believers as having an organic unity. We are members of Christ's body. We are branches of the vine. We are brothers and sisters of God's family. What this means is that we share each other, whether we like it or not.

In other words, we are one. Since we have partaken of Christ, we share the same life in our souls. We do not have to find something in common. The thing which is common to us all happens to be the most important thing in the universe; a reconciled relationship with the Creator through Jesus Christ. We firstly have fellowship with God Himself. We are joined to Him, and are forever one with Him. We have become joint-heirs with Christ.

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

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

So what exactly is fellowship? In short, fellowship is continual sharing of the life of the Lord Jesus. Since Christ is your life, and Christ is my life, we have fellowship, because our lives have really become united. We share our entire lives with one another, because our lives are Christ. We increasingly think like each other, because we are getting the mind of Christ. We desire the same things, we delight in the same things, we hate the same things, and we honour the same things. Not that we become cookie-cutter replicas of each other, but we become more and more familiar to each other as we become more like Christ.

Think about branches of a tree or vine. How do they have fellowship with each other? By continually receiving and transmitting that sap which makes them live. How do your heart and your kidneys have fellowship? By giving and receiving the blood which is the life of the body – doing their part to sustain the body.

So fellowship is the state which believers are in, one of receiving and giving out the life of Christ to each other.

Why is it worship?

When we fellowship with other believers, we exalt what we have in common – the Lord Jesus.

It is when believers, who would probably not cross the street to speak to each other if they were not believers, will now lay down their lives for one another. Who or what is the reason for this? Jesus Christ! He is exalted, He is worshipped; He is cherished when believers love each other. When your love for Christ so draws me to you and vice versa – that is worship towards Jesus Christ.

When fans of a particular pop star get together and form friendships based upon their common admiration for that pop star, that is sad, but it nevertheless glorifies the pop star. When believers unite, it honours Jesus Christ.

To love believers is to love the Lord Jesus. Remember when He told us that in the day of judgement He will say to some –

Mat 25:35-40 *'for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; 36 I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'* 37 *"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? 38 When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? 39 Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'* 40 *And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did it to one of the least of these My brethren, you did it to Me.'*

Now if you have the life of Christ, you are connected with other believers and will want to share and receive Christ with and from them. **Acts 2** gives us one of the best descriptions of what fellowship looks like and what it lives on.

I believe verse 44 gives us a description of fellowship – *'they were together and had all things in common.'* These believers were in close bonds, and they were united in all areas.

Fellowship is hearing and obeying the Word together – Acts 2:42

The disciples met around the apostles' doctrine. That means they gathered for teaching, for instruction from the Word of God. In fact, this is the fundamental form of fellowship –

agreement around the Word of God, because the Word of God is what defines what we believe. The Word of God is where we come to know and enjoy Jesus Christ in our life. And if we disagree on the Word, we disagree in the most serious place.

If two people who claim to be communists get together, but one interprets the writings of Karl Marx and Lenin in a way which sounds like a capitalist, you can be sure that his fellowship with the second communist will be limited. The doctrine of Lenin, the doctrine of Marx is what defines much in communism. To disagree on the authoritative documents of communism is to have very little fellowship at all.

When Christians gather to hear the Word of God expounded and accurately taught, and come to agreement on what it says, this is our greatest fellowship. Because we are seeing the revelation of God unfold before our eyes, and we can say Amen – this is true. In a way, this is the ground of our fellowship exposed and made clear. Apart from the preaching and teaching of the Word, we would have no fellowship.

This is how we come to that wonderful state of being the Bible calls – being of one mind. How do we become of one mind – to be harmonious, likeminded, agreed? We become of one mind when we submit our individual minds to the Word of God.

Doctrine matters. This is why our fellowship with other believers is limited to their allegiance to the Word of God. How another believer responds to the doctrines of the Word is going to determine how much fellowship we can have.

Maximum fellowship with other believers comes when they hold to the whole counsel of God. The minimum fellowship is around the Gospel. It cannot be less than that, or it fails to be Christian fellowship.

There are two things which rob us of fellowship with one another. One of them is false teaching. False doctrine, when it enters in, divides. In fact, the word for heretic actually means – a schismatic. Because false teaching draws away disciples after the error it proposes.

There is a need for declarative, authoritative preaching and we should not be afraid to rebuke false doctrine, one on one.

Fellowship is sharing the Lord's Supper together – Acts 2:42

The believers united for the breaking of bread. This is probably a reference to the Lord's Supper or communion.

The Lord's Supper is perhaps the ultimate symbol of our fellowship. We take one loaf, so to speak, and we break it into pieces of which we all eat. We take one amount of the fruit of the vine and share it out so that we can all drink. And since the bread represents Christ's body, and the grape juice His life-blood, we are saying, 'We,

together share in Jesus Christ. We have tasted of the Lord Jesus, and so we corporately remind ourselves of that – we are one, we eat and drink, not from separate loaves, not different kinds of the fruit of the vine – but one Lord, one faith.

1Cor 10:17 *For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread.*

We'll come back to this point, but for now, let me ask – 'What is it that we do to prepare ourselves before partaking of the bread and the cup? What is it that we do before symbolising

our fellowship with Christ and with one another?’ Bear that in mind, for we will come back to it in a moment.

Fellowship is praying together – Acts 2:42

The disciples met for prayer. This was not an isolated occasion. You see this matter of corporate prayer coming up again and again in Acts.

Prayer is a form of fellowship.

What is unique about believers praying together, which sets us apart from Muslims, Hindus, Jews or any other religious group? We have a name which unites us when we pray. We alone pray in Jesus’ name. When we pray together we are declaring our shared inheritance in Christ by together taking up that privilege and praying in His name. We are united in what we pray for. We are guided by the Word of God and the Spirit of God (**Romans 8:26**).

When we pray it is a joining together, a uniting of voices, a solidarity which says – ‘We agree on this. We are one – we are of one mind, one accord.’

Neglecting to pray together is neglecting fellowship.

Fellowship is meeting genuine needs out of our own goods - Acts 2:45

The disciples even showed their commonality by making their goods available to other believers. The attitude was not ‘Mine, hands off’, but ‘What’s mine is yours’.

They reasoned that since they shared what is most important – Jesus Christ – how could they deny each other what is less important?

1 John 3:17-18 *But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? ¹⁸ My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.*

Fellowship gets very practical, and seeks to meet needs. It does not dispense with private ownership (**Acts 5**), but it is willing to hold things loosely. It makes available to the covenant community its goods.

We can go beyond this and recognise the principle. It is essentially this – if you are in genuine need, and you are a faithful member of the covenant community of believers, and I have what you need beyond my family’s needs, I will meet your need; because we have all things common. We are not trying to protect ourselves from each other, or profit off each other. Nor should this ever be abused to take advantage of the kindness of one another.

2 Cor 8:13-15 *For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened; ¹⁴ but that as a matter of fairness your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵ As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."*

This is the principle of fellowship – the body does not let one suffer while another luxuriates.

How will you know if someone has a need – be it spiritual, emotional or physical?

Fellowship is sharing everyday life with each other – Acts 2:46

These disciples met frequently, and they met from house to house. They shared meals together. Here is what is interesting – the Bible tells us how they ate meals together. It says they did so with gladness and with sincerity. There was no deceit or insincerity here. They genuinely wanted to be with one another and to enjoy each other's company.

Fellowship goes beyond a quick handshake and perhaps bolting out the door. It is seeking to have other believers in your home, or taking them out for a meal. It is reaching out to one who may still be a stranger to you and spend time with them.

The Lord's Supper was no doubt celebrated alongside a meal in ancient times, and it just adds to the idea – share with one another. Sometimes as a church we will have a meal, a fellowship picnic. Do you avoid these times, or embrace them as an opportunity to get to know the ones you do not yet know?

It's obvious, fellowship continues outside a church building.

Some people are attracted to mega-churches due to the anonymity they offer.

Fellowship is sharing your entire life with another believer, since Christ is now your life.

So what is wrong with us when we do not want to fellowship with each other? The answer is found in **I John 1:5-10** - *This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.*

Look at the progression. John tells us that God is light, so anyone fellowshiping with God walks in the light. One walking in darkness is not fellowshiping with God.

But verse 7 tells us we have fellowship with each other when we walk in the light.

So that raises the question, 'What is meant here by walking in darkness and walking in the light?' Verses 8 to 10 tell us. When we deny or cover our sins, we are walking in darkness. We are hiding in the shadows of Adam and Eve – making excuses, covering ourselves with fig leaves, hiding in the trees of the garden. But if we confess our sins - verse 9 - we come out into the light of God's Word and let it search us, and then we agree with God on what needs changing. That is walking in the light. Walk in the light of God's convicting Word. Let it reveal your sin, confess it and forsake it.

The more this is occurring in your life – the closer fellowship you have with God and with other believers doing the same thing. No excuses, no delay tactics, no 'yes buts', no 'I know I should but not right now.'

When we walk in darkness, what happens to our fellowship with God? For that matter, what happens to our fellowship with each other? It is clouded and obstructed by insincerity, masks and deceit.

Both sins against God and sins against the unity must be confessed and forsaken for fellowship to be enjoyed. There is no partaking of Christ worthily with unconfessed sin. There is no partaking of each other with harboured, unaddressed sin in our lives.

In fact, when you think about the sins that destroy unity – envy, gossip, impatience, anger, pride, bitterness, and a wicked tongue – they will be dealt with if we confess them to the Lord, and to each other. And as we will see in the next message in this series, it is also our responsibility to prod each other in that direction.

It's very simple. When a believer becomes less like Christ, he breaks fellowship with God, and with God's people. The more a believer becomes like Christ, the more he has fellowship with God and with His people.

So two challenges:

- [Are you earnestly seeking to put off sin in your life to enjoy closer fellowship with Christ, and consequently with His people, or is your sin causing alienation from God and His people? The closer fellowship you have with God, the closer fellowship you will have with His people, thereby worshipping Him.
- [Are you humbling yourself to share Christ and receive Christ with and from other believers? Do you recognise your deep need of fellowship as a means of exalting Christ and edifying yourself and others? If not, you will fall short of worshipping Christ as you ought. Jesus Christ is so vast, He cannot fully be expressed by just you. You need other believers to truly know Christ and make Him known. So how about it? Are you the cork plugging God's blessing in your own life? Open up. Know, and be known.