

Knowing Christ Through Fellowship

If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also. (1 John 5:20-21)

Over the years, I have met people who tell me that that they don't go to church because they find church people tend to discourage and distract them. And of course, what they are implying is that they are quite capable of knowing God alone. Their private encounters with God are more than sufficient.

But standing against this idea is 1 John 4:12:

No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us. (1 John 4:12)

Here John deliberately tells us that no one has seen God. The essence of God cannot be viewed directly by an individual. However, there is another form of revelation of God, John tells us, and it is sitting right next to us in church on Sunday. It's other believers. Fellowship with other believers is a means of knowing Christ.

Knowing God was never meant to be something we do alone. At the completion of the perfect creation, the only thing that God regarded to be 'not good' was that idea man should be alone. Companionship and community are part of our design. God has always intended that we know Him with others, and through others, and even reveal Him to others. No one will fulfil the Great Commandment, who dismisses the importance of worshipping God as one member of a larger Body.

God does not save us in groups; he saves us individually. Nevertheless, when he does so, he saves us to be part of a group, to be part of a community that will take us to greater heights of knowing and loving God than we could ever achieve on our own. God joins us to the church.

In this thing called the church, we experience something called fellowship. Fellowship becomes one of the major ways that we know God. A simple definition of fellowship is to have things in common. The Greek word *koinonia* just means partakers together. It is not a strictly religious word.

When we say Christians have fellowship, what do we mean? We mean Christians hold something in common. What is it that we hold in common? We who have believed the gospel have the greatest possible commonality: Jesus Christ Himself. He is our shared Saviour, Lord, King, Head, Shepherd, Bridegroom, and Inheritance. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 4:5-6, once we are truly converted we have in common "one body and one Spirit, one calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all." In meditating on our commonly shared position in Christ, we will find fellowship less of a struggle.

When a people have this much in common, they express that commonality by doing all kinds of things around the thing they hold in common. In Acts 2:42-27 we see the kinds of things the early church did as they were together orbiting the one they held in common - meeting together as often as they can, praying together, studying the Word together, meeting practical needs together, enjoying meals together, and living life together.

Fellowship is not merely a meal, drinking coffee or tea, or enjoying a picnic. These may be good

settings to foster greater ties, but they do not constitute fellowship. Fellowship between Christians already exists. Just like our position in Christ, we must become what we are. We have fellowship; such fellowship must now be realised, expressed, and experienced. It is the responsibility of Christians to intertwine their lives together, discovering from each other aspects of God they could not know on their own.

Fellowship is actually a means, and the occasion, for knowing God, and returning to him ultimate love. As we work through Scriptures together, we will see three ways that fellowship brings us greater knowledge of God. In fellowship, we see God **with** others, we see God **in** others, and we reflect God **to** others. We experience revelation with and from others, and we become part of it ourselves.

I. Knowing Christ By Seeing Him With Other Believers

Psalm 42:4 *When I remember these things, I pour out my soul within me. For I used to go with the multitude; I went with them to the house of God, With the voice of joy and praise, With a multitude that kept a pilgrim feast.*

Psalm 84:10 *For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness.*

Psalm 111:1 *Praise the LORD! I will praise the LORD with my whole heart, In the assembly of the upright and in the congregation.*

David, when writing many of these psalms, was alone. He was in the wilderness, or being pursued. And when alone, what was he longing for? He was longing to worship amongst God's people. Why did he long for that? Since David's focus is not on merely being with others, having a fun time of comradery, but instead on God Himself, we can infer that David expected to see more of God when he was with God's people than when by himself.

C.S. Lewis wrote that "it is in the process of being worshipped that God communicates his presence to men". It is not of course the only way. But for many people at many times the 'fair beauty of the Lord' is revealed chiefly or only while they worship Him together.

God's people are not merely an aid to a private worship experience, they are indispensable partners in this endeavour. When God's people worship God together, there is more to go around.

The successor to John Owen, David Clarkson, preached a sermon, *Public Worship to be Preferred Before Private*. In it, he gave twelve reasons why worship in the gathered assembly of God's people was superior to the private devotions of the individual Christian.

1. The Lord is more glorified by public worship than private.
2. There is more of the Lord's presence in public worship than in private.
3. God manifests himself more clearly in public worship than in private.
4. There is more spiritual advantage in the use of public worship.
5. Public worship is more edifying than private.
6. Public worship is a better security against apostasy than private.
7. The Lord works his greatest works in public worship.
8. Public worship is the nearest resemblance of heaven.
9. The most renowned servants of God have preferred public worship before private.
10. Public worship is the best means for procuring the greatest mercies, and preventing and removing the greatest judgments.

11. The precious blood of Christ is most interested in public worship.
12. The promises of God are given more to public worship than to private

One of the greatest ways to know God is to seek Him with other believers at those appointed times when we assemble for that purpose. Unite your voice with others in hearty song. Join your heart and mind with corporate prayers that are offered. Read the Word thoughtfully when it is read. Concentrate on the teaching. Seek to help others to do the same. Partake of the Lord's Table. Here is more opportunity to see and know Christ than you will have most times alone.

We should come to our times together with that expectation.

II. Knowing Christ By Showing Him To Other Believers

Not only will you see more of God when with other believers, you become part of that revelation. You are to show more of Christ to others.

Ephesians 4:13-15 ¹³ *till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ;* ¹⁴ *that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting,* ¹⁵ *but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head -- Christ --*

One of the best ways to know a subject is to teach it. And here we are told that all of us are to be speaking the truth in love to each other. What does that mean? It means in conversation, we take God's word, the truth, and lovingly speak to others. We apply truth to them, encouraging, helping, nourishing, challenging. As we do that, in the very act of teaching and admonishing one another, we learn of Him, we know Him, we understand Him. When young believers ask you questions, and you learn so as to teach them, you are knowing Christ. When people ask you questions and you can relate life experiences of how the Lord has worked, you learn more of Christ.

You don't need to know all the answers to teach and disciple someone else. But you can teach what you know. And if you choose to teach, you come to know what you know even better. Nothing causes retention better than having to teach others.

There's another way we are to show Christ to other believers. Not only with our lips, but with our lives.

1 Timothy 4:12 ¹² *Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity.*

Parents know the importance of backing up what they say with their lives. When we know others are watching us, it becomes a healthy spur to be more like Christ. And as we do that, we ourselves come to know Him better.

Now sometimes you find a Christian who thinks the greatest threat to his Christlikeness is other Christians. He feels he would be much holier if it weren't for these other Christians who keep discouraging him and tempting him to sin and provoking him. But Scripture has the opposite approach. Scripture knows very well how hard it will be to be Christlike around others, but that's deliberate. God wants those people in your life so you learn to be Christlike not when it's easy, but when it's under pressure.

Ephesians 4:1-3 *I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which*

you were called, ² with all lowliness and gentleness, with long suffering, bearing with one another in love, ³ endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Fellowship will give plenty of space for Christ likeness, for the closer we dwell together, the greater the potential for friction. We may be tempted to grumble against one another (Jas 5:9), to judge one another (Rom 14:13), to provoke and envy one another (Gal 5:26), and to speak evil of one another (Jas 4:11). We can choose to be more like Christ, or less like Christ and when we choose to be more like Christ, we come to know Him, from the inside out, by experience.

Others don't make us sin; they reveal the sin that was always there in our hearts (Mk 7:21-22). Through these, often painful encounters, we learn to put off the old man, and put on the new, As we consecrate ourselves to more love, we are more like Christ, and in deeper communion with him.

If you avoid close contact with other believers, you avoid a gymnasium for your soul. You will remain a spiritual dwarf, and your Christ likeness will be in theory only. You will in fact be a brittle, inflexible, self-centred Christian with little genuine gentleness, forgiveness, compassion and long-suffering.

So the big surprise, and the humour of Heaven is this: you want to know God – you will come to know Him when you love that annoying Christian in church. You want to know God? You will know him when you learn patience and gentleness with that obnoxious Christian who always says the wrong thing, or seems to ignore you, or makes you feel inferior, or even gossips behind your back.

III. Knowing Christ By Seeing Him Through Other Believers

Every believer you meet is actually a remarkable opportunity for you. In each believer is something unique and unrepeatable. First that person is a unique reflection of Christ. Yes, there are things we all hold in common, and there are ways we are very alike. But each Christian has a unique personality, a unique perspective, a unique set of attitudes, habits, desires, personality traits (some of which are in process). But Christ through that person is an aspect of Christ repeated nowhere else. That person is a unique lens of Christ, a unique facet on the diamond that is Christ. By simply getting to know other believers, and watching for God's grace in them, you can learn more about God than you imagined. Christ will be uniquely expressed through each of his sheep, so each Christian is an opportunity to see something more of his beauty.

Galatians 4:19 *My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you,*

Christ formed in each believer is unique. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul uses the illustration of the Body.

1 Corinthians 12:20-22 *But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. ²¹ And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." ²² No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary.*

When you are tempted to dismiss another Christian, remember Paul's words. Body parts might think they can say that of each other, but they are denying reality. They need each other. They are made to need each other. We should look at each other and think, "This is one for whom Christ died. This is one in whom Christ lives." I need to know more of Christ by know him or her.

But there is another way that other believers reveal more of Christ to one another. By listening to them describe their experiences, their walk with the Lord, their struggles, you learn more of God than you could ever know on your own. When I hear of the particular challenges, prayers, answers

that believers go through, in their times of personal testimony, I discover aspects of God's character that I could not have found on my own.

But not only that, I find out about the Lord by listening to people with different vocations to mine. A Christian who is a doctor, a lawyer, a driver, a programmer, a pilot, a housewife, a mother, an investment broker – these are callings. And each of those Christians is trying to understand how to know and love God in their callings. They study their callings, to know them, and then they study the word, to find out how to be more pleasing to God. If you listen to them, they will tell you amazing things about God and His world through what they have learnt in their calling.

One of the other great blessings of the local church is that you often meet Christians of a similar age, or gender, or stage in life. And as these Christians compare notes, they help each other know more of God through their situations.

This does not mean the church should break up into cliques and interest-groups. However, it is natural for people with similar backgrounds or experiences to be able to provoke each other to deeper faith, without withholding their uniqueness from the rest of the body.

We've been taught by our culture that we can do everything as individuals, but it's nice to have others along for the ride. But God's Word tells us we need others to know Him. We need them to see more of Him, we need to show them more of Christ with our lips and our lives, and we need to see more of Christ in them through their characters, experiences and vocations.