

Pilgrim Fellowship

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. 6 And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: 8 for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills. 12 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-- whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free-- and have all been made to drink into one Spirit. 14 For in fact the body is not one member but many. 15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? 18 But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. 19 And if they were all one member, where would the body be? 20 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. 23 And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor; and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, 24 but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it, 25 that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. (1Co 12:4-27)

One of the prominent Christians of the early years of Christianity was a man by the name of Tertullian. Tertullian was a Christian who lived in Carthage around A.D. 200, about the time the Roman empire was at its peak. Many Romans regarded Christianity as a foolish, weird, cult that worshipped a crucified criminal. They spread rumours that the Christians were cannibals. Christians were frequently the scapegoat for whatever problems were afflicting the Roman empire. But there was one thing which gripped the hearts of the Roman pagans about Christianity. Tertullian wrote of that in one of his books. He gives the distinguishing marks of Christians, the peculiarities. After describing briefly how they worship, and how they administer themselves, he says this:

"But it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. 'Behold,' they say, 'how they love one another,how they are ready even to die for one another.'" Here was a watching world looking on, and the observation they made was "Behold how they love each other."

The early church understood they were a pilgrim church. The way they loved each other stood in contrast to the way the surrounding culture loved one another. The church was different in its fellowship.

Fellowship is a word that has come to mean, in the minds of modern Christians, something rather different to what the Bible means by the word. For many Christians, fellowship is a kind of friendliness, a congeniality, a sociableness that we share after a service for a few minutes. Maybe it goes a little beyond that into some church picnics, but nothing really beyond that.

But what we see from this passage in 1 Corinthians 12 is that Christian fellowship is something very different to mere partnership, or polite acquaintance, or amenable cooperation. The Pilgrim Church not only has different worship, it has very different fellowship. Paul's writing here give us two fundamentals of pilgrim fellowship.

I. Pilgrim Fellowship is Sharing Christ's Life

In this passage, Paul is setting up the discussion of spiritual gifts, where he wants to challenge a selfish, egotistical approach to spiritual gifts, and teach a sacrificial, other-centred approach. To do so, he invokes the image of the human body, which is one but many. It is one living unit, but made up of differing parts.

Now this is what is implicit in the image of the body: all the parts of the body share the same life. If the body is dead, all the parts are dead. The parts have no life on their own, nor does the body have a life independent of its various parts. The life is shared. Every body part is fed shares the same life-giving blood, controlled by the Head.

So what is it that Christians share? We share the life of Christ.

2 the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us-- 3 that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. (1Jo 1:2-3)

Extending this image of the body, Paul calls Christ the Head of the Body (Col 1:18, 2:19, Eph 4:15). – where the life is sourced – decapitate a person, and the body dies. So Christ, the Head of the Body, is the source of our life. He has become our life (Col 3:4), and that same life is in every believer. Every branch experiences the life giving sap from the vine. Once you are born again, you are brought into the body of Christ. He saves you as an individual, but He saves you individually to be part of a group. And not some vague, generalised group that meets nowhere in particular, but He saves you to be part of the local church. 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.

Now when you compare that to anything else that people can share, Christian fellowship is the highest possible kind of sharing, of community. Soccer fans have fellowship in soccer, astronomers in star-gazing, party-supporters in politics. We could name countless things or activities or causes or circumstances that cause people to find partnership. But the people of God are unique in that what we share is not just an idea, or a cause, or a thing, or a place. We share a Person, a living Person, who is in fact the Creator of the universe.

The reason why the early church in Acts 2 was willing to share everything with each other is because they were deeply aware that they already shared the main thing with one another. When you share the deepest reality, it is easier to share time, food, material goods.

So Christian fellowship is first and foremost the mutual sharing of Christ. Fellowship is not merely something we do, it is firstly something we have. And since we have it, we then flesh it out.

How do we do that? Let me use some terminology from evangelism. We often talk about sharing Christ with unbelievers, by which we mean witnessing. But I think we can rightly speak of Christians sharing Christ with one another. Since we share the life of Christ, we are supposed to share Christ with each other. We can do that in two ways.

First, whenever we do any of the 'one another commands' of the New Testament, we are acting in a Christlike way to one another. In so doing, you show another believer a fleshed-out, living version of Christ. The many 'one another' commands of the New Testament are various ways of fulfilling the new commandment: 34 "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have

loved you, that you also love one another. (Joh 13:34)

Wash one another's feet (serve each other humbly) , Be kindly affectionate to one another Rom 12:10, In honour prefer one another (be devoted to one another) Rom 12:10, Don't judge one another Rom 14:13, Receive (accept) one another Rom 15:7, Admonish (instruct) one another Rom 15:14, Salute/ Greet One Another (Rom 16:16 2 Cor 13:12), Serve one another (Gal 5:13 I Pet 4:10), Bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2), Don't provoke one another, envying one another (Gal 5:26), Bear with one another Eph 4:2 Col 3:13, Forgive one another being kind & tenderhearted Eph 4:32, Submit yourselves one to another Eph 5:21 I Pet 5:5, Don't lie to one another Col 3:9, Teaching one another Col 3:16, Comfort one another I Thes 4:18, Edify one another I Thes 5:11, Encourage one another daily Heb 3:3, Consider one another to provoke to good works Heb 10:24, Don't forsake assembling with one another Heb 10:24, Don't speak evil of one another James 4:11, Don't grumble against one another James 5:9, Pray for one another James 5:16, Confess your faults to one another James 5:16, Have compassion on one another I Pet 3:8; Be clothed with humility towards each other I Pet 5:5, Phil 2:3; Be hospital toward each other I Pet 4:9

When we do these, we are sharing Christ with one another.

There is a second way that other believers reveal more of Christ to one another. In the church, we are a great spread of ages, languages, ethnicities, as well as different vocations and interests. When we meet, we get to tell each other about how we are discovering what it is to be Christlike in our different callings, and even in our avocations, our hobbies or interests. I used to think that Christian conversation should be more than small talk about job, sports, hobbies. But I realised I was splitting up the human life from the spiritual life. It is entirely natural for Christians to talk about their jobs, their hobbies, their interests. But what distinguishes Christians from the world, is that that small talk leads into bigger talk. We find out what is it like to know and love God as a doctor, a lawyer, a driver, a programmer, a pilot, a housewife, a mother, an investment broker.

Very often Christians of similar age, or similar job, or interest will naturally be drawn together to compare notes about how they have tried to be consistently Christlike in their callings. They consider, how have you battled idolatry in this thing? How are you different from your unbelieving colleagues in your approach? How does this open up ministry opportunities? That's not a clique, so long as it doesn't exclude anyone else. And this becomes how we share Christ with one another.

Within this room is a wealth of experience in trying to know Christ in a great variety of jobs, stages of life, financial states.

That's not to say you will be equally close with everyone. You can think of fellowship in a church like concentric circles. In the inner ring you will have those two or three deep and close friendships who know you deeply and love you and edify you. More broadly, you will typically have a group of people closer to you, perhaps through age or background or location, that you love and serve and turn to, and particularly practice the one another commands. And then more broadly, there will be the whole church, who in other ways you love and serve and fellowship with.

Pilgrim fellowship is sharing a shared life. There is openness, vulnerability, an invitation to know and be known.

But in the world, we see a very different trend. We have come to a place in the world where technology is bringing about the very opposite of shared life. The Internet, and its applications are producing a kind of hyper-privatisation. Privacy is a normal and natural feature of life. When someone is a responsible member of a community, privacy is a normal and healthy feature of life. In the last 10 years, it has escalated to where we are relentlessly assaulted with hyper-privatisation,

a kind of self-created secrecy, which is the opposite of shared life.

Hyper-privatisation is where we use the Internet to create our own unreal worlds, and create an unreal image of ourselves and project it into the Internet. It is not true belonging, it is not true relationships, it is not true mutuality, and so it is not true community. But it gives the appearance of it, and it meets just enough of a selfish need for social contact as to become very popular, without being very edifying.

In the 80s, Neil Postman wrote a book on television, where he described the way our culture was changing from a thinking, reasoning, debating culture into a non-thinking culture of zombies who wanted entertainment. But the thing about TV was, at least we all sat down together to watch it. It might have been pretty poor community, but we were at least in the same room looking at the same screen, fighting over the remote.

But now with cell-phones, laptops, tablets, we don't even have to share the same screen, or the same room. At any time and any place, you get to create your own world of entertainment and influences, free from the scrutiny or involvement of anyone else. You select what you want to watch, what you want to listen to, what you want to experience. And it's entirely private. Before, you at least had to be sneaky about what you watched because of who might walk into the room. But now that's not a concern. You can pollute yourself, destroy yourself, defile yourself without anyone else ever seeing or knowing.

The age of broadcasting, where some media executives choose what to put on TV or the radio is over. Now, with the touch of a button, I choose my music, my movies, my apps. That's not always entirely a bad thing – we get to filter out a lot of rubbish. But done without discernment and self-awareness, it can be dangerous.

Think of the attitude it creates in us. I get to shape a world perfectly around my tastes, my expectations, my likes. I don't have to tolerate what I don't like. If I don't like something, I delete it, I unsubscribe, I close the window, and click out. If I don't like the music, I stop it. If I don't like the preacher, I mute him. If I don't like someone else, I unfriend you.

What kind of attitude am I going to have when I come to church, a church made up of real people with real flaws? I've been constructing this world where I choose the best preachers to listen to, the best music to listen to, I friend the people I want to, I read the things which fascinate me, and now I must go to this rather average church with rather average people, and a rather average preacher. I have become so personally stylized, so isolated, that I have problem with real people. I am going to become quickly impatient, intolerant. What do I need all the pain and trouble of tolerating people, learning patience, forbearance, meekness, forgiveness, conflict resolution, godly use of the tongue, when I can have my digital world where I get who I want and what I want when I want? I will have little patience with genuine community, because my digital pseudo-community is so much more convenient, so personalised around me. I tell myself that I am connected, that I have community, but I don't, because there is no mutuality. It's hyper-privatisation, and it teaches a deep childishness and immaturity regarding real relationships and real community.

Not only do these things encourage me to shape a world around myself based on my likes, but they also encourage me to shape an ideal version of myself which I project into the Internet. I don't actually experience genuine accountability with others, who come to know me for who I am, and help me to become more like Christ. Instead, I get to create myself. The me you will know is the me I tweet or Facebook or Google Circle or whatever your choice of social media is. I don't have to let

you in to my world; I will show you what I want you to know or like, whether it's real or not. It pretends to be a media which allows us to know each other, but it is actually the opposite, it is artificiality on a massive level.

And while these social media are simply devices, utilities, they often seem to encourage in human hearts the worst in exhibitionism and competition. We are tempted to parade ourselves, to tweet or post every insignificance of our lives, immortalising the merest details of our lives, thereby actually trivialising them further. We're tempted to the worst kind of narcissism, the worst kind of childish egotism, where we compete for the most attention. Everyone is a celebrity now, and each of us deserves our time being wowed and oohed and awed by others.

This hyper-privatisation gives us the impression we have relationships online, when we don't. We might have acquaintances. Or perhaps we have some real relationships and these technologies assist us to touch, to say hi, to remain somewhat connected. But to imagine that these by themselves are real relationships and real community is a sad delusion. Genuine community has mutual interdependence. We know and are known. We need and are needed. We serve and are served. We experience both the privileges and advantages of relationships, along with its burdens and responsibilities. We are embodied beings who enter one another's physical presence, and experience genuine facial expressions and sights and sounds of a real human that we take seriously. And any technology which is shaped entirely around me creating my world, picking and choosing who and what I want, and shaping myself, editing out the parts I don't want others to see, boosting and exaggerating the parts I do want them to see, treating others like disembodied nobodies is encouraging a deep self-centredness.

I am not preaching against screen, or even against using social media. I recognise that there are lawful ways we can use these things. You can use these things to extend or supplement a real relationship. But be very aware of how these things are not creating shared life, but in some ways encouraging a very worldly, self-centred life.

Christianity is not a private religion. Sin wants you alone. Sin wants you in private. Sanctification wants to force you into the body for accountability, openness, shared life.

II. Pilgrim Fellowship is Mutual Interdependence

14 For in fact the body is not one member but many. 15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? 18 But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. 19 And if they were all one member, where would the body be? 20 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."

Here in 1 Corinthians 12, the image of the body not only teaches us that we share the life of Christ, it teaches that Christian fellowship is mutual interdependence. The image of the human body is so easy to understand, it hardly needs comment. Each part of the Body belongs to the body, it is not a body on its own. Therefore the body needs each part, and the part needs the body. Everyone is needed, and everyone needs everyone else.

Pilgrim fellowship is this idea of mutual interdependence.

Now think of this idea of mutual interdependence. Clearly, the idea is one of belonging. We are not simply related to one another, we are connected to one another. With that go two things, a sense of need for the Body, and a sense of responsibility towards the Body. I need the Body, so I open my

life to them, I am vulnerable, accountable, I am teachable, I look for ministry. The body needs me, so I make myself available to the body, I sacrifice, I look for needs, I look for ministry.

What that means for you is that you need your church's ministry (not just my ministry), and your church needs your ministry. The way God has set this up is through what the Bible calls grace-gifts, or spiritual gifts. God equips every believer with an enablement to meet needs in the body of Christ. That enablement may be related to natural abilities you have, or it may be completely different. But this enablement is never for you, for personal use. It is given to you to bless and strengthen and edify the church.

Every believer who counts a church as his or her home should have some task in the church, some service you render to the Body, just as the Body serves you. It might be a ministry of helpfulness, doing practical work, administration, setting up, organising meetings, transporting, babysitting, cooking, hosting, repairing. It might be a ministry of bearing burdens – exhorting, listening, visiting, phoning, meeting a financial need, praying. It might be a ministry of speaking the Word of God to one another – whether on the phone, email, visits, sharing books or sermons, or teaching someone or a group of someones in the church.

Now you do not come to know your gift by doing some kind of internal search or some cheesy spiritual gifts questionnaire. Instead, you and I grow in this by having what I call a deliberate otherness. Being intentionally outward-focused, intentionally focused on the others in the Body and what their needs might be.

4 Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. (Phi 2:4)

I ask myself, how can I be a blessing, how can I meet a need as one who is a part of this Body, belonging.

That's really important for your spiritual growth. The sense of responsibility pushes us, that I am needed, and I am in need, disciplines us and helps us forward in our relationship with Christ. In my life, the need to preach every week, and the accountability and scrutiny that puts me under is good for my soul. It challenges every fleshly impulse in me for secrecy and withdrawal, and hiding.

This is the opposite of the trend in the world. It is very pilgrimlike to submit to being mutually interdependent.

The world does not have shared life. It can only have things external to them which it celebrates. The world does not value mutual interdependence, it values being autonomous and anonymous. Because like we saw in worship, at the heart of worldliness is Self. It's also true of fellowship. The world will partner, and associate and befriend, but it is all a means to the end of Self. The world will not lay down its life for you, because the connections don't run that deep.

In fact, the world prefers relationships to be as easy come-easy go as possible. Anonymity and minimal commitment are ideal. Again, the world thinks of itself as consumers and even relationships and societies and communities are like products. If it is not working, you throw it away, and get another one.

Sadly, many in the church cater to this idea. Instead of calling for a deep sharing of Christ with one another, knowing one another in genuine spiritual friendships, the church wants to cater to anonymity. So we come to a mega-church, take our seats as one face among thousands we don't know, the lights go off, so we can forget about our neighbour. We watch the show, and remain

anonymous, and perhaps come back next week. No call to know these people, to share Christ with them, and experience more of Christ from them.

Mutual interdependence challenges the ideas of total anonymity and total autonomy. Instead, we need to look at the believers in the church as our people, our community, our family. We need to seek to know and be known. Get into the life of others, obey the one another commands, share your life and interests with others and what you are learning of Christ with others. That means involvement. Pursue spiritual friendships. Pursue deepening relationships. Pursue involvement.

To be the pilgrim church, you don't need to do something extraordinary. You simply need to treat the believers in this church for what they are: part of a body that you need and who need you to share more of Christ's life.