

Key Value # 5

Fellowship

Descriptions of Fellowship

Fellowship describes the relationship that exists between God's people, grounded upon their common participation of the life of God, by the grace of God in Christ.¹ It is both something that exists, & something that we strive after.

The word translated fellowship is used in a secular sense in Luke 5:10

".... James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon"

...in the fishing industry. Partners share something specific in common, whether it is the prospects of a fishing business, or some other interest in common, or a common future, etc. Christians share the same way of salvation, the same Saviour, the same indwelling Spirit, the same gracious Father, the same brothers & sisters in the same worldwide family. We share a common faith. So Fellowship describes a shared Partnership, brought into being by God, but expressed in the loving relations between God's people.

The word is often used to describe a church or congregation, because we recognise fellowship as a vital feature of a true church.

All the disciples were called, at some level, into a depth of sharing that they had never known before. This what excited John when he wrote about the shared life the apostles enjoyed with Jesus, which was now made available to all believers in 1 John 1:3.²

A) A Radical Alternative to the World

Fellowship is a radical alternative to common, shared identities in the world, whether nationality, community or even family. In Acts 2:40 Peter cries: **"Save yourselves from this corrupt generation"**. They were delivered from an old identity as members of a corrupt, apostate community to a new identity as members of a new community, the fellowship of the church. So by accepting the Gospel & being baptised v41 they detached themselves from the one & attached themselves to a new generation/ a new community in touch with God.³

This is at the heart of conversion. Christianity is fundamentally corporate. Jesus saw His disciples as His brothers & sisters⁴.

Yet many Christians have been infected with the most weakening virus of modern life, what sociologists call "radical individualism." They concentrate on personal obedience to Christ as if all that matters is "*Jesus and me*," but in doing so, they miss out on the fullness of biblical Christianity. For Christianity is not a solitary belief system. Most of the imperatives in the N.T. are written in the plural - e.g. Eph 6:10. **"Stand fast in the Lord...."** Would soldiers ever fight alone? And we pray to **"Our Father..."**

So we are converted out of the world into the fellowship of God's people which replaces it, as the new setting in which we live out our life.

B) A Shared Life Capable of Growth

Fellowship means much more than casual acquaintance or working relationships in a church. Discipleship requires a depth of relationships that is both demanding & exciting. It requires we maintain values that are in defiance with the world, & accept an unconditional liability for our brothers & sisters in Christ – emotionally, financially & spiritually.

Jesus identifies this "love one for another"⁵ as the hallmark of true discipleship that the world would be unable to imitate. The sects & cults often make attempts to forge this fellowship. But authentic Christian fellowship is a life of mutual love lived out under the Lordship of Christ. He modelled this in His shared life with the twelve disciples and in salvation makes this life & love real possibilities for His people.⁶

Eph 4:31 – 5:2 contains a powerful call to live out the fellowship that God has created. It is a commitment to one another, centred upon Christ's love & sacrifice for us.

C) A Shared Service

The ducks flying in "V" – 185% further because they work together. All that Christians can do because they do it together. Yet right relationships are a prerequisite for effective service in the Church.

D) Some Barriers to Fellowship

- Pride - lack of authenticity. Masks must be removed..
- Fear - See C.S. Lewis quote.⁷ We risk losing too much by the fear of man.
- Time - busyness. Priorities require changing.
- Individualism - a worldly outlook that needs challenging & remodelling.
- Divisions, often over personality issues.
- Intolerance – that tends to diminish our fellowship ultimately to one.

The things that unite believers are infinitely larger than the things that divide us.

E) Some Marks of a Spiritual Fellowship

- Security – an environment of trust and acceptance where people feel safe and secure where we can take off our masks. Reality, openness, honesty.
- Vision for growth – the ability to see what another could become in Christ.
- Wisdom – the work of God’s Spirit to help us discern times & seasons.
- Spiritual Power – being an encourager to one another. Across the centuries suffering Christians testify of the sustaining power of the fellowship.
- Reconciliation practised & forgiveness is a reality. We live in a nation of disconnected people: no loyalty, no real neighbours. Closeness requires forgiveness.
- Practical Support - In the NT the word fellowship occurs most of all in the context of the sharing of financial support. Eg. 2 Cor 8:4. We are called to demonstrate care and concern through practical help and support.
- Evangelistic Impact – Imagine the Potential of a church with true shared fellowship upon the outside world.

“Without this fellowship, the world remains captive to the powers of darkness, & the devil & all his children mockingly taunt “Where is your God?”⁸

“The church surely has few things of greater immediate relevance to offer the world than the secret of genuine human relationships”.

Questions for Personal Reflection & Discussion

1. Have we repented of unloving, worldly, disrespectful, divisive attitudes to one another?
2. Do believers see themselves more as individuals or as members of a fellowship? Which is the most important, if any?
3. What conditions led to fellowship being withdrawn in the NT?
4. How can we encourage a greater sense of shared identity in the church?
5. Are we experiencing the reality of fellowship – what are the obstacles?
6. How does fellowship express itself?
7. How are new people best integrated into the fellowship of the church?
8. Is the same level of fellowship attainable with every member of the church? (Contrast Christ’s relationships with Peter, James & John, to the rest of the disciples)
9. What can we do for the housebound or infirm who are unable to get out to meetings?
10. What about expressing fellowship between churches?

¹ Based on Bruce Milne “Know the Truth” p223

² 1John 1:3 “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.” From “Discipleship” by David Watson p36

³ Act 15:14 Simon has declared how God at the first visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for His name.

⁴ Mar 3:34-35 And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers! (35) For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother."

⁵ Joh 13:35 By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

⁶ Eph 4:31-5:2 Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamour, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. (32) And be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you. (5:1) Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. (2) And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma.

⁷ “To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything, & your heart will certainly be wrung & possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no-one... Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it safe in a casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket – safe, dark, motionless, airless – it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers of love is – Hell.

⁸ Discipleship p38