

ENJOYS TRUE FELLOWSHIP

David VanAcker, Pastor of Discipleship
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INTRODUCTION

I imagine that for most of us this session will be the most practical. Most people regularly experience a deep longing for true fellowship. Most people deeply feel the effects of a lack of true fellowship. But, from what I can tell, few people regularly experience it.

Imagine for a moment what it would be like to be a part of a community where everyone in it loves Jesus above all things. Where there is an obvious and experienced willingness to be mocked and abused for the name of Jesus by everyone around you. Where you feel truly loved and where there is no concern for ever having to go it alone. Where you know you'll be cared for and provided for by God and his people. Where you are constantly encouraged for who you are in Christ. Where your sins are able to be confessed, prayed for, and fought against and along side brothers and sisters who care more about your soul than your face and who are humble enough to avoid godless judgment and guilt-based interactions. Imagine a community where offences against one another are quickly forgiven and bitterness and malice and gossip are absent. Imagine delighting daily together with others over God's Word and his present faithfulness. Imagine knowing that you were prayed for constantly by people who know and love you because they know and love God. Imagine living in a community where Jesus' commands are known and loved and lived and expected. Imagine being able to serve according to your gifts and seeing real fruit flow from it. Imagine the gospel going forth from your community with power and effectiveness. Imagine a community mixed with a steady influx of new believers and gray-haired saints. Imagine a mixture of youthful eagerness and aged wisdom. Imagine a community where there are dozens of examples of godly marriages to look to and imitate. Imagine being a part of a people who you're excited to point your children to as examples of Christlikeness. Imagine being in a place of real sacrifice (which ends up being no sacrifice at all) where orphans and widows are welcome and well cared for, where people share resources so that no one is in need, and where the poor are loved generously. Imagine living in such a community where the glory of God is the banner and goal.

Grace Church, that's true fellowship. That's what we're called to. I've tasted it at times and it is good. In this session we're going to look at a few necessary components of this type of fellowship. May God grant this good gift to us.

STEMMING FROM ONENESS IN CHRIST

If we are ever to experience true fellowship it will stem from a mutual commitment to Jesus Christ. Fellowship based on anything else will be shallow at best and, in the long-term, untenable.

Bonhoeffer says, *"Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this...[This] means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity"* (Bonhoeffer).

And Paul says, *"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility"* (Ephesians 2:13-16).

The type of true fellowship that we were created to have in the body of Christ stems from the fact that we were all brought from far off by the blood of Jesus and therein reconciled to God and each other as one body. What an amazing concept. What an amazing reality. Jesus saved us as one body. In the cross he won fellowship for us with himself and others. Because we are one with Christ we can be one with each other.

CENTERED ON GOD'S WORD

The second necessary ingredient of true fellowship is a community that is centered on God's Word. It is God's Word, as we talked about earlier that draws us to Christ (Romans 1:16; 1 Corinthians 1:24; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23; 2 Timothy 3:15), that builds us up as Christians (Acts 20:32), that gives us life (Matthew 4:4; Deuteronomy 32:47), that convicts us of sin and draws our attention to righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16), that guides us (Psalm 119:105; 2 Peter 1:19), that makes us wise (Psalm 19:7), and that gives us hope (Romans 15:4).

"God has put this Word into the mouth of men in order that it may be communicated to other men. When one person is struck by the Word, he speaks it to others. God has willed that we should seek and find His living Word in the witness of a brother, in the mouth of man. Therefore, the Christian needs another Christian who speaks God's Word to him" (Bonhoeffer).

Indeed, it is God's Word that defines true fellowship for us. Without it we would not know what real fellowship is. Since our communion is first with God and then with each other God's Word is absolutely necessary for us to know who God is, what he's like, what he wants, how to have fellowship with him as well as what we're like, what were created to do and be, and how to have fellowship with one another.

God's Word brings life and health and is at the center of any true Christian fellowship.

FUELED BY PRAYER

When I asked pastor Daniel to look over my outline for this seminar the thing that stood out to him as needing to be made more obvious was the fact that in order for the body of Christ to have any life or power the Spirit must work. I'm thankful for his reminder.

If we are to experience fellowship it will be because we are one in Christ, centered around the Word of God, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Our neediness, our dependence on God for all that we need (including fellowship), must drive us to prayer.

"Christian community is like the Christian's sanctification. It is a gift of God which we cannot claim" (Bonhoeffer).

We must pray for ourselves to be right with God and our brothers. We must pray for God's help to love and serve and live and care and forgive and function and be as we ought. And we must pray for those things in our brothers and sisters as well.

"This brings us to a point at which we hear the pulsing heart of all Christian life in unison. A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. His face, that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in intercession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died, the face of a forgiven sinner. This is a happy discovery for the Christian who begins to pray for others. There is no dislike, no personal tension, no estrangement that cannot be overcome by intercession as far as our side of it is concerned. Intercessory prayer is the purifying bath into which the individual and the fellowship must enter every day. The struggle we undergo with our brother in intercession may be a hard one, but that struggle has the promise that it will gain its goal.

How does this happen? Intercession means no more than to bring our brother into the presence of God, to see him under the Cross of Jesus as a poor human being and sinner in need of grace. Then everything in him that repels us falls away; we see him in all his destitution and need. His need and his sin become so heavy and oppressive that we feel them as our own, and we can do nothing else but pray: Lord, do Thou, Thou alone, deal with him according to Thy severity and Thy goodness. To make intercession means to grant our brother the same right that we have received, namely, to stand before Christ and share in his mercy.

This makes it clear that intercession is also a daily service we owe to God and our brother. He who denies his neighbor the service of praying for him denies him the service of a Christian. It is clear, furthermore, that intercession is not general and vague but very concrete: a matter of definite persons and definite difficulties

and therefore of definite petitions. The more definite my intercession becomes, the more promising it is” (Bonhoeffer).

And Jesus’ body of Christ prayer,

Matthew 6:9-13 *Pray then like this: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. ¹⁰ Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. ¹¹ Give us this day our daily bread, ¹² and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. ¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*

For us to experience true fellowship within the body of Christ we need God to work. Our prayers demonstrate our understanding and acceptance of this fact.

FOLLOWING GOD’S EXAMPLE IN CHRIST

This point, that true fellowship means following God’s example in Christ, has two important aspects. The first, and probably most obvious, is that God has provided us in his interactions with his people and in his Son, Jesus, an example to follow for fellowship among men.

“God Himself has undertaken to teach brotherly love; all that men can add to it is to remember this divine instruction and the admonition to excel in it more and more. When God was merciful, when He revealed Jesus Christ to us as our Brother, when He won our hearts by His life, this was the beginning of our instruction to divine love. When God was merciful to us, we learned to be merciful with our brethren. When we received forgiveness instead of judgment, we, too, were made ready to forgive our brethren. What God did to us, we then owed to others. The more we received, the more we were able to give; and the more meager our brotherly love, the less were we living by God’s mercy and love” (Bonhoeffer).

Simply, in God’s interaction with his people and Christ’s ministry on earth, we see true fellowship in action.

The second important aspect of this point, which I’ll just mention, is that true fellowship is ultimately modeled not after our oneness with each other in Christ, but with the oneness eternally experienced among the Trinity.

John 17:11 *And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.*

John 17:22-23 *The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*

To fully grasp what eternal and infinite harmony is like we look to the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit.

RELATED TO OUR INDIVIDUAL WALKS

There are two truths that must always be taken together. First, the quality of our fellowship within the body of Christ will always be dependant on the quality of fellowship that each individual member of the body has with God. And second, the quality of our individual fellowship with God will always be dependant on the quality of our fellowship within the body of Christ.

All too often we forget one or the other. If a church isn’t spiritually healthy it’s because there is a lack of health among the individuals within the church. If individuals aren’t spiritually healthy it’s because there’s a lack of health in the church. God means the two to be inseparably related.

We, as individual members of the body, need the church to grow in the way God intends us to grow. The Church, as we said earlier, is a means of grace for Christians.

And we as a Church need each individual member to go hard after Christ. It is individual members that make up the body.

Again, consider Bonhoeffer on this relationship:

“Many people seek fellowship because they are afraid to be alone. Because they cannot stand loneliness, they are driven to seek the company of other people. There are Christians, too, who cannot endure being alone, who have had some bad experiences with themselves, who hope they will gain some help in association with others. They are generally disappointed. Then they blame the fellowship for what is really their own fault. The Christian community is not a spiritual sanatorium. The person who comes into a fellowship because he is running away from himself is misusing it for the sake of diversion, no matter how spiritual this diversion may appear. He is really not seeking community at all, but only distraction which will allow him to forget his loneliness for a brief time, the very alienation that creates the deadly isolation of man. The disintegration of communication and all genuine experience, and finally resignation and spiritual death are the result of such attempts to find a cure.

Let him who cannot be alone beware of community. He will only do harm to himself and to the community. Alone you stood before God when he called you; alone you had to answer that call; alone you had to struggle and pray; and alone you will die and give an account to God. You cannot escape from yourself; for God has singled you out. If you refuse to be alone you are rejecting Christ's call to you, and you can have no part in the community of those who are called. "The challenge of death comes to us all, and no one can die for another. Everyone must fight his own battle with death by himself, alone. ... I will not be with you then, nor you with me" (Luther).

But the reverse is also true: Let him who is not in community beware of being alone. Into the community you were called, the call was not meant for you alone; in the community of the called you bear your cross, you struggle, you pray. You are not alone, even in death, and on the Last Day you will be only one member of the great congregation of Jesus Christ. If you scorn the fellowship of the brethren, you reject the call of Jesus Christ, and thus your solitude can only be hurtful to you. "If I die, then I am not alone in death; if I suffer they [the fellowship] suffer with me" (Luther).

We recognize, then, that only as we are within the fellowship can we be- alone, and only he that is alone can live in the fellowship. Only in the fellowship do we learn to be rightly alone and only in aloneness do we learn to live rightly in fellowship” (Bonhoeffer).

And it's also plain in Ephesians 4:15-16, “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”

We must go hard after God not only for our own souls but also for the souls of our brothers and sisters in Christ, indeed, for the whole body of Christ.

LOVE AND OTHERS ORIENTED

Let me start with this. We've brought a consumer mentality into the church. I see it in my heart and in your actions. You've heard the sermon before probably, but I'm going to give a piece of it again. Most of us walk through these doors (even today at the seminar) with one primary question on our minds, what's in it for me? How will I benefit from this? Sometimes it's blatant and secular, will I like the music? Will the service go too long? Are the people here too weird? Will I be sufficiently entertained? Will people be nice enough to me?

And sometimes there wrapped in more spiritual language, will the bible study be...? Will the sermon be...? Do their children's ministries...? Does the worship music...?

In a certain context many of these questions might be OK to ask. For the most part, however, we just want things our way. We ask these questions as consumers with little or no view to the things of God.

Pastor Daniel quoted the following Leadership Magazine article a few months ago when he preached on the body of Christ.

“When we approach Christianity as consumers rather than seeing it as a comprehensive way of life, an interpretive set of beliefs and values, Christianity becomes just one more brand we consume along with Gap, Apple, and Starbucks to express identity. And the demotion of Jesus Christ from Lord to label means to live as a Christian no longer carries an expectation of obedience and good works, but rather the perpetual consumption of Christian merchandise and experiences—music, books, t-shirts, conferences, and jewelry....” (Leadership Magazine).

Scripture paints a radically different picture, however. And for us to have true fellowship (indeed, if we are to honor God) we must break free from our consumerism and embrace God’s good design for a love and other’s oriented Church.

Listen to the Word of God.

1 John 4:7-12 *Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*

Mark 9:33-35 *And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?” ³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”*

For true fellowship to take place here we must continually walk through these doors (whether it is ever reciprocated or not) looking for ways to show the love of God to the people around us. We must continually walk through these doors (whether it is ever reciprocated or not) looking for ways to serve others. And we must stop walking through these doors thinking, “here I am” and start thinking “there you are”. We must stop focusing on what we’re not getting that we think we deserve and start being what God has called us to be.

We have all that we need for contentment in all situations in Jesus!

God does intend for you to be treated a certain way by your brothers and sisters in Christ. He is grieved when you’re not loved and served rightly. However, we can’t control others or take over the role of the Holy Spirit for others. But we can love and serve and obey God in joy regardless of how others respond, however.

Some of you have no idea that you’ve been taking like crazy and giving little to the body.

Some of you give but have been carrying around resentment for months or years because others aren’t treating you rightly. You’ve used the sins of others to justify sin in your own life.

True fellowship in the body of Christ results when we become love and others oriented.

VULNERABLE AND TRANSPARENT

Lastly, true fellowship happens when we stop putting on an act. When we stop pretending that we’re something that we’re not. This needs to be coupled with a commitment to godliness of course (or else we’re all running around being honestly sinful with one another with no expectation of repentance), but we simply must stop living hidden lives.

We need to create a context here which is vulnerable and transparent. Consider Bonhoeffer’s words once more.

“The final break-through to fellowship does not occur, because, though they have fellowship with one another as believers and as devout people, they do not have fellowship as the undevout, as sinners. The pious fellowship permits no one to be a sinner. So everybody must conceal his sin from himself and from the fellowship. We dare not be sinners. Many Christians are unthinkably horrified when a real sinner is suddenly

discovered among the righteous. So we remain alone with our sin, living in lies and hypocrisy. The fact is that we are sinners” (Bonhoeffer).

“In confession the break-through to community takes place. Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation...Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of a Christian brother, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders; he gives up all his evil...the expressed, acknowledged sin has lost all its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear the fellowship asunder” (Bonhoeffer).

James 5:16 *Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working.*

CONCLUSION

May God grant this fellowship to us here.