“Better Together”
Fellowship Community
We will be intentional in creating opportunities for our Church community
to build relationships and share life together,
with the goal of fostering spiritual growth.
Acts 2:42, Hebrews 10:24-25, Galatians 6:1-10
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Acts 2:42

42 *They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.*

Hebrews 10:24-25

24 *And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,* ***25*** *not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

Introduction

When we come to the value "Fellowship Community," we shouldn't just check the box and say, well, we have a Fellowship Ministry Team who makes sure we have dinner on Wednesday nights and coffee fellowship on Sunday mornings. For the kind of fellowship community this value expresses is not one relegated to a committee; it is a value embraced by everyone, and it is the driver that moves individuals to share not only a pew but their very lives with each other.

I was delighted to have 10 people in our current Inquirers' class. It has been said that ninety percent of new members will stay in their congregation if (1) they can articulate their faith; (2) they belong to subgroups (such as a choir, small group, or Sunday school class); (3) they have four to eight close friendships in their congregation.[1]

There's nothing like a good friend who can laugh and cry with us, who really knows us. And yet, there's nothing more frustrating than other people, too! We don't know the situation of the Hebrew community, what compelled the author to urge them not to forsake meeting together, which some were doing. We don't know if they weren't getting together because of differences of political opinion or differences of socio-economic class. We don't know if they simply got busy, or if they felt they were spiritually mature, so they didn't need to be in community with other Christians. The author simply says, "don't stop getting together." It's important, for you can spur one another on to love and good deeds. For community also provides accountability, which can safeguard against poor judgment, unconscious motivations, and self-deception.[2] This is part of what Paul describes in Galatians 6:1-10.

Galatians 6:1-10

My brothers and sisters, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. ***2*** *Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.* ***3*** *For if those who are nothing think they are something, they deceive themselves.* ***4*** *All must test their own work; then that work, rather than their neighbor's work, will become a cause for pride.* ***5*** *For all must carry their own loads.*

6 *Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher.*

7 *Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, for you reap whatever you sow.* ***8*** *If you sow to your own flesh, you will reap corruption from the flesh, but if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life from the Spirit.* ***9*** *So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.* ***10*** *So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith.*

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[1] *Source: Willard Black, Leadership, Vol. 4, no. 3.*

[2] *Source: Archibald D. Hart in Leadership, Vol. 9, no. 2.*

Garfield is a comic strip character created by Jim Davis who was hugely popular in my teenage years. I had all the stuffed animals and several books of the comic strips featuring the sarcastic cat Garfield along with his clueless sidekick and frequent punching bag, Odie.

In one of the cartoons, Garfield is sitting inside in a comfortable chair, and he sees Odie outside, peering into the window and eager to get in. Garfield says to himself: "Poor Odie, locked outside in the freezing cold. I just can't bear to see him like this. I've got to do something."

So the lazy fat cat gets out of the chair, goes over to the window, and closes the curtains, thinking to himself, "Now, that's better!"

The fact of the matter is that there is never a time we can just close the curtains and ignore other people. Cain would famously ask God, "am I my brother's keeper?" to which the reply then and now has always been, yes. We are responsible for one another. So fellowship, *koinonia* in the Greek, would be a significant aspect of Christian life in the New Testament. The little fledgling group began to create a community around their shared belief in the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. For they were called to a new way of life, a new way of seeing people, a new way of living in the world. They needed each other for support and encouragement. Acts 2:42 describes those early gatherings as places where they listened to the apostles' teaching, shared their lives and their possessions, ate meals and prayed together. These were the activities of Christian community.

But living together isn't easy. In his letter to the Galatians, we find Paul yet again having to challenge a practice, to correct a belief, to mediate between differing points of view in the church community. Living in fellowship has always been challenging. This particular community was trying to figure out what this new faith in Christ meant in terms of their Jewish roots. The main issue was the practice of circumcision, the sign of the covenant with Abraham, and the mark, literally in one's flesh, that one belonged. Surely that basic practice would still be required for these new Gentile converts, right?

No, says Paul, there is another law at work in your midst, and that is the law of Christ. Christ has fulfilled the requirements of the law and given you a new commandment. This new commandment is the law of love. And it is guided by the Spirit rather than by a list of do's and don'ts. But this can be even more demanding, not less. For this is a guideline that constantly keeps other people in view. And the church is the place where we practice.

When a new website launches, or when a website launches a new feature, they commonly go public for a period of time as what is called a "beta" site. For example, Google for years called their email feature—Gmail—a beta site. The idea of a beta site is it's a test site that is available for the public to use, but with the understanding that you may find bugs in it. The site is not making any claims to have everything worked out to perfection. If you find a problem with a beta site, you think to yourself, *Oh yeah! This is a beta site. Maybe I should send the designers an email so they know they still have a problem here.* If you are a mature person, you don't get

angry with a beta site if you find a broken webpage. A beta site is a "grace-expected" web site. The site is counting on you to give them grace.

Applying this idea to the Christian life, we will be more like Christ if we treat the people we live and work with each day as beta Christians. Like us, they are all a work in progress. They all need grace. None of them is perfect yet. We should go through every day expecting we will need to give grace to others all day long.[3] Because we know that *we* need grace all day long, too. Christian community should be the place we give and receive grace, which ties back to our first value. God gives us grace, but we need to receive and give grace to others in order to grow. This won't happen if we're trying to live the Christian life on our own.

Consider the redwoods in California. They are said to be the largest and oldest trees in history. One would assume that they have a complex root system that reaches down hundreds of feet. In fact, they have a very shallow root system, and the only way they survive storms and strong, blustery winds is that their roots intertwine together. The ultimate measure of maturity in the Christian life is not individual growth as much as it is integration into the family system of God's people. It's like Henry Ford once said, "Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is a process; working together is a success."

Paul is realistic about his churches. He knows they are made up of human beings who will continue to fail God, fail each other, and fail themselves. One question I ask couples in premarital counseling is to describe their method of practicing forgiveness with each other. Because we know that just because you love someone it doesn't mean that you don't mess up and hurt them. So we need a methodology for addressing failure and hurt.

Paul offers a way for this to happen in a fellowship community. He gives us a guide for how we treat those who have failed in the family. The word he uses is those who have committed a *transgression*, which means straying from the path. Here the focus is on more of a one-time slippage instead of a habitual offense.

For he says we are to be a restorative community, not a punitive one. So he describes a very careful and intentional process. We start by ensuring that we are Spirit-led. Oswald Chambers has said, "God never gives us discernment in order that we may criticize, but that we may intercede."[4] So, we need to pray before we approach someone. Because we need to be clear about whether God is calling us to say something, what our motivations are in doing so, and the best way to go about it.

There are a lot of "one another's" in the New Testament, such as forgive one another, serve one another and pray for one another. But there are quite a few that we do to each other that can nowhere be found in Scripture:

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[3] *Source: Craig Brian Larson, editor of PreachingToday.com. (The idea of a beta website being a grace-expected site came from Marshall Shelley, editor of Leadership journal.)*
[4] *Source: Oswald Chambers. Leadership, Vol. 16, no. 1.*

Humble one another, scrutinize one another, pressure one another, embarrass one another, corner one another, interrupt one another, defeat one another, sacrifice one another, shame one another, judge one another, run one another's lives, confess one another's sins, intensify one another's sufferings, point out one another's failings …[5]

That is not what we're called to do. Instead, we are called to restore one another in a spirit of gentleness. Restore means to mend or equip. The goal of restoration is to equip the offender so that they do not repeat the behavior. We restore to help. But we are to do so with the greatest humility and without condemnation, knowing that their failure could also be our failure, and what happens to them could also happen to us.

A visible sign of a community characterized by grace is that we don't shoot our wounded. We take care of others in distress even if their wounds are self-inflicted. We stand beside those who struggle, rather than increasing their load. Paul says, "bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Christ has taken and transformed the law, fulfilling its requirements and offering it back to us under that simply worded yet so much more difficult law, which is the law of love: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The objective is to love your neighbor, and the method is to love them as you love as yourself: As much as I think about me, take care of me, seek the welfare of me, I am to do that for others. The law of love means that sometimes we carry an inordinate share of another person's struggle because they are unable to carry it themselves.

Of course, burden bearing can extend into all kinds of other things. Consider Mr. Alter's fifth-grade class at Lake Elementary School in Oceanside, California. One spring it included fourteen boys who had no hair. Only one, however, had no choice in the matter. Ian, undergoing chemotherapy for lymphoma, faced the prospect of having his hair fall out, so he had his head shaved. But then 13 of his classmates shaved their heads so Ian wouldn't feel out of place.

"If everybody has his head shaved, sometimes people don't know who's who," said his 11-year-old friend Scott. "They don't know who has cancer, and who just shaved their head." Ten-year-old Kyle started it all. He talked to some other boys, and before long they all trekked to the barber shop. "The last thing Ian would want is to not fit in," said Kyle. "We just wanted to make him feel better."

Ian's father, Shawn, choked back tears as he talked about what the boys had done. He said simply, "It's hard to put words to." Paul put these words to it: "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."[6]

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[5] *Source: Ray Ortlund, "'One Another's' I Can't Find in the New Testament," The Gospel Coalition blog (5-24-14)*

[6] *Source: Sherman L. Burford, Fairmont, West Virginia. Leadership, Vol. 15, no. 3.*

M. Scott Peck said, “Often the most loving thing we can do when a friend is in pain is to share the pain--to be there even when we have nothing to offer except our presence and even when being there is painful to ourselves.[7]

The Christian community should be the place where we experience God’s second chances, where we come alongside another in need of forgiveness or support, offering our presence even when it is hard for us to do so.

Obstacles and Ultimate Accountability

Paul will point out two obstacles that can hinder our practice of the law of Christ. The first is how we see ourselves in the Christian community. Do we think we are immune to certain failings? Certain struggles? If we’ve avoided certain pitfalls, do we think we deserve more than someone else who has fallen into them? Paul knows that any sense of entitlement is toxic to healthy congregational life, because it kills the root system that holds us together and keeps us strong. We are so connected that when one rejoices, we should all rejoice, and when one hurts, we should all hurt.

It’s a little like the two sisters who went to the mall together. One was pushing the other in a wheelchair. At one point, the one being pushed said to her sister, “let me know when you get tired, and we’ll trade spots. You can sit, and I’ll push a while.”

The second obstacle is related, and that is the sin of comparison. To combat this Paul says, “All of us must examine our own work rather than that of our neighbor.” For comparison leads to competition and an abiding sense that we are more faithful than somebody else. But the church is not a contest. We don’t compare ourselves to each another, rather, we compare ourselves to Jesus and his law of love. That will surely keep us humble, eager to be extremely gentle in the words we use and the manner in which we speak to one another.

Paul says, “For all must carry their own load.” Here he is not contradicting verse two but complementing it. In the here and now, we can help one another. We can grow, we can learn, we can mature. But ultimately, God will hold each of us accountable for our own actions. God is not mocked, and we reap what we sow. This means God is the one who dispenses both mercy and judgment, for he is the one who knows our hearts and our motivations.

This means we have to let God be God. We know that God wants to heal and restore, and he uses his body, the church, to help him with both of these things. In this way we sow to the Spirit, who provides everything we need to recognize that each of us is fragile and should be handled with care. And so the Spirit provides the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Most of these are relational words, describing the attitude we are to have not only in ourselves but with one another.

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[7] *Source: M. Scott Peck. Leadership, Vol. 15, no. 2.*

Paul will conclude by saying, don't grow weary – don't give up, don't lose heart. Keep thinking deeply about what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and what that looks like in our relationships. Because we come together to practice, learning to fulfill the law of Christ. For God will call us to take the show on the road, to exhibit the love of Christ to those who are outside these walls.

So we come in, to go out, we come in, to go out. Because God has designed us to need something from each other. So we should heed the instructions in Hebrews 10:25: Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another, and all the more as we see the Day approaching.

Amen.