

October 10, 2010

I John 4:7-21 / Romans 12:1-21 / Acts 4:32-37

Pursuing and Embracing a Vision of Church Health (#4) - A Gospel-Centered Community of People Lovers!

Today we come to the **THIRD LINK** in the **Chain of Church Health**. It's a link that is so vital to the effectiveness of any church or ministry, that when it suffers, everything else cannot help but suffer / and when it is strong, everything else a better chance of growing and thriving. The link I call "**FELLOWSHIP**."

And I did debate using another word, since as Tim Chester and Steve Timmis point out in their superb book, Total Church, the English word fellowship is a bit "***anemic***." It's a somewhat vague, nebulous and indescrpt term which simply does not convey the idea it is meant to convey in Scripture.

Yet it is an accurate translation of the word that comes to us right out of Acts 2:42 (which is it's first occurrence in the NT). There we read: "***And they***" (***that is, the 120 disciples plus the 3000 new converts that came to faith in Christ on the Day of Pentecost***) "***devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, and to the FELLOWSHIP, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.***"

THOSE were the FOUR main spiritual priorities of the early church -- DISCIPLESHIP / FELLOWSHIP / CELEBRATING THE SACRAMENT OR ORDINANCE OF THE LORD'S SUPPER TOGETHER and PRAYER. Yet today we're only going to focus on the second one -- the priority of "Fellowship."

Yet before I do, let me ask all of you:

- 1.) What do you think the word "fellowship" means?
- 2.) In your opinion, who is encompassed under the umbrella of that term?
- 3.) If I were to say to you right now -- "You must devote yourself to the fellowship" -- What would that look like? What changes would you have to make in your calendar, lifestyle, budget, thinking and priorities in order to do that? Any?

You see, those are some of the questions I want to address today, remembering as we do -- ***THAT NO CHURCH CAN BE TRULY HEALTHY if the "fellowship" in that church is unhealthy.*** It's just not possible!

This one link in the chain is so vital and pivotal and instrumental to the overall health of any church, that when it disintegrates (even if all the others are strong) that church will struggle to survive.

In fact, if the disintegration of fellowship is not remedied, that church as a gathered, organized, local body of believers, will often close its doors, and cease to exist. That's how pivotal healthy fellowship is to any gathered church! Other elements may be absent and the church can still function. But when "fellowship" is absent that church will cease to be a viable entity.

So, let's see where our English word "fellowship" comes from / what it means / who and what it refers to / and how we can strengthen it -- beginning **FIRST** with the where it comes from and what it means.

In general terms, when most people hear the words "the fellowship" (that is, "they devoted themselves to the fellowship") they tend to think in terms of the people who congregate at the church they attend. The sum total of the believers who gather at any given location to worship together on Sunday mornings. That's the most common understanding of the word.

And that is true. Yet, in reality the words "the fellowship" refer to more than just people. Because the word actually comes from the Greek word "koinonia" -- which appears 19 times in the NT, being translated "fellow-ship" twelve of those times; "sharing" three of those times; "participation" twice; and "contribution" twice. Which assures us it has to refer to MORE than just the people who gather at any local church.

And THAT is what we need to see. At its core the word "fellowship" means "life lived in common" / or "life lived in intimate shared communion" or "life lived in devoted community with others."

As one commentator states: ***"Koinonia is a complex, rich, and thoroughly fascinating approach to community building, team building, and group cohesion with a heavy emphasis placed on the health and the well-being of the group as a collective whole."***

Koinonia is the diametric opposite of a 'go it alone' type of rugged individualism or self-preoccupied isolationism, where one is primarily concerned with the self, and taking care of their own needs, and feels little or no moral obligation or responsibility to live a life centered in the needs, concerns and struggles of the larger community.

In koinonia words like independent, self-sufficient, lone wolf, anti-social, recluse, hermit, seclusionist or exclusionist are completely out of place! Because when we live in fellowship with others, we don't see ourselves as individuals living in isolation from a group!

That's why every description of the church purposely avoids any reference to individualistic imagery. Jesus speaks of the church as a flock of sheep / Paul's favorite was a Body where Christ is the head and each believer is an organ or limb or a ligament (an eye or hand or finger or foot).

For Peter it was a Temple in which God resides, where each believer is merely one living stone built into the walls of that huge edifice.

In koinonia the ideas of independence and individualism are replaced by interdependence and group identity, where we view ourselves as a piece of the whole / a part of the group / a member of the team / one of many children in a family / or one of many sheep in a flock or organs in a body. All very necessary, but none able to function alone by themselves!

You see, Scripture avoids individualistic language, because that's part of our problem as fallen human beings! That rugged / individualistic / "I don't need anyone" / "I can go it alone" / "I have what it takes" / "I take care of myself and pursue my own dreams and take care of my needs, and leave you to worry about yours" mentality is NOT a virtue! / It's an expression of the SIN NATURE!!!

Though we've tended to lose this over time, in Scripture becoming Christian was not simply coming to see my need for God or Christ. It was also, AT THE VERY SAME TIME, coming to see my NEED for OTHER PEOPLE!

My need for a community of people who would help me grow in my faith, and support me, and stick by me in my trials and struggles. / A group of people who would be there for me / and encourage me / and pray for me / and challenge me / and hold me accountable / and if need be, slap me off the back of the head and rebuke me and seek my restoration if sin should trip me up.

I do need God! But I also need others! If we didn't, God would not have formed and ordained the establishment of local church bodies, or saved us into the fellowship of that church and made us part of His Body!

You see, contrary to so much of the evangelism that is done in our day, CONVERSION is simply being "saved" (in the sense of going to heaven when we die), in the Bible it is so much MORE! Because in the Bible it includes being saved into the Fellowship of the Church!

Being saved includes being grafted into to the Body of Christ / and adopted into the family of God / and joined to the household of faith / and ordained into the priesthood of all believers / and made a citizen of the holy nation / and a living stone built into the wall of the Temple of the Living God as just one of billions of other Living Stones!

I can't stress that enough! The church in America will NEVER TRULY BE HEALTHY until we see that conversion includes a change in our thinking where we STOP viewing ourselves as rugged, independent, self-sufficient individuals, and START seeing ourselves as people chosen and called by God to live a life in community with others.

A life where we stop thinking in terms of ME / and start thinking in terms of US. A life where we realize we are merely part of a whole and incomplete and at risk when we live in isolation from others / and are actually living contrary to the will of God when we are not living in close, caring, committed relationship with a specific group of believers that we are devoted to.

Which brings us to the **SECOND** thing that needs to be said. It is extremely hard for many people (who have grown up in the American church) to

grasp what "koinonia" or "fellowship" is or means, since what people think it means and what it really means are so often so far apart, that it requires a complete reorientation of how we view both ourselves and church life.

I already mentioned that for most people living in America today, the words "the fellowship" simply refer to the individuals who gather for worship at any given church on any given Sunday--which is partially true. To "devote ourselves to the fellowship" does mean devoting ourselves to each other.

Yet, biblically speaking, what does that look like? And in that regard God does not leave us to wonder! He gives us two passages that spell it out for us very clearly. They describe "the fellowship" or "koinonia" that took place in the church in the years following Pentecost, where we are told:

"They devoted themselves to the Apostles teaching and to the koinonia (that is, to living a life where everything was shared in common), to the breaking of bread and to prayer. All the believers (literally "the believing ones" - which tells us who is included under the term "fellowship") were together (literally "in the same place" - hinting, possibly, at communal living) and had everything in common (that is, "in koina" - they shared each other's possessions).

Selling their possessions and goods (literally their "properties" or real estate holdings including houses and their contents), they distributed the proceeds from the sales to anyone (in the fellowship) as they had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread (in this case celebrated the Lord's Supper) in their homes, and ate together with glad and generous hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people."

And it doesn't end there! Because two chapters later (in 4:32-35) Luke expands on what he means by koinonia (or fellowship) when he writes:

"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything in common (in koina).... From time to time those who owned lands or houses would sell

them, bring the money from the sales and put it at the apostles feet, and it was distributed to anyone as they had need."

And here, I need you to know, that I hesitate to even speak on this topic -- as it's presented here and elsewhere in Scripture -- because Americans in particular tend to dislike the communal overtones.

In fact, if I were to challenge us as a church (or challenge any church in America) to adopt THAT level of commitment to each other (or the group as a whole) / to practice THAT depth of sacrificial caring and sharing / and THAT degree of pooling their economic resources to meet the needs of the less fortunate in their community / We'd probably be regarded as a cult (just like the early church was) / And I'd likely drive many people away from the church / or lose my job in the process of seeking to reorganize it along those lines!

Because if we practiced "fellowship" the way they did, people would see us selling off our excess possessions (houses and lands and things) / pooling our excess wealth / and then handing it over to the church leaders / who would have both the authority and responsibility to distribute it to the poor and needy believers in the community and they'd probably label us as fanatics, extremists or a cult.

Tell me to PRAY / and tell me to WORSHIP / and tell me to EVANGELIZE / and DISCIPLE / and GIVE TO THE POOR / and SUPPORT FOREIGN MISSIONS and I'm ok with that! Because I can do all those things quite well on my own without any thought of what others are doing.

But tell me I must give up my cherished "live as I like" independence / and "build my life around the church" / and devote myself to living in THAT TYPE OF CLOSEKNIT COMMUNITY WITH OTHERS" and I'll balk or run!

Because koinonia is people sharing EVERYTHING they have with EVERYONE in the group. / It's divesting ourselves of all EXCESS and UNNECESSARY wealth / and liquidating our "more than I need to get by" assets / and then sharing the proceeds they get from selling them with the less fortunate in our midst.

That, my friends, is biblical "koinonia." That's "fellowship." That's what the early church "devoted themselves to": To each other! To the group. / And to all the things that would glue that group together as one. / To a sense of group belonging / and group sharing / and group involvement / and group participation / and commitment to the group as a whole which led all of them to give up their right to live their lives as isolated individuals / and join in becoming a tight-knit community where EVERYTHING was shared in common (or in koina) -- which is the basis of all true koinonia or fellowship.

Are You ready to do the same?

So, in **CONCLUSION**, how do we work toward that ideal, since it is the Scriptural ideal we are called to strive for? Given all the factors surrounding the day of Pentecost and the years that followed (which I don't have time to summarize here) I'm not sure if such fellowship or depth of community is sustainable LONG TERM. Because it seems to be an expression of community birthed out of a time of intense spiritual revival. But at any rate, we must at least strive in that direction -- for THAT is God's ideal, and THAT is how people filled to overflowing with the Holy Spirit lived!

So let me give you **5 quick pointers** (bullet points) of things WE MUST DO if we are to strengthen the fellowship or the koinonia of the church.

1.) We must **"be being filled"** with the Holy Spirit, as Paul tells us in Eph. 5:18.

The "fellowship" we see in Acts was spawned by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. On Pentecost, "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit," and the result of that filling was a love of such measure poured into each heart that it manifested itself in a bonded community of people who were devoted and committed to living and loving and caring for and helping each other. To even come close to that ideal, or merely head in that direction, we must be "filled with the Holy Spirit." If not, then such love, or koinonia is not even the faintest of possibilities.

2.) We must be "devoted to the fellowship" in two ways: Devoted to the people (those individuals who are a part of this fellowship) / and devoted to sustaining the love and generosity and caring concern and sacrifice that make fellowship

possible. Fellowship is both a WHO and a WHAT. / It's the people who gather at this place and the relational love dynamic that exists between us. And we must be devoted to sustaining and strengthening BOTH.

3.) We must devote ourselves to the grace of generosity -- sharing our lives and our homes and our possessions with each other. As believers, our homes and lands and possessions were not given to us simply to be seen as our own private property (as is often the case in the world). They were given to us to be shared or held "in common" (in koina).

Not viewing my things as "mine" but as "ours." Places for the church to meet and fellowship. To eat together and practice hospitality and house those who have no houses - the orphan, foster child, traveler or homeless person -- possibly, as the Author of Hebrews states, **"entertaining angels unaware."** Sharing our things / and pooling our resources / and sacrificing our wants that others might have their needs met.

4.) We must see church not as a building we gather in, or something we come together to "do," but something we are called to be -- a community of Gospel-centered, Spirit-empowered, Christ-loving, God-adoring people lovers! We are to love God with all that we are and all that we have, but the way that works itself out in reality and is made manifest and visible to others, is by the way we love each other.

"If anyone says, 'I love God,' says the Apostle John, "yet hates (and "hate" here means to reject, shun, avoid or treat with indifference) his brother (his brother in the faith in whom God's Holy Spirit lives!), he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen... whoever loves God MUST love his brother as well." And its only when we do that, from the heart, that we are being the church God called us to be!

Last.) It is clear from this passage that the "church" or "the fellowship" was not some added extra that they added on to an already busy life. Rather, it was central to all that they did! Their life revolved around the church!

Many people view the church as just one of many things that they juggle to fit into their schedule, the same way they juggle work and leisure and chores and family and so much more. So, when pressures overwhelm us, church, like many of the other "things" we juggle, often gets dropped.

That's why it's better to view all our various life-activities as spokes on the hub of a wheel where the church (as persons in living in committed community with each other) is the hub. The hub of the wheel is not me as an individual. That's how the world thinks. But rather: ***"The hub is the church as a group! It's not simply another ball that I juggle, but that which defines who I am and who I belong to and gives Christ-like shape to me life."*** (Chester/Timmis)

You can't look at the early church / and its fellowship (as its described in the NT) / and even begin to think it was simply one of many other equally pressing priorities. For what we find in the NT is that everything they did revolved around their being a part of the Body of Christ or the worshipping community! It wasn't simply one of the things on the periphery. It was the center from which everything else flowed!

They met together, studied together, worshipped together, witnessed together, worked together, served together, ate together, prayed together, suffered together, bore each other's burdens together and held all their possessions in common together!

Their Christian commitment wasn't simply to attend church each Sunday!

It was to live as a community that was committed to each other and involved in each other's lives all week long!

