

## Sharing the Values

LIFE CAN BE a roller-coaster ride of ecstatic highs and empty lows. Remember the happiest day in your life, when you were surprised by joy? Remember the saddest day in your life, when you were racked with disappointment? If you are like most of us, you wanted someone to tell. Someone to share your joy and happiness. Someone to share your pain and loss.

Whether sharing the highs or the lows, that sharing is what we call fellowship. The Greeks called it *koinonia*, a multifaceted word that has several different English translations: “sharing, participating, communion, friendship.” Whichever definition is used, however, it is always based on the concept of fellowship that grows out of having something in common. There must be a common denominator for fellowship/koinonia to occur.

Just watch any group of strangers as they become acquainted with one another. Everyone looks for some common bond for friendship. Often people will group together by age, or gender, or race, or nationality, or mutual friendships, or similar experience, or common interest.

We all delight in finding someone who grew up near us, someone who attended the same school, someone who cheers for the same professional sports team. If we can’t find some common bond, we usually break off the relationship. Where there is nothing in common there can be no real fellowship.

Think of it in mathematical terms. Compare three fractions:  $1/2$ ,  $1/3$ ,  $214/400$ . Which two have the most in common? At first glance the  $1/2$  and the  $1/3$  look the most alike and the  $214/400$  is the weird one. But after a closer look you see that the  $1/2$  and  $1/3$  only look alike while the  $1/2$  and  $214/400$  share a common denominator of 2. That common denominator makes them much easier to add together.

Fellowship works the same way. It is based on a common denominator. Sometimes it is obvious and easy to find. Sometimes it is difficult to find. But if there is nothing in common, there can be no fellowship.

Actually, the whole idea of fellowship begins with God.

### Fellowship of the Trinity

The Bible teaches that in the beginning there was God. Just God. God never began. God always was. This sounds both boring and lonely, but God was neither.

From forever ago God existed as three persons. We call them Father, Son, and Spirit. They had one all-important thing in common: they were all God. Because they had their deity in common, they fellowshiped together. They shared everything. They participated in projects together, including the creation of the universe and our world.

Because fellowship is so central and essential to who God is, and because we are created in His image, we have

been designed for fellowship. We all have a natural and normal need for fellowship with other human beings.

After God created Adam and Eve, He just naturally fellowshiped with them. They talked together. They worked on projects together. They had a great time together because of all they had in common.

Tragically, Adam and Eve broke fellowship with God. They chose to sin. God is holy and sinless. He hates sin. So God could no longer fellowship with Adam and Eve as before. When He came to the Garden to share with His human friends, everyone immediately knew something was wrong. Their fellowship was broken.

There is no way for us to understand the profound loss God experienced in this loss of fellowship. He had created Adam and Eve to be like Him so they could be friends, but the primary basis of their common denominator had been broken. Because of sin they were too different for the old fellowship to continue.

The closest comparable human emotion may be that which is felt by a parent estranged from a son or daughter. A man and woman want a child who will be like them, who will share their home, values, and dreams. A son or daughter is born, and during the early years of childhood it seems as if the dream has come true. But then, during adolescence, the child of their dreams chooses drugs, friends, and activities that alienate him from his parents. The relationship becomes strained. Now there are more differences than similarities, more expressions of hatred than of love. Those who once were close become like strangers with little in common.

The parents’ hearts ache over broken dreams and a lost relationship.

God wanted fellowship with humanity restored because He valued that relationship and He valued His creation. But putting fellowship back together again was not a simple or easy

thing to do. It required the sacrifice of God’s only Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus became the new common denominator in order to restore the lost fellowship with us humans. “God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful” (1 Corinthians 1:9). And through the death and resurrection of Jesus, those who believe on Him become the new children of God—like new Adams and Eves. “And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3).

This may not sound like a big deal, but it is. It is, in fact, the biggest deal. We can share with God. We can talk with God. We can participate in God’s work and God can participate in our work. Fellowship with God means friendship with God. It’s the best we can get. It’s worth everything. It’s more than valuable. It is invaluable.

### Christian Fellowship=Sharing/Participating

Christian fellowship with God is based on what we

*Values govern our underlying thoughts, attitudes, and decisions which result in behavior.*

have in common with God, Jesus Christ. A Christian is someone who has a personal relationship with God through Jesus. And just as every Christian has Jesus as the common denominator with God, so every Christian has Jesus as the common denominator with other believers.

It's like being members of the same family. We are all spiritually related and connected through Jesus Christ. We're all brothers and sisters. What we have in common is not language, gender, education, employment, ZIP code, or citizenship. It is Jesus. "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

As Christians we highly value the relationship we have with each other based on Jesus. "We have come to share in Christ ..." (Hebrews 3:14). It's enough to make us love people we might not otherwise like. It's enough to draw us close to people who would otherwise be complete strangers. It's enough to motivate us to forgive when otherwise we might stay angry.

It is important to understand that Christian fellowship is never primarily based on having children the same age, on living in the same neighborhood, on working for the same company, or on going to the same church. What draws us together and glues us together is Jesus. He is our reason for friendship. He is the subject of our conversations. He is the One for whom we all love to work.

Just as good fellowship is wonderful, bad fellowship is awful. God's Word warns Christians, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ... What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?" (2 Corinthians 6:14-15).

This does not forbid friendships with non-Christians, but it does say that there cannot be a soul-bond to an unbeliever. There is an inherent danger for a Christian marrying, becoming a business partner with, or even a best friend with a non-Christian. Although some Christians have taken this beyond the biblical intent, the primary teaching here is that Christians should beware of entering into fellowship relationships with non-Christians. It is especially dangerous if either unbeliever or the relationship has greater influence on the Christian than the Christian has on the unbeliever and the relationship.

Sometimes, of course, Christians have no choice. In the first century, Christian slaves were sold to non-Christian slaveholders and forced into a binding relationship with an unbeliever. Even in our modern society, some cultures still insist on weddings arranged by parents, thereby at times forcing Christians into marriages with unbelievers. In such extreme cases the believer has an even greater challenge, and this becomes an opportunity to experience God's special help and use the situation for God's greater good. The higher principle that applies in every relationship is to be sure to "not share in the sins of others" (1 Timothy 5:22).

This is certainly not to say that all natural associations are wrong or unimportant. Of course there are bases for fellowship other than Christian faith. At international Christian conferences the delegates from Japan usually stay in the same hotel, eat meals together, and sit together during

meetings. At church gatherings the parents of school-age children often prefer each other's fellowship because they are in the same chapter of life and dealing with many of the same issues. However, Christian values require us to order our assignment of importance to relationships. The most important basis for fellowship is a common denominator of Jesus Christ, which means that we have more in common with another Christian even of a different race, age, and gender than we have with a non-Christian of our same race, age, and gender. If that is not true, if we give higher priority to natural associations than to supernatural associations, we are ordering the values of life in ways that do not reflect God's values.

To round out our understanding of fellowship requires us to move from thinking of fellowship as primarily a passive relationship. Just as marriage is not primarily a legal document and family is not a set of birth certificates, fellowship is not merely being Christians listed on the Rolodex of heaven. Marriage and family and fellowship are all active relationships: they describe what we do with specific relationships we have.

Fellowship may be a noun in the dictionary, but it is a verb to those who live Christianly.

### **Fellowship...Do It!**

When we truly value something, we take initiative regarding it. If we value money, we save it or invest it. If we value books, we buy them and read them. If we value food, we eat it. And if we value fellowship, we do it.

This means we regularly reach out to establish relationships that share life with other Christians. A Christian without fellowship is an oxymoron; it just doesn't make sense.

Too many Christians miss out on the God-given value of fellowship because they spend a lifetime waiting for someone to fellowship with them. Other Christians miss out on God's fellowship because they build all their relationships on jobs or hobbies or common denominators other than Christ.

Don't wait any longer. Don't lay the responsibility on the church or other Christians. Take the initiative to share life with other Christians through fellowship together, and the place to begin is with a focus on Christ and on giving of our time, of ourselves. If we enter into relationships with other Christians with our primary focus on fellowship itself rather than on Christ, or on what we can get rather than on what we can give, we're bound to be disappointed.

I've lived around Christians and churches all my life. And I've seen hundreds of Christians come to a church looking for great fellowship and expecting to get a lot from other people. They are almost always disappointed. Many of them spend a lifetime looking, often becoming bitter and angry people. Why? Because people and churches never measure up to those kinds of expectations.

I've also seen hundreds of Christians who are focused on Jesus and what they can give of themselves to others. Those people are not disappointed. They are far less likely to end up bitter and angry. They come out winners.

Calls to this high value of Christian fellowship are

woven throughout the New Testament:

Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. (Acts 2:45)

The New Testament often speaks about those who gave away what they had to those in need but rarely mentions those in need getting anything. The emphasis was on giving.

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. (Acts 4:32)

Share with God's people who are in need. (Romans 12:13)

Carry each other's burdens. (Galatians 6:2)

And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:16)

Consider some of these practical suggestions for translating these first-century biblical principles and practices into modern acts of Christian fellowship:

- Befriend someone who needs a friend—not for what you'll get, but in order to give.
- Offer to pray with and for someone who has a special need.
- Whenever you hear about a job opening at your company, pass the word along to others looking for work.
- Give away your car instead of trading it in. Don't give it to a charitable organization to get a tax deduction. Give it to some Christian who needs a car and can't afford to buy one.
- Offer your week of time-share vacation or the use of your cabin to someone who really needs a vacation.
- Pay someone's medical bills. If you know they don't have adequate money or insurance, just mail a check to the doctor or hospital and ask for it to be credited to the account of the person who needs help.
- When you know a Christian in financial need, help out. Give some cash or a check. Consider sending it anonymously if that's appropriate. Since the United States Internal Revenue Service does not allow gifts going to individuals to be tax deductible, don't try to circumvent the law by giving through a church or other charitable organization.
- Use your professional skills to help someone who can't afford to pay—like the dentist who offered free care to the child of a recently divorced single mother. Or the retired handyman who does home repairs for widows one day each week.
- Volunteer to drive someone who regularly needs a ride to the doctor or to church.

- Phone an elderly shut-in at 8:00 a.m. every day (or some other set time) to make sure that he or she is okay and feels loved and not forgotten.

*Take the initiative to share life with other Christians through fellowship together, and the place to begin is with a focus on Christ and on giving of our time, of ourselves.*

All of this is helping to bear one another's burdens. Don't expect the government to do it. Don't expect the church to do it. Don't expect someone else to do it. Just try doing it yourself. We have forsaken too much individual responsibility to institutions. Skip the institutions. Fellowship, share, and participate. That's what they did in the New Testament church.

Also join with others in ministry. Ministering together is a wonderful means of fellowship. It forces us not only to work together, but to trust God together. Teach Sunday school. Build a house with Habitat for Humanity. Set up a prayer group on behalf of non-Christians in your neighborhood, for a missionary in Latin America, or for the suffering people of Rwanda.

Look for fellowship relationships through a small group, home Bible study, adult Sunday school class, or other gathering of Christians.

Don't wait to be asked. Take the initiative. Focus on Christ. Expect to give. Value fellowship.

### **Does Fellowship Mean Church Membership?**

For most North American Christians the most practical issues of Christian fellowship are related to local churches. It is not always easy or ideal to live out Christian relationships in a local congregation. In fact, pollsters report increasing percentages of North Americans who claim to be growing Christians yet who have no church affiliation, participation, or desire for such. Reasons for lack of church relationship are many, but most have to do with negative experiences in the past, strained interpersonal relationships, disagreement over church doctrine or practices, or a perception that the church and its ministry are irrelevant to the individual's life.

Certainly it is possible to be a Christian without church membership or participation, but it should not be considered normal. Christians who follow Jesus as Lord must share His values, and one thing He values greatly is the church.

Jesus founded the church as His body on earth. Just as the work of God and word of God were primarily represented on earth through Jesus' original body (His physical body) during His thirty-three-year life in Palestine, so the work and word of God are primarily represented on earth now through His second body (the church, His spiritual body). He intended that believers organize together into fellowship communities with Him at the head. These local churches were normal in the New Testament and have continued to be the primary expression of Christian community for the past 2,000 years.

When Christians who are searching for a church home ask me what they should look for, I tell them to look for a

congregation where the Bible is taught and where they feel comfortable. Beyond that they should allow some latitude in terms of denomination and expression of doctrine. The chances of their finding a church that perfectly fits every one of their beliefs and desires are minimal. Besides, it is this very point that tests the value of fellowship. Those who truly value Christian fellowship will tolerate differences among believers in order to do fellowship. This has been true from the very beginning. Differences and disagreements were part of the fellowship of the apostles during the days of the early church recorded in the book of Acts, and among the churches of Corinth, Galatia, Philippi, Thessalonica, and many others.

Local churches are like families. It's true that in certain instances a person may be forced to disassociate from his or her own family—from parents, brothers and sisters, or sons and daughters. But surely this is only in the most extreme and unusual circumstances. The same standard of extreme exception should apply to church affiliation.

This does not mean that Christians must stay a lifetime with any particular local church. Increasingly churches are like chapters of life that open and close, changing with each stage of growth and maturity. A family may move from one church to another because of a job transfer or because of the specific educational needs of teenage children. When a move is made, however, it is important to apply Christian values to the process of change. The way a person changes churches is often more important than the change itself. The practice of open communication along with Christian love, forgiveness, and understanding will allow ongoing fellowship with individuals, even if they are part of different churches.

Formal church membership is expected by some churches, while others don't have any membership at all. The words "church membership" never appear in the Bible. They are a human invention used to formally express the more important informal affiliation that takes place through Christian fellowship. Some Christians never become church members but share the fellowship; others go through the ritual and are added to the church membership roll but never connect relationally or experience genuine fellowship. Without a doubt, the fellowship is more important than the membership.

It seems to me that Christians should desire to fit in with the church of God's choice for them as best they can. When I move to another state, I cheer for that state's sports teams. When I am a guest in someone's home, I try to follow their house rules and traditions. When I visit in another country, I do my best to fit in with their culture and customs. Since the Christian value of fellowship is so important, I also choose to live by the norms established in any particular local church. If that means membership, I join. If that means no membership, I'll choose to live without it. Submitting my will to others, getting along with fellow believers who are different, fitting in on the basis of Jesus Christ rather than past tradition—these are all tangible expressions of my commitment to Jesus Christ and to other Christians for whom Christ died.

Think of it this way. Suppose you are planning to go

on a dream vacation with a group of people from your hometown. This trip will include a flight to Australia, a cruise to Tahiti, and a stopover in Hawaii. During the weeks before you leave you do everything you can to get ready. You visit the tanning booth to build up your tan. You exercise to get into good shape. You practice language study so that you can say "Good Day" as one word for greetings in Australia. You attend four group meetings to get acquainted with your fellow travelers and plan your itinerary. Your group includes people from all walks of life with varied interests, backgrounds, and experiences. What you have in common is your dream vacation. All of this is exciting, fun, and good preparation. Getting ready is half the joy of going there.

As Christians, we all have a real dream vacation coming. Better than Hawaii, more exotic than Tahiti, and farther than Australia. It's heaven. Forever.

During the weeks and years before we leave for heaven, we do everything we can to get ready. We get in shape spiritually. We study what our destination will be like. And we get to know the others who are going. They come from all walks of life and have varied interests, backgrounds, and experiences. What we have in common is that we all belong to Jesus Christ. Sharing this time together is called Christian fellowship. It is part of the joy of going to heaven.

## Questions

### For Thought:

1. Think about what fellowship with God means. What does it mean to you to have a never-ending friendship with Someone who will never let you down, never give up on you, but rather love you, encourage you, and support you in the difficult times of this life?
2. Jesus is the bond that draws us together in fellowship. Have you started to form a "soul-bond" with anyone whose values and beliefs are not in line with your Christian faith? Will that person's friendship build you up in your faith, tear you down, or maybe even destroy it?

This transcript is an excerpt from Leith's book *Winning the Values War*. For a copy of the book, available only through Wooddale Church, please call 1-800-MATTERS or mail your request to Faith Matters, 6630 Shady Oak Rd., Eden Prairie, MN 55344. A suggested donation for this book is \$20, and please indicate your request for *Winning the Values War*. The book may also be purchased through the Wooddale Bookstore and you may link to the bookstore through the [www.wooddale.org](http://www.wooddale.org) web site.

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