

## RECLAIMING AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY

*Biblical Practice of Fellowship*

Acts 2:42-47

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### LONGING FOR COMMUNITY

The iconic film, *Rudy*, tells the story of Daniel “Rudy” Ruettiger who dreamed of playing football for the University of Notre Dame. The movie chronicled Rudy’s desire, since high school, to be a part of Notre Dame’s famous football team but faced many obstacles. His dream of belonging to the prestigious Fighting Irish school motivated him to work relentlessly and tirelessly for the opportunity to gain admission into the elite university, then try out for the football team. Despite his academic struggles, financial difficulties and athletic shortcomings, Rudy’s dream is eventually realized as he attends Notre Dame and makes the football practice squad. The story culminates when Rudy is able to suit up for the final game of his senior year, plays the final defensive play of the game, sacks the opposing quarterback and is carried on his teammates shoulders before a cheering stadium. No other player in Notre Dame history had been carried off the field to that point.

The sentiment of this film depicts the strong desire some have to belong to a community, and the lengths they will go to achieve it. Not all of you may be motivated to work as strenuously as Rudy did to belong, but you might be able to identify with the joy and satisfaction received from being accepted by the group you admire. This sense of belonging and acceptance is inherent in the way God designed us. We were made to be in fellowship and community with God and others. There is both personal and spiritual satisfaction when we find true fellowship to enjoy. God has instituted His church to be the place where His people belong and can experience authentic community.

*How do you know that you really belong to God’s community? How can you experience the type of spiritual fellowship God intends?* These were questions our Shepherding Group recently wrestled through and studied in Jerry Bridges’ book, *True Community*. Our honest conversation and biblical study on this subject has led to more intimate fellowship, genuine care and generous sharing among us. It is because of this experience I want to exhort you today to pursue biblical fellowship in order to enjoy authentic community in our church.

### DEFINING COMMUNITY

<sup>ESV</sup> **ACTS 2:42-45** *And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. <sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.*

The description of the early church in Acts shows a dynamically engaged community willing to commit themselves to God's truth and care for each other. This level of devotion did not come naturally or simply because they all happened to like each other. It was a supernatural work of God enacted by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of His people.

Their willingness and eagerness to come together in this way fulfills both the spiritual and personal longing for fellowship that God created us for. In the beginning, Adam was placed in the garden of Eden to enjoy personal fellowship and intimate communion with God Himself. Adam and Eve broke that special relationship when they sinned, bringing shame and fear of the presence of God. However, God sought them out and revealed His plan for a future Redeemer to restore sinners back into fellowship with Him.

*"Fellowship with God is the goal of the Christian life, and this relationship will be perfected forever when we see our Savior 'face to face', when God dwells with his people in the heavenly kingdom. The gospel restores fellowship not only with God, but among believers as well."*<sup>1</sup>

The earthly ministry of Jesus Christ brought salvation to mankind, resulting in spiritual restoration with God and renewed relationship with others. The church is God's institution where His redeemed people live out new spiritual realities in cooperative love with one other. God's design for fellowship since the beginning is now renewed in believers so that we can enjoy the blessings He intends for us to experience together. The beautiful testimony of the church that you and I share is this intimate communion with our Creator God while belonging to each other in a common partnership for the gospel of God's glory.

The Bible's use of the word FELLOWSHIP carries ideas such as *friendship, sharing, closeness* and *community*. Our most familiar use of the word *fellowship* comes from the New Testament interpretation of the term *KOINONIA* (κοινωνία). It is specifically translated in four ways: "**fellowship**", "**sharing**", "**partnership/participation**", and "**contribution**". The New Testament's use of *koinonia* and Scriptural examples illuminate our understanding of how God expects believers to commune with Him and interact with each other. Spiritual fellowship goes beyond social activity, and it is infinitely more than just eating a meal with somebody. Spiritual fellowship is built into the fabric of God's community and is a responsibility entrusted to each one of us to assume. "*Spiritual fellowship is not a luxury but a necessity, vital to our spiritual growth and health.*"<sup>2</sup>

This past year has revealed our need for regular fellowship. If it was not good for Adam to be alone in the garden, then you can be certain it's not good for you to be alone in your Christian life. *So how do you avoid loneliness, overcome fears of being left out, or feeling like you don't belong?* Praise God He has both described and prescribed how you belong to His household, the church. God has placed every believer within the body of Christ into a unique relationship with one another. He has called us into fellowship with Him and expects you to partner in the gospel work He has prepared for us to accomplish.

Spiritual fellowship is the fiber that binds God's people together into a cohesive community. Establishing or reclaiming authentic community is achieved through the Holy Spirit's enablement to love God's people with biblical intention. **EXPRESSING TRUE COMMUNITY COMES THROUGH THE BIBLICAL PRACTICE OF FELLOWSHIP (κοινωνία) AS YOU SHARE TOGETHER AND SHARE WITH GOD'S PEOPLE.**

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<sup>1</sup> Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). Fellowship. In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 1, p. 789). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

<sup>2</sup> Bridges, Jerry. *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia*. Navpress. Location 766. Kindle Edition.

## I. SHARING TOGETHER

**1 JOHN 1:3, 6-7** *[T]hat which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ...<sup>6</sup> If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.<sup>7</sup> But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.*

### SHARING CHRIST'S LIFE

*"Biblical community is first of all the sharing of a common life in Christ. It is when we grasp this truth that we are in a position to begin to understand true community."*<sup>3</sup> The common denominator to Christian fellowship is our union with Christ. It is the saving work of Jesus Christ that reconciles you to God, unites you to the body of Christ and establishes your fellowship with other believers. Apart from Christ you cannot know true fellowship. There are many outside of Christ who are around His people and taste the benefits of spiritual fellowship. They mistake this residual effect for being real fellowship and are often deceived into thinking they belong to the true community. They are like a "groupie", someone who follows celebrities by attending as many concerts or appearances in the hope of meeting or getting to know them. The fanatical groupies blur the line of reality thinking they actually are a part or belong to the celebrity inner circle.

Only those who are joined to Christ can experience the rich blessings of fellowship with God. The apostle John's plea is that you would experience genuine fellowship with God's people on the basis Christ's cleansing blood and restored relationship with the Father. Your fellowship with other believers is dependent upon your active communion with God and the power of Christ working in you. His divine enablement is what supplies you with the grace and love to pursue enriching fellowship with God's community. It is not God who simply *helps you* in your fellowship, but it is the Holy Spirit who EMPOWERS you to live in genuine fellowship with God and others. Since biblical community is fundamentally sharing a common life in Christ, spiritual fellowship is foremost about a relationship, and not an activity.

### SHARED PARTNERSHIP

**PHILIPPIANS 1:3-5** *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

A striking definition and translation of *koinonia* is "PARTNERSHIP/ PARTICIPATION". Paul regarded himself as a spiritual partner with the Philippian church in the work of gospel ministry. This idea that fellowship makes us *Partners-in-Ministry* focuses our efforts to look outside of ourselves for those who need to be brought into fellowship with God's people. Understanding fellowship as partnership makes us a COMMUNITY IN ACTION. There is a work of spiritual labor to be done in making disciples of all nations and teaching them to observe the teachings of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>3</sup> Bridges. Location 112.

If you enter into a business partnership with someone else, you are entering into a relationship with that person, along with your shared resources. You are investing and risking yourself, your money, your effort and your time to make that partnership successful. Ultimately any success is up to God, but you bear the responsibility of that relationship to labor and strive for the result you are seeking. In the same manner, as co-laborers of the gospel we have been joined in partnership (*koinonia*) to Christ and with one another to labor in gospel harvesting ministry. As Jesus prepared to send His disciples out, He instructed them "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.*" (Luke 10:2).

As a community in action, our partnership is for the promotion of the gospel and the building up of fellow believers. Our thinking must be shifted corporately, not individually. In order to work in cooperation and not in competition with one another, you need to view fellowship as not simply for yourself but for concern of your fellow believer's growth. This makes our spiritual fellowship a mutual commitment and responsibility toward each other.

*"As we build up and enjoy one another, we are in fellowship, but as we join together to spread the gospel, we are in partnership and our objectives are focused outside ourselves on those who need to be brought into the fellowship of God's people."*<sup>4</sup>

## II. SHARING WITH

**PHILEMON 1:4-6** *I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.*<sup>5</sup>

### SHARING SPIRITUALLY

The result of sharing together in spiritual fellowship will lead to sharing spiritually with one another. Out of the overflow of your communion with God and gospel partnership with others, you should be sharing your testimony of God's work in your life and instruction from the Scriptures. "*Spiritual fellowship should always be centered around the teaching of the Bible.*"<sup>6</sup> The early church made it their habit to be devoted to the Apostle's teaching. This is why we do Bible studies, reading plans, Shepherding Groups consistently. Authentic biblical community cannot happen apart from God's Word. Spiritual fellowship is nurtured and cultivated by the Scriptures as it is shared among us. This sharing of the dynamic truth of Scripture with each other leads to encouragement, admonishing, and submitting ourselves together in an accountable relationship. This type of fellowship compels you to pray with and for each other, and to exercise your spiritual gifts in the body.

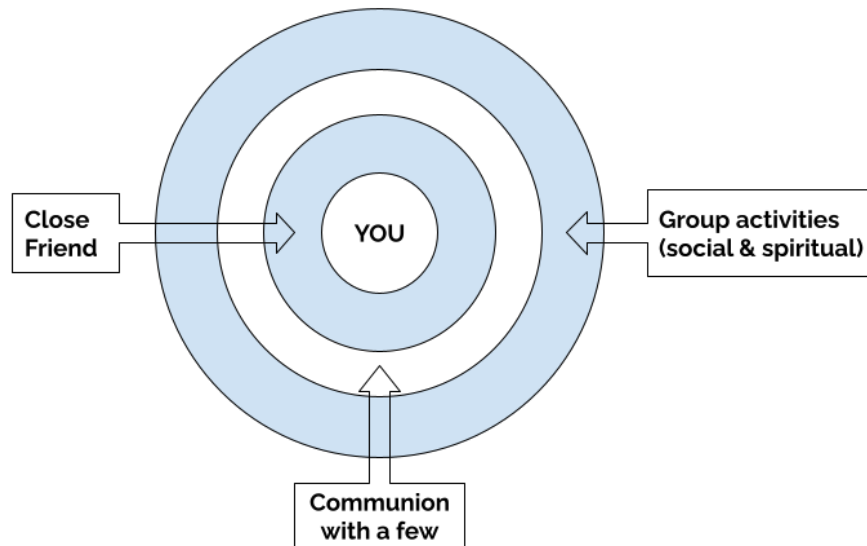
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<sup>4</sup> Bridges. Location 981.

<sup>5</sup> NET notes, Phlm.1:6: *The result is that Paul prays for Philemon that he will be equipped to encourage and love the saints more as he himself is brought to a place of deeper understanding of every spiritual blessing he has in Christ; out of the overflow of his own life, he will minister to others.*

<sup>6</sup> Bridges, Jerry. *True Community*. Location 828. Kindle Edition.

The expectation isn't for you to have deep, spiritual relationships with every believer in the church; no one has that type of capacity. But you do need to proactively cultivate relationships in your life that will lead to this type of shared fellowship. Work on relationships from outward to inward. As you begin at the outer level of relationships, you must earn the right to move to the next level in fellowship.



## SHARING POSSESSIONS

**HEBREWS 13:16** *Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

**ROMANS 12:13** *Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*

The natural consequence and realization of our partnered relationship with fellow believers should lead us to be concerned with the needs of others in the body of Christ. The most practical way the early church displayed their love for one another was through the sharing of God's provision and contributing to the actual needs of others. The fruit of this practice brought joy to the community and promoted further generosity among them. This led to greater worship, favorable community reputation, and God's blessing by drawing others to Himself in salvation to join His church.

You might feel hesitant to contribute financially or uneasy sharing your "stuff" with others. You may have been burned in the past, or you're not certain the person is trustworthy to receive your aid. Giving in our culture is often treated as a "private matter", or met with a degree skepticism. To be sure there is a measure of wisdom as to whom or how you contribute your resources. Mature fellowship should not assume upon a person's generosity or take advantage of another's property. However, sharing possessions and contributing to the needs of fellow believers is commanded and expected in Scripture. (ROM.12:13; 15:26-27; 2 COR.8:4; 9:13; 1 TIM.6:18; HEB.13:16)

As a parent, you delight in being generous with your kids. You experience joy watching them get excited or express sincere thankfulness when you give them good gifts. When you view everything you possess as good, gracious gifts from God and you embrace the spiritual truth that we belong to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, then you will make other's needs your own and will want to be generous toward them. It is the Holy Spirit who creates community, He will create a care and concern in you toward those in need. He will also supply the means necessary to meet those needs.

There are needs both here in our local church and churches abroad. Our partnership in the gospel compels us to support other churches, pastors, missionaries and ministries outside this local community. When you are a contributing partner in prayer and finances, you share in the responsibility of the work that is taking place. God chooses to use you to share in His abundant work.

William Carey of England, who has been called “the father of modern missions,” went to India in 1793. At that time, there were no organized missionary societies, but as Carey prayed over the needs of an unreached world, God laid India on his heart. At a “commissioning” service for Carey and his colleague in March 1793, one of Carey’s friends exclaimed, “There is a gold mine in India but it seems almost as deep as the centre of the earth!” to which Carey replied, “I will venture down but remember that you must hold the ropes.”<sup>7</sup>

*"Thus, we need a balanced emphasis on the church as a caring community, as a partnership in the gospel, and as a body of believers who mutually build up one another spiritually and share with one another materially."*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Drewery, William Carey (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 46.

<sup>8</sup> Bridges. Location 1951. Kindle Edition.