

The Church in Crisis

In the modern church there is a crisis in regards to our understanding of, and most notably our application of, the doctrine of New Testament fellowship. This crisis is the result of a myriad number of causes, not the least of which are the Western notions of rugged individualism, isolationism and compartmentalization.¹ Although there is a superficial emphasis placed upon fellowship by many in the church today, for the most part it is simply lip service being paid to an ancient notion of mutuality. To be sure, this crisis has aroused the attention and concern of a number of scholars, pastors and church leaders throughout the United States and the world. Let us listen to a few of their voices.

“On one subject, however, there has been dimness--that of the fellowship. That the first church adhered as steadfastly [sic] to the fellowship as to the teaching of the apostles, is positively affirmed; but precisely what is meant by fellowship, and how they continued in it, has been matter of so much doubt as to leave our churches largely destitute of the blessings of fellowship, and render them failures, so far as this feature of primitive Christianity is concerned.”²

“Today, however, the word [fellowship] has lost most of its biblical meaning. ‘Fellowship’ now usually refers to casual conversation, socializing, food, and fun. The question ‘Where do you fellowship?’ means ‘Where do you attend church?’ ‘Stay after for fellowship’ usually means ‘Wait for refreshments’...Authentic fellowship is not superficial, surface-level chit-chat.”³

¹ Brian Anderson, *The Traditional Church vs. the NT Church*, n.p. 1999. Online: www.solidrock.net/library/anderson/charts/nt.traditional.chart.php. [September, 2003].

² Isaac Errett, *The Fellowship*, n.p., 1923. Online: www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/zsweeney/ntc1/NTC119.HTM. [October, 2003].

³ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 138-139.

“Fellowship, you see, is not just being together, it is doing together! This is a point almost universally ignored by Christian groups today.”⁴

“For this reason we must quit thinking of Christian fellowship as primarily doing things such as having pot luck dinners or watching football or playing basketball with other believers. These have their place but they are only fellowship to the extent that rest, exercise, and eating are doing the work of the Lord. Fellowship involves actively doing God’s will. The things we usually think of as fellowship are certainly not the primary meaning of the word!”⁵

“Today, the subject of fellowship among brethren is often reduced to the consideration of a common meal together. However, biblically, comparatively few passages address this kind of fellowship.”⁶

“Many churches have a superficial idea (and experience) of community. Christian community is easily mistaken for mere cordiality, courtesy, or sociability. It easily becomes least-common-denominator ‘fellowship’, not much different from the Kiwanis or a neighborhood potluck. Often so-called Christian community is marked by nothing that is specifically Christian and nothing that challenges the values of surrounding pagan society.”⁷

A crisis indeed! If what these people, and many like them, are saying is true and New Testament fellowship bears any value at all, then the church today is in serious need of understanding and discipline in regards to the doctrine and practice of New Testament

⁴ Bob Gilliam, *The Importance of Fellowship in a New Testament Church*, n.p., 1996. Online: www.bible.org/docs/theology/eccles/measure/meas-03.htm. [September, 2003].

⁵ Ibid., n.p.

⁶ Louis Rushmore, *The New Testament Church is Divine in Fellowship*, n.p., 2000. Online: www.gospelgazette.com/bookstore/download/articles/church8.htm. [November, 2003].

⁷ Howard A. Snyder, *Authentic Fellowship*, n.p. 2003. Online: www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/010/28.102.html. [October, 2003].

fellowship. Perhaps no one states the importance of genuine fellowship more powerfully than Vivian H. Green, DD FRHistS, former Fellow and Rector of Lincoln College, Oxford who wrote the following closing to his 400 page work, *A New History of Christianity*. At this point in the book Green has come to the end of some 1,950 years of church history, having traced the growth of Christianity from a small band of disciples in Jerusalem up through history as it became and has remained the predominant religion in the world. Green closes his book with these statements:

“However, perhaps we should now draw breath and remind ourselves that Christianity has survived because first and foremost from the very beginning it has been a society, a brotherhood, a *koinonia*, sustained by a vision of holiness and love, and by a deep faith in the purpose and providence of God. It was less historically important that Christianity should have been a system of belief than that it was a way of life...Christianity represented both a culture and an existence...Whether Christianity has its roots in a supernatural world or is simply a manifestation of the highest form of the human spirit, it is likely to survive until man destroys creation or the world crumbles into dust.”⁸(italics his)

Here Green acknowledges what so many have found to be true, that Christianity is not just a religion, a set of practices, or an institution. Christianity is a way of life, and what is more, it is a way of *shared life*. Herein we will examine the doctrine of New Testament fellowship and the implications it presents for the modern day church. The modern American church is in crisis. She does not suffer from lack of education, or resources, or talent, or time. What she lacks is a unity of spirit, a unity of doctrine, a unity of faith and a unity of practice. Compared with the New Testament doctrine and

⁸ Vivian Green, *A New History of Christianity* (Phoenix Mill, UK: Sutton, 1998), 402.

model of fellowship the modern church is little more than a phantom, making a show of fellowship without the substance.

What is New Testament Fellowship?

Although *koinonia* is the word most often used to express the notion of fellowship in the New Testament there is much more to it than just one word. *Koinonia* represents an entire ethos of thought and practice in the New Testament. It is what under girds all of New Testament life and what made possible the incredible growth of the first century church. Herein we will look at the uses of the word family of which *koinonia* is a part in the New Testament in order to establish some type of framework from which to build a clear doctrine of what New Testament fellowship is.

The Greek word *koinonia* is used twenty times in the New Testament and is rendered in various ways including; fellowship, contribution, communion, and communicate/ion. It exists in a family of related words including; *koinos*, *koinoneo*, *koinonikos*, and *koinonos*. These related terms occur over 30 times in the New Testament⁹ and express ideas such as; having things in common, sharing a common faith, having a common salvation, distributing to needs, partaking together, communicating to one another, willingness to communicate, companionship, and partnership.¹⁰ As is clearly seen just from these uses, *koinonia* and its related words communicate the notion of togetherness and involvement between two or more parties. Such was the nature of the New Testament fellowship. There were many ways in which New Testament believers

⁹ Martin Reardon, *Sharing Communion: the New Testament Legacy*, n.p., 1998. Online: www.interchurchfamilies.org/resource/eucharist/legacy.shtm. [September, 2003].

¹⁰ J. Spender, *New Testament Church Series (XIV) Fellowship – An Outline*, n.p., 1984. Online: www.newtestamentchurch.com/Series/ntc30.htm. [October, 2003].

had fellowship with one another. Let us examine the different ways that are laid out explicitly in the Bible.

1. Material Fellowship with Believers

First of all, it can be clearly seen that the early believers considered their material possessions to be resources that should be shared with fellow believers at God's discretion as expressed through the apostles. This is obvious in the description of the early churches commonality (Acts 2:42-44)¹¹ and the antithesis of this commonality demonstrated in Ananias and Sapphira's deception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11). Paul encourages the Romans to distribute (*koinoneo*) to the necessity of the saints (Rom. 12:13), and tells the Galatians to share/communicate (*koinoneo*) with those who teach them (Gal. 6:6).

This notion of exchanging material gifts for spiritual gifts is perhaps clearest when Paul tells the Romans that Gentiles are debtors to the Jews, having been partakers (*koinoneo*) of their spiritual things, they owe them material things (Rom. 15:27). When writing to the church in Philippi, Paul reminds them that they were the only church that communicated/shared (*koinoneo*) with him in regards to giving and receiving (Phi. 4:15).

Again speaking to the Romans, Paul tells them of certain ones from Macedonia and Achaia who made a contribution (*koinonia*) for the poor in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26), and in his second letter to the Corinthians writes about the gift of giving and refers to their liberal sharing/distribution (*koinonia*) with/to the brethren (2Cor. 9:13). The writer to the Hebrews reminds them to not to forget to share/communicate (*koinonia*) for it is a well pleasing sacrifice to God (Heb. 13:16). Finally, Paul writes to Timothy concerning

¹¹ All Scripture quotations and references are taken from either, *The Holy Bible, New King James Version*. Copyright © 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. or, *The Holy Bible, King James Revised Standard Version*. Copyright © 1970 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

the rich that they should be willing to share/communicate (*koinonikos*) so that they will be rich in good works (1Tim. 6:18).

2. *Spiritual Fellowship with Believers*

Secondly let us look at the ways that fellowship between believers took on a spiritual connotation. Paul refers to Titus as a true son in the common (*koinos*) faith (Titus 1:4) and Jude writes to his audience as those who share a common (*koinos*) salvation (Jude 3). Paul again references the shared/common (*koinonia*) faith when writing to Philemon (Phlm. 6), and then appeals to their common faith, stating that if Philemon considers him a partner (*koinonos*) then he should receive Onesimus as a partner as well (Phlm. 17).

The early church was described as praying together, eating together, in short, having fellowship (*koinonia*) one with another (Acts 2:42). Paul, speaking of his reception in Jerusalem, states that Peter, James and John gave him and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship (*koinonia*) that they should go to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:9). Again, when writing to the Philippians Paul speaks of how thankful he is for their fellowship (*koinonia*) in the gospel (Phil. 1:5). John the Beloved writes his first epistle in hope that those he writes to may also have fellowship (*koinonia*) with he and the other believers (1John 1:3). Speaking of Titus to the Corinthians, Paul refers to him as his fellow worker (*koinonos*) in the ministry (2Cor. 8:23). Finally, the author of Hebrews writes to encourage those who are being persecuted and those who are partners (*koinonos*) with them (Heb. 10:33) to remain in the faith.

3. *Fellowship with the Father*

There is one place in which a Biblical author directly references the fellowship we have with the Father. When John the Beloved wrote his first epistle his stated purpose in writing was that those who received it would have fellowship (*koinonia*) with him and his companions and stated that their fellowship was with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1John 1:3).

4. Fellowship with Jesus Christ

Next we will examine the ways in which New Testament believers had fellowship with Jesus Christ. Paul states that God had called the Corinthian believers into fellowship (*koinonia*) with His Son (1 Cor. 1:9) and the writer of Hebrews talks about how those who partake (*koinoneo*) of the body and blood of Christ are one with Him (Heb. 2:14). Paul explicitly states that this action (taking of the body and the blood of Christ) refers to the taking of communion sacraments in his address to the Corinthians regarding the communion (*koinonia*) we experience with one another and with Christ when we take of the bread and the cup (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

This community with Christ is explained more clearly by Peter's statements about us partaking (*koinoneo*) in Christ's sufferings (1 Peter 4:13), an idea popularized by Paul's statements concerning wanting to know Christ in the fellowship (*koinonia*) of his sufferings (Phil. 3:10). Of course if Christian's share in/partake of (*koinonos*) the sufferings of Christ they will also partake of His consolation (2Cor.1:7).

5. Fellowship with the Holy Spirit

Twice the Bible speaks of Christians having fellowship with the Holy Spirit. In both cases Paul assumes this relationship, once in a benediction to the Corinthian church, blessing them with the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the

communion (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit (2Cor. 13:14). Next, when encouraging the Philippians to be like-minded he refers to the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Spirit along with the consolation of Christ and the comfort of love (Phil. 2:1).

6. *Fellowship in the Divine Nature*

Next we hear of a somewhat mystical fellowship when Peter speaks of Christians being partakers (*koinonos*) of the divine nature through the great and precious promises bestowed upon them by Christ (2Pet. 1:4). When speaking to the elders, Peter states that he is a partaker (*koinonos*) of the glory that will be revealed (1Pet. 5:1) and Paul when writing to the Ephesians speaks of how the church has been chosen to reveal the manifold wisdom of God to the world, and that, having been chosen for such a task, they partake in the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the mystery of God (Eph. 3:9).

7. *An Exclusive Fellowship*

Finally, we observe the fact that the New Testament fellowship was an *exclusive* fellowship. Paul warns Timothy not to be a partaker (*koinoneo*) of other men's sins, but rather to keep himself pure (1Tim. 5:22), and when writing to the Corinthians Paul tells them not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers, asking, "For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion [*koinonia*] hath light with darkness?" (2Cor. 6:14 NKJV). Formerly when writing to the Corinthians Paul warned them concerning idolatry, telling them plainly that he does not want them to have fellowship (*koinonos*) with demons (1Cor. 10:20). Perhaps no one makes a clearer case for the exclusivity of the fellowship than John in remarking about the believers fellowship being with either light or darkness (see 1John 1).

What principles can be derived from New Testament fellowship?

Having now examined the instances of the *koinonia* word family in the New Testament we are faced with an important question. What principles can be derived from looking at the way that the New Testament church fellowshiped? The answer to this question is necessary in order to move to the final step, that of application to the modern day church.

It can be observed that the New Testament speaks clearly of seven specific types of fellowship that Christians are to be involved in; material fellowship with other believers, spiritual fellowship with other believers, fellowship with the Father, fellowship with Christ, fellowship with the Holy Spirit, a mystical fellowship with the divine nature, and finally an exclusive fellowship.

1. The Principle of Inter-Relation

The first derivative principle we see is the *principle of inter-relation* between the different types of fellowship. None of the types of fellowship stand on their own, rather they each inter-depend upon one another. For example Paul speaks of the partnership between Jews and Gentiles, stating that Gentiles should share their material blessings with the Jews in gratefulness for the spiritual blessings the Jews have shared with them. Another example is that when believers come together to fellowship in the taking of communion, according to Paul they achieve communion with Jesus Christ Himself.

Perhaps nowhere is this interdependence more noticeable than in John's words, "If we say that we have fellowship with Him [Jesus Christ], and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin," (1John 1:6-7 NKJV). Thus each type of fellowship is dependent on the other. One

cannot have true fellowship with Christ without partaking of His Spirit (Rom. 8:9), and one cannot have true spiritual fellowship with his brother unless he is willing to share with him materially (James 2:14-17).

2. *The Principle of Financial Generosity*

Next we see the *principle of financial generosity*. Over half of the instances of the *koinonia* word family in the New Testament refer to the liberal sharing of material wealth with other believers. This clearly indicates that the notion of giving freely of one's wealth was a principle by which the New Testament community lived and in which they realized true fellowship.¹²

3. *The Principle of Spiritual Unity Expressed through Shared Labor*

The third principle that can be derived is the *principle of spiritual unity expressed through shared labor*. It is clear that New Testament believers recognized that they were of a common faith, sharing a common salvation, laboring together for a common cause. It has been written that, "Fellowship is a relationship of inner unity among believers that expresses itself in outer co-participation with Christ and one another in accomplishing God's will on earth."¹³

4. *The Principle of Unity with God*

The fourth principle we can observe is the *principle of unity with God*. By surveying the uses of the word we note that Christians were called to fellowship (be unified) with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This communion with God was signified in the taking of the cup and the bread, and demonstrated one's identification

¹² Lee Smith, *Old Doctrines, New Light: Fellowship*, n.p., 1999. Online: www.arlev.clara.net/fellowship.htm [October, 2003].

¹³ Gilliam, n.p.

Louis Rushmore gives added insight into this concept, although Gilliam's treatment of it in the aforementioned article is excellent.

with God and His people. Without this foundational step, one could not be in fellowship with other believers.¹⁴ Again, this references the inter-dependence of the different types of fellowship.

5. The Principle of Exclusivity

Finally, the New Testament clearly demonstrates a *principle of exclusivity* in the early churches fellowship.¹⁵ Christians are to be kind and compassionate to unbelievers, but not “yoked” to them, that is to say, not joined in ways that would only be appropriate for one who was also joined to God (i.e. marriage, taking of communion, etc.).

Whereas this is certainly not an exhaustive list, for our purposes we will stop with these five principles and move now towards an understanding of how the modern church can apply these principles in order to re-establish the fellowship that so often fails to exist within the Body of Christ.

Application for the Modern Day Church

It has been established that the modern church is in crisis, desperately in need of a new understanding of the Biblical meaning of fellowship. Now that fellowship has been examined and derivative principles have been extracted we can propose a solution to the crisis in the church. The solution is to take this newfound understanding of fellowship and to apply it to every area of “church life”. But how can that be done? What practical steps are necessary? How can principles be transferred into practice?

Step #1: The Fully Integrated Christian

¹⁴ Dick Tripp, *The New Testament Emphasis on Relationships*, n.p., 2002. Online: www.christianity.co.nz/church.htm [November, 2003].

¹⁵ Rushmore, n.p.
Reardon, n.p.

The first step is for individual Christians to realize that the issue of fellowship is not optional. This is clear from the first and fifth principles that were examined. When a person comes into a relationship with Jesus Christ they come into a relationship with His Body, and become *dis-fellowshipped* from unbelievers. As has been commonly stated, there are no ‘lone ranger’ Christians.

Each Christian is called to be an active member of the local body of which they are a part. This does not simply mean attending three services a month and tithing. It means sharing liberally with believers in need, praying for and working together with other believers in order to accomplish the will of God. It means putting their spiritual gifts to work and filling their place in Christ’s body, whether that be through administration, giving, serving, teaching or any other gift that the Holy Spirit has given them.

Christians must be aware that if they think they are in fellowship with God, and are choosing not to be in fellowship with other believers, they are deceiving themselves. The Body of Christ only functions to the extent that its separate parts function together as a whole.¹⁶ Each Christian must ask themselves the questions, “Am I making the Body of Christ sick and lethargic? Am I helping to make the Body of Christ alive and vibrant?”

Step # 2: The Fully Committed Christian

Christianity is not simply a religion or spiritual activity. Christianity is a way of life, it *is life*. And more, it is a *shared* life. Christians must increase daily in their commitment to God and His purposes. This will be accomplished through renewed vigor in prayer, obedience to whatever level of Biblical truth has been learned, and deeper

¹⁶ Andy Neckar ed., *Christian News & Views: Newsletter & Resource Page; Is it possible to meet as a New Testament church today? A word of explanation*, n.p., 2003. Online: cnveiw.com/churches_today/new_testament_church.htm [September, 2003].

revelation of God's plan and purpose for the Body of Christ. Christians must be fully committed, not only to God, but to one another.

This commitment cannot simply be expressed in "accountability partner" relationships and prayer breakfasts. Christians must know and love one another to the point that they would willingly die for one another and through this loving commitment choose each day to live sacrificially for God and one another. Christians must ask themselves the questions, "What am I willing to give up for my brother or sister? Would I be happier with more entertainment and toys, or by giving that money to see God's will accomplished in someone else's life? If Jesus looked at me and told me to sell all that I had and give to the poor would I gladly do it, or would I walk away saddened like the rich young ruler?"

Step #3: The Unified Body of Christ

Finally, we must realize that all of these changes are wasted if the time, understanding and effort being expended is limited to individual Christians. The true mark of fellowship is not that individual Christians have become more involved or more committed, but that as a collection of individual believers, the Body of Christ has become more involved in and more committed to the purposes of God. The Body of Christ must function as a unit, working together, giving of itself to Christ and to what He wants to accomplish in the earth.

At this step the individual identity of the believer is completely sacrificed in order to serve the greater purposes of the Body of Christ. It is not simply a matter of individual believers giving of their gifts and talents, but of all of the gifts and fruit of the Holy Spirit being expressed in beautiful harmony through the universal Body of Christ. This is true

New Testament fellowship, and this is the place at which the Church of God can truly function as the Body of Christ.

The Crisis, The Solution

The Crisis

The modern church is in crisis. We do not lack the power, presence or purpose of God, but we do lack the unified fellowship to fully utilize His power, experience His presence, and accomplish His purpose. The unity of thought, spirit, practice and faith that was so evident in the New Testament church is severely lacking in the modern church and the effects are devastating. Today the modern church is fractured, with hundreds of denominations and non-denominations competing with each other and falling apart from the inside out. The modern church is full of division and schisms. She lacks the spirit of hospitality and generosity seen so vividly in the early church. She moves slowly and lethargically along, often seeming completely unaware of her purpose. If one were to look at the modern church compared with the New Testament church they would scarcely recognize that the two were even intended to be of the same breed. And the most outstanding element that is severely lacking in the modern church is that of true fellowship.

The Solution

Against such a bleak and discouraging backdrop the church is confronted with a solution that is as simple as it is profound. If you want Biblical results, you must apply Biblical principles. The Biblical principles of fellowship are certainly not fully expressed herein, but the five principles that are outlined would have a drastic effect on the life and vitality of the church if they were applied. God has called believers into fellowship with

Him. He has called them into a mutuality of identity, a joining of two into one, similar to the fellowship experienced in marriage. It is no mistake that the Church is referred to as the Bride of Christ. The intimacy of the church's fellowship with Christ should be that of a husband and wife, that of two becoming one flesh.

But the fellowship that believers are called to with Christ is also a fellowship with one another. Christians are called to live and work and pray and serve together, accomplishing God's will upon the earth through sacrificially giving of their lives to one another. This is true Biblical fellowship. It is a unity of resources, a unity of spirit, a unity with God, resulting in a unity with His divine nature, separated eternally from the world.