

of the church. You quickly admit that when you think of the church you think of your Sunday School class and your life together. We do this so well. Just this week I witnessed several classes gathering around those who are going through sickness, death, and other transitions. It is amazing to watch this occur. If you are not part of one of these Sunday School classes here at Trinity you are missing something special. However, I do think that the strength of our classes is disguising a problem and that is our fellowship in the greater congregation.

A third obstacle is of course our busy lifestyle. The multiple options we have when it comes to attendance is overwhelming and thus all statistics show that the frequency of attendance has changed and the result of course is that we are not with each other like we once were. Here they were together daily and if we are together monthly we think that is wonderful.

We live in a changing community. Our church community is changing and so is the community around us. People are more transient than they were just a decade ago. All of this creates an obstacle to keep fellowship in our church.

However, I think we want it. I think we value it we have just forgot how to do it. We do it on Sundays, but we also do it on Wednesdays. Wednesdays have always been the time of fellowship and relationships beyond our own generation. Whether it is because we work with children or youth or we sing or play in an ensemble or the choir or we find ourselves in a small discipleship class with people of various ages, this is the weekly gathering when we take a step toward fellowship. We gather around a table and eat, we engage with others that we might not even see on Sunday. In all of this we devote ourselves to the fellowship.

This week I attended a funeral for a father of one of our members. He was a great man. Dr. Ross Fogelman of Kinston. Dr. Fogelman not only delivered 1,800 children in his life, but also gave care for decades to the people of Kinston. However, he might be better remembered not for his medical practice, but for his beautiful voice. He loved to sing and sing he did. He sang in the choir and he sang at work. He sang at home and he was known to just break into song. I know this because his best friend for 40 years shared through his tears what life had been like sharing it with his friend. He remarked we had so much

in common, we sang arms length apart in the choir for 30 plus years. We shared meals and so many moments. They shared life.

I approached him after the service and told him thank you for sharing. I then said you know I think you can count yourself blessed if you have one friend like you described to share life with. When my father died his best friend in Ohio came to the funeral in Tennessee and walked up to me and said the same words to me. Jeff you can count yourself lucky if you have one friend like your father was to me. It is true. Our true friends who last a life are few for sure. However, as I thought about those words and my words I thought maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was asking too little of this life and of God. Maybe the church is not only the place to find a friend, but also the place to always be among friends. I don't know about you, but I don't want to spend my life in the company of strangers. I want to live in the company of friends... more so my brothers and sister in Christ.

Bonheoffer was right. "Let him who until now has had the privilege of living in common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren."

They devoted themselves to the fellowship.



What We Mean by Fellowship

Acts 2:42-47



Just before his death, U. S. Senate Chaplain Richard Halverson, shared these thoughts about the church. In the beginning the church was a fellowship of men and women who centered their lives on the living Christ. They had a personal relationship with the Lord. It transformed them and the world around them.

Then the church moved to Greece and became philosophy. Then it moved to Rome and became institutions. Then it moved to Europe where it became culture. Finally, it moved to the United States where it became an enterprise. We have far too many churches and not enough fellowships. What does it mean when we use the word fellowship?

Most of us would admit, as good Baptists, that when we say fellowship we mean food. Now there is nothing wrong with this because food was a part of the early church and fellowship. So when we say fellowship, many of us think long tables of food. Casseroles and sweet tea. We think of Wednesday night dinners and dinner on the ground. No doubt when we say fellowship many of us think of an activity we do with other church members. Maybe it is playing a sport or going on a trip. Some of the great moments in building relationships the church happen on an outing or just spending time together. However, fellowship from a New Testament definition is something more.

It was Dietrich Bonheoffer, in one of his last sermons, who spoke these words to the captives in the concentration camp with him:

Not all Christians receive this blessing. The imprisoned, the sick the scattered lonely, the proclaimers of the Gospel in other lands stand-alone. They know that the visible fellowship is a blessing. The physical presence of other Christians is a source of incomparable joy and strength to the believer. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living

in common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.

Bonheoffer was right. There are those who due to being a minority in a land, missionary on a field, home sick, having to work when others gather who do not experience the blessing of being in the company of the saints week after week. It is our blessing to be able to be here together. So many who can no longer be with us long for this moment. They long to share life together.

That really is what fellowship is about... about sharing life together. It is about sharing the good, the bad, the ugly, the glorious, the moments of ease and the moments of pain. Whatever comes, we share it. We share it because we belong together. When we enter into a relationship with Jesus we enter into a relationship with His church. We have to take them both. They are a package deal.

Here in the book of Acts we find the activities of the early church. They were creating a new community. They were being created into the very visible presence of Jesus on this earth. So we are told of their activities.

Luke reminds us:

They devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe and the apostles did many wonders and miraculous signs. All believers were together and they had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts praising God and enjoying the favor of the people and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.



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There are many activities we expect to find in this passage such as the teaching of the Apostles, the breaking of the bread or the Lord's Supper and of course prayer. However, there are other activities there that we must not overlook. They devoted themselves to the fellowship that is to living life with each other. They met daily. They wanted to be together. They made sure each other were cared for physically. They gave to the one as he had need. They broke bread in their homes. They practiced Christian hospitality. There was also a sense of joy as they praised God and the result is that people noticed them. They found favor with the people. God also took note and God added to their number daily those who were being saved.

There was something incredibly attractive in this community of people. There was something about the way they lived, cared for each other and devoted themselves to each other and God that made others notice and long to be a part of their lives. As they shared life together others too wanted to share what they were sharing.

They devoted themselves to the fellowship. In our core value we state that it is our goal to have intentional fellowship. That is, we too express that what we desire as a congregation is to devote ourselves to the fellowship.

What does intentional fellowship look like? What do we mean when we say fellowship?

First, we must recognize that fellowship is not an afterthought. Fellowship is not a by-product and a characteristic of the church that is some how of less importance than other activities that are mentioned here. We might say that in this one passage we find our other core values. They met for breaking of bread and prayer. That is worship. They listened to the teaching of the Apostles. That is discipleship. They made sure that everyone had their needs met. That is ministry. They were out in the Temple Courts daily. That is mission. They devoted themselves to the fellowship.

Fellowship is a biblical concept and it is of equal importance to the early church as is the prayer, worship, teaching and care. One of the realizations we need to make this morning is that the fellowship of the believers is as important to our faith and growth as anything we do in the life of the church. All of these activities are important in the life of a healthy church as well as a maturing Christian.

Pastor Lillian Daniel includes in her blog a recent article called "Spiritual but Not Religious Person, Stop Boring Me." She writes:

On airplanes, I dread the conversation with the person who finds out I am a minister and wants to use the flight time to explain to me that he is "spiritual but not religious." Such a person will always share this as if it is some kind of daring insight, unique to him, bold in its rebellion against the religious status quo.

Next thing you know, he's telling me that he finds God in the sunsets. These people always find God in the sunsets. And in walks on the beach. Sometimes I think these people never leave the beach or the mountains, what with all the communing with God they do on hilltops, hiking trails and ... did I mention the beach at sunset yet? Like people who go to church don't see God in the sunset! Like we are these monastic little hermits who never leave the church building. How lucky we are to have these geniuses inform us that God is in nature. As if we don't hear that in the psalms, the creation stories and throughout our deep tradition.

Being privately spiritual but not religious just doesn't interest me. There is nothing challenging about having deep thoughts all by oneself. What is interesting is doing this work in community, where other people might call you on stuff, or heaven forbid, disagree with you. Where life with God gets rich and provocative is when you dig deeply into a tradition that you did not invent all for yourself.

Thank you for sharing, spiritual-but-not-religious sunset person. You are now comfortably in the norm for self-centered American culture, right smack in the bland majority of people who find ancient religions dull but find themselves uniquely fascinating. Can I switch seats now and sit next to someone who has been shaped by a mighty cloud of witnesses instead? Can I spend my time talking to someone brave enough to encounter God in a real human community? Because when this flight gets choppy, that's who I want by my side, holding my hand, saying a prayer and simply putting up with me, just like we try to do in church. There are limits to self-made religion.

Could it be that the church is the exact place where the Holy Spirit does the creating and recreating of us into the image of Jesus. You see, it is in the church with the same people every week that God works in us. The Spirit leads us to love that person we do not like. The Spirit leads us to forgive the person who hurt us and stay in fellowship. The Spirit leads us to open our lives to others who come through these doors and sit themselves in "our pew" or insert themselves into our relationships in a Sunday School class. It is in the church where we remember that all we have belongs to God and when someone has a need we let it go. In those moments we have to decide

if we are truly going to be like Jesus. Are we going to forgive those who hurt us or dismiss us? Are we going to welcome those who are different than us? Are we going to give of our time, energy and resources for another?

It may well be that in the world is where we model what it means to be like Christ, but I think it just might be the church where it is really formed. You see if the church is an alien outpost of heaven and not the reflection of culture, then the church becomes to witness to the world that there is actually a people who take the commands of Jesus seriously. There are actually a people who are willing to live as though the Kingdom of God is at hand and in our midst through the risen Jesus.

They devoted themselves to the fellowship. It formed them; it was their witness to the world around them. Here is what is amazing. Their activities of devotion are not earth shattering. What did they do?

They worshipped together. We have already spoken how worship is the great last witness of the church in our world. Worshipping together reminds us that we all stand under God. Witnessing together reminds us that we are all standing on the level ground where we find the cross. Worshipping together is the reminder of just what it is that unites us in the first place.

They broke bread together. That first line has to do with the Lord's Supper. They gathered and they broke bread and they remember the Lord and they anticipated His coming again. It is at the Lord's table we are reminded of Jesus' sacrifice and promises to not only each of us... but to us all.

They listened to teaching. They were open to growing in faith. They had not arrived in faith. They knew there was always more to learn and know of Christ.

They welcomed each other into the most intimate moments of life. That is what being open to helping and receiving help is about. That is what sharing a meal was about. We know that in the Bible the act of sharing a meal was the highest moment of acceptance of another. It was saying you belong to me and I to you. It is like sitting around the family table and there are others welcomed in the family.

THAT REALLY IS WHAT FELLOWSHIP IS ABOUT... ABOUT SHARING LIFE TOGETHER. IT IS ABOUT SHARING THE GOOD, THE BAD, THE UGLY, THE GLORIOUS, THE MOMENTS OF EASE AND THE MOMENTS OF PAIN. WHATEVER COMES, WE SHARE IT. WE SHARE IT BECAUSE WE BELONG TOGETHER.

This is why the Pharisees were so upset with Jesus when He would eat and drink with the sinners. This is why the Pharisees were so upset when the woman with the alabaster jar came into Jesus' presence and broke the jar of perfume and wiped His feet with her hair. It was just too close. You just did not eat and consort and fellowship with people like that. Why? It was acceptance.

Here in the early church they devoted them to fellowship by welcoming each other into their homes and sharing a meal.

Lastly, we find that it was authentic fellowship. We are told they did it gladly and with sincere hearts. This was not forced, contrived or inauthentic. Just the opposite. They knew they needed each other in this world. They knew they belonged to each other in a world of strangers. They knew of the importance of these moments and so they gladly, and authentically shared life together. They devoted themselves to their fellowship.

As we begin a new year of ministry together this fall I want to share my heart for a few moments. One of my great concerns is for our fellowship. Our Core Value says we value intentional fellowship, but sometimes I have to question this by our actions and priorities. We do face obstacles.

We face the obstacle of two worship services. Ever since we went to two worship services we have begun to struggle with our devotion to the fellowship. We knew it was going to happen and it had to happen because we need to provide more space for worshippers and also to provide options for worshippers, but there was always going to be an unintended consequence. That is why Sunday School is so important. It holds us together. It keeps the fellowship in some sense for a growing and larger congregation. This is one of the reasons we want to expand our facility. We need more small group space. We need more Sunday School classes. You do grow larger by growing smaller. Since I have been your pastor we have added 11 new adult classes. That is short of my one a year goal, but it is still a good number. This must continue.

However, I also would list our Sunday School as our most important ministry but it too can challenge us in fellowship. When I speak with many of you, regardless of your generation, and ask you to talk about the fellowship
