

Pillar III

Strive for a fellowship that demonstrates in both word and deed the beauty of the Gospel

How can fellowship demonstrate the Gospel? The Gospel after all is a message. But it is the world's most important message. It is the message of the substitutionary death and triumphal resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is the ultimate message of love and reconciliation. So, fellowship that demonstrates the Gospel happens when God's people begin to forgive as they have been forgiven, show mercy the way they have been shown mercy, and work for reconciliation because they have been reconciled by God.

Conversion and Fellowship

It would be naïve to think that everyone whose name is on a church role is a genuine convert to Christ. Real fellowship however can thrive only among people who share a common connection to Christ. When Jesus offered His great High Priestly prayer in John 17 He prayed for the unity of “those whom You have given me, for they are Yours” (v.9). He specifically says that he is not praying for the whole world. Rather, Jesus prays that those whom the Father has given to him “may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (v. 21). It is clear that spiritual fellowship is built upon a unity that is possible only among those who belong to Jesus.

Consistent Gathering

When the church is healthiest there is a common recognition of the importance of times of corporate fellowship. The first church formed on the Day of Pentecost was characterized by frequent gatherings for teaching, worship, prayer, and the sharing of meals. It is clear that there was something sanctifying about this commitment to community. “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people” (Acts 2:46-47). Luke ends his description of the church with the powerful phrase, “and the Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved” (v. 48).

One of the primary benefits of gathering regularly is the encouragement gained to press on toward greater Christ-likeness.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

- Hebrews 10:24-25

The gathering of God's people while not always structured or programmed ought still to be purposeful. We need our brothers and sisters to “spur” us on toward greater Christ-likeness.

Comfort and Joy

A healthy fellowship grieves with those who grieve and rejoices with those who rejoice. It offers comfort to the hurting and shares the joy of the rejoicing. These are not simply warm sounding platitudes. To meet mourning with comfort and rejoicing with joy requires action. When a person suffers loss, sometimes the best thing we can do is sit with them upon the ash heap, so to speak, as Job's friends did. Rejoicing in someone's good news can be as simple yet meaningful as a well-timed card.

But offering comfort and joy will at times be more costly and God's people must grasp their resources loosely so they may use them to bless their brothers and sisters. Luke's description of the church at Jerusalem is helpful here. "And all who believed were together and had all things in common [*that is, they shared what they had*]. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need" (Acts 2:44-45).

Throughout history, when the church has been healthiest she has been characterized by an outpouring of generosity both within and without. We know from historical records that during the first several centuries of the church's life Roman authorities begrudgingly acknowledged the unusually generous way that Christians cared for each other. Oh that the church might once again have the same reputation!

Conflict Resolution

A church is a collection of saved sinners. And wherever sinners gather there is sure to be sin. When people sin there will inevitably be conflict. To expect a church to be free from conflict is a fools game and will end only in disappointment. This is why so many people flit from church to church. They are hoping to find a place that in reality does not exist. They are hoping for a church where their fellow sinners will yield to their expectations. So, instead of working to resolve the conflicts that can and do arise they flee elsewhere for a fresh start. This common act of self preservation is a gross perversion of the gospel.

Failing to resolve conflict in the manner called for in Scripture...

- *Withholds love* – We demonstrate that we love our grudge or our pride or our sense of security more than we love the one with whom we have conflict.
- *Withholds forgiveness* – This is a grievous sin since Jesus has forgiven us of so much.
- *Withholds obedience to Christ* – Working to be reconciled to our brothers and sisters is a command from the Lord.

Jesus gives very specific instructions regarding conflict resolution. The Lord is specific enough that His words need no additional commentary.

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be

established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

- Matthew 18:15-17

Congregational Accountability

One of the most oft abused texts in the Bible is Matthew 7:1 in which Jesus says, “Judge not, that you be not judged.” It is abused when taken out of context as a shield against correction or accountability of any kind. We should certainly not be judgmental, that is hypocritically criticizing the weaknesses of others while our own. But that is a far cry from the kind of healthy accountability that Scripture calls for in the church. Jesus’ words in Matthew 18 and the instructions of I Corinthians five and six clearly tell us that the church is to exercise judgment within the fellowship.

Christians are supposed to be very different from the world. Our witness depends in part on our consistency to what we profess to believe. When Christians flagrantly violate what God has clearly revealed in His Word they harm the witness of the church and damage the reputation of God. It is clear from Paul’s instructions to the church at Corinth that those guilty of public and harmful sins who refuse to repent ought to be removed from the fellowship of God’s people until their hearts are so burdened that they turn from their sin and seek restoration. Paul writes:

Let him who has done this be removed from among you. For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced on the one who did such a thing...[You] are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

- I Cor. 5:2b-5

But Paul is not finished. He goes on to write:

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people – not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler – not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

- I Cor. 5:9-13

John Dagg, an early Southern Baptist leader observed that, “When discipline leaves a church, Christ goes with it.”