

## **Glorifying God in the Church by our Fellowship - Acts 2:42-47**

*Preached by Pastor Phil Layton at Gold Country Baptist Church on March 30, 2008*

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John Fawcett understood and experienced biblical fellowship in a deep way

- He was born in the year 1739 in England.
- At the age of 16 he was converted under the preaching of George Whitefield, perhaps the greatest traveling preaching evangelist in modern history. John Fawcett himself felt the call to the ministry and he also became a gifted preacher.
- At the age of 26, John Fawcett and his new bride, Mary, began their ministry at an impoverished Baptist church in Wainsgate. Though the people were poor and lacked resources to adequately support him, they compensated for this lack by their faithfulness and warm fellowship.
- After seven years of faithful service in meager circumstances, his reputation as a powerful preacher and writer and scholar had spread even to the attention of King George III who appreciated his writings. Pastor John received a call to the large and influential Carter's Lane Baptist Church in London. After a lengthy and difficult decision process, they decided to accept the call.
- The wagons were loading with their few possessions, and their people came for a final farewell. The tears were flowing, and many expressed their love to the pastor and pleaded with him to reconsider.
- Touched by this great outpouring of love, he and his wife began to weep. Finally Mrs. Fawcett exclaimed, "O John, I just can't bear this. They need us so badly here." "God has spoken to my heart, too!" he said. "Tell them to unload the wagon! We cannot break these wonderful ties of fellowship."
- This experience inspired Fawcett to write a hymn: "*Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love! The fellowship of kindred mind is like to that above.*"
- John and Mary Fawcett carried on their faithful ministry in the little village of Wainsgate for a total of 54 years. The church was humble and tiny, but the fellowship was blessed. It's reported that the King promised Pastor John any benefit that could be conferred. But the offer was declined with this statement: "I have lived among my own people, enjoying their love; God has blessed my labors among them, and I need nothing which even a king could supply." It's a wonderful story behind the wonderful words:

Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love! The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.  
 Before our Father's throne we pour our ardent prayers;  
 our fears, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares.  
 We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear; and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.  
 When we asunder part it gives us inward pain; but we shall still be joined in heart, and hope to meet again.<sup>1</sup>

Do those words express your heart this morning? Is that how you view Christian fellowship in the body? Can you sing truthfully the words of the 3<sup>rd</sup> stanza that within Christ's body "our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear"? Do you seek to bear each others' burdens? Do we sympathize and empathize and pray for each other and express as the 2<sup>nd</sup> line says "our fear, our hopes, our aims are one, our comforts and our cares"? Do we have "kindred minds" as the first verse says, and are our hearts bound together in Christian love?

What is the blessed tie that binds our hearts together? What is this blessed fellowship that John Fawcett knew and sung about and that the New Testament speaks about?

*In Acts 2, we have its first and best snapshot in Scripture.*

#### OUTLINE:

1. **The Definition of Fellowship in God's Word**
2. **The Devotion to Fellowship by God's Church**
3. **The Duty and Delight of Fellowship for God's Glory**

First, the definition. To define fellowship, what better place to begin than the first place in the Bible that we find this word “fellowship” (*koinonia*) – Acts 2:42. The original language word *koinonia* interestingly does not occur in any of the four gospels, the first time it's used is here on the Day of Pentecost, the day the church was born, it appears when the Holy Spirit came in unique power and began His New Covenant ministry indwelling believers. This fellowship is produced by the Holy Spirit, and *it is characteristic of* those who have the Holy Spirit. In fact, it's sometimes called “fellowship of the Spirit” in Paul's writings (2 Cor 13:14, Phil 2:1). After this word first appears in Acts 2, it is used by every other NT writer afterwards. Fellowship marked the early church as one of its first four characteristics – there are four listed in this text, and fellowship is 2<sup>nd</sup> on the list.

Acts 2:42 (NASB95)

<sup>42</sup>They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to **fellowship**, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

This is the first verse that speaks of what the first church looked like. Back in January, I preached a whole message on this chapter which I would refer you to if you weren't here to get the whole flow. The historical context is the day the church was founded as Peter preaches Christ in Jerusalem. There were about 3,000 souls saved by God that one day, baptized, added to the body by God. Verse 42 gives us in one sentence a compelling summary statement of what this amazing first church looked like, and what stood out second to teaching or doctrine in the list was fellowship. If fellowship is this important, we need to begin with a **Definition of Fellowship**.

As I've been using that word “fellowship” each of you already have something in your minds, based on the pre-conceived connotations you have of the word, based on your background. For many, fellowship equals **food**, maybe even a particular type of food and drink. Howard Hendricks once jokingly asked “How did the early church fellowship without coffee and donuts?”

I've heard a pastor say that growing up in his Christian circle he always thought the word “fellowship” meant red punch and cookies and hard metal folding chairs, because everytime he heard the word “fellowship” growing up in their church they went to the fellowship hall and had red punch and cookies and broke out the cold hard metal folding chairs. When the word “fellowship” was used in other circles and churches or contexts without those things, he was confused as to whether it was real fellowship without the right colored punch and right type of cookies and right type of chair. Of course he later began to realize as he grew up that those things are not part of the dictionary definition of fellowship.

If food is the most common idea people have about fellowship, second most common would be **fun**. Food and fun times, good times. Those two often go together; socializing or social events. Maybe when I use the word “fellowship” you think of youth group bowling parties, or a church picnic, or some church-sponsored social activity, or playing games in a Christian atmosphere, or small talk or chatting with someone about the past weeks. Now, we all *should* have fun. I love to. Certainly there’s nothing necessarily wrong with any of those things, but according to the Bible, those things are not what “fellowship” is. Those fun activities *can include fellowship for some who understand and pursue what true fellowship is*, but fellowship is not an activity or program or party.

Last night many of us enjoyed an informal time as a church where we gathered to sing hymns together, and afterwards we ate ice cream and talked with each other. Probably some of you were involved in spiritual fellowship last night, and some of you weren’t. I don’t mean some of you talked to others, and some didn’t – the question is not so much *whether* we talk to other Christians but *what* we talk to other Christians about.

When you’re with other Christians you know, do you discuss everything except *spiritual* things, everything except the things of God or what God is doing in your life or what God is teaching you in His Word? There is nothing wrong with simple socializing or just talking and having fun with each other and talking about other things, but let’s not confuse that with spiritual fellowship. Fun and fellowship are not the same thing. Food and fellowship are not synonyms. I love having fun. And if you know me, you know I love food. But we do ourselves a great disservice if we think those things *are* fellowship or substitutes for the real thing.

J. I. Packer writes: ‘It is not a good sign when a person sees no difference between sucking sweets and eating a square meal. Equally it is not a good sign when Christians see no difference between social activities in Christian company and what the New Testament calls fellowship in Christ.’<sup>2</sup>

Don Whitney clarifies: ‘The church needs socializing, and so does the individual Christian. But in practice the church has often accepted socializing as a substitute for fellowship, almost forfeiting our spiritual birthright as children of God for something far less valuable ... God intends for every Christian to enjoy the therapeutic sweetness of fellowship. And the reservoir God made where we may drink these refreshing waters is in the local church’<sup>3</sup>

Maybe this statement will help our def:

Fellowship is not just a planned activity, it’s a purposeful spiritual interaction.  
Communion we have with Christians flows from our common union in Christ.

Even unbelievers can socialize, but the Bible uses this word “fellowship” for something only *believers* can partake in.

When I say it’s not a planned activity, I don’t mean that actions are not a part of fellowship, because they are - fellowship must include active interaction. But it’s important to think outside of official church functions and to just think of how you interact with Christians in your life who you know, and especially those you have some relationship with, which our actions flow out of.

You could read dozens of dictionaries, and reference works, and articles on fellowship as I have, and what you'll find is that there are two basic parts of the Greek word *koinonia*:

- **Having a share in / with (common life)**
  - **Giving a share / participating (to common good)**
- \*Notice that "sharing" is part of both – key word: sharing

In other words, it is a two-way street, it's not merely one-sided or passive. One dictionary says this word 'is always used of active participation, where the result depends on the cooperation of the receiver as well as the action of the giver.'<sup>4</sup>

Let's take apart each of those two parts of the definition. We see both of these as Acts 2 continues.

**Having a Share in /with (common life)**

<sup>44</sup> And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common;

The word "common" (v. 44) is the root word *koinos* we get *koinonia* from. This is what their fellowship looked like: they were together, the v. says "all things in common," which in the context, I think means all *spiritual* things, the eternal things that matter. This led them to share their material things with each other, too (v. 45).

The things we all have in common are not the same ideas or preferences about everything earthly and temporary. N.T. fellowship was not based solely on similar jobs or backgrounds or political persuasions or similar views about homeschooling or similar hobbies or rooting for the same basketball team during March madness. Those things may contribute to friendship on a human level, but biblical fellowship goes to a whole other level. It's not based on a common ground that is social, economic, ethnic, intellectual, cosmetic, or anything else superficial. It is *spiritual*, and it's based on the common life we have in Christ, the same Holy Spirit in all of us, the same Lord, the same gospel.

This is an inward unity, not an outward uniformity. This is based on the internal common life we share, not the external things where there is significant variety among believers. Church unity is not the same thing as *uniformity*, and it's not the same thing as *unanimity* – we don't all look or think exactly the same way and that's actually good for fellowship amidst some differences on secondary matters.

If we have the essentials right, I like the old motto: "In essentials, unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things, charity."

Christians may not see eye to eye on everything, but they should walk arm in arm when they have the essential things in common.

One writer points out that the term common in this verse 'does not refer to what believers have in common with each other, but what they have in common in Christ. What unites us as believers is not primarily our ... views, our cultural preferences, or our denominational affiliation. What unites us in Christ *is Christ!*'<sup>5</sup>

<sup>46</sup>Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple

This fellowship continued with one mind or one accord in the temple, which makes clear it was a spiritual union, a like-mindedness in pursuing God's truth and the things in v. 42: devotion together to teaching, fellowship, Lord's Table, prayer.

Those of you in our adult Sunday School class on 1 John are by now familiar that the epistle begins by saying in v. 3:

what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have **fellowship** with us; and indeed our **fellowship** is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. (1 John 1:3-4)

True believers all have fellowship of the Spirit with God and His Son and that's the beginning of and basis for their fellowship with each other, and that's what makes our joy complete.

*That's the first half of the definition: Having a share in / with (common life), the second half is Giving a share / participating (to common good)*

In secular Greek, at the time the N.T. was written, the word *koinonia* was used in writings to refer to a sharing participation:

- People who had a share in things like business enterprises, legal relationships, citizenship, marriage, and especially friendship.
- A joint-partnership in a business venture in which all parties actively participate to ensure the success of the endeavor
- A marriage contract where husband and wife agree to a joint-participation to and for each other
- There's a touching use of the verbal form of this word in a 4<sup>th</sup> century inscription, where a man wrote to his wife who had died "as with you alone I shared my life." What a beautiful thing it is when a believer saved by grace can come to the end of his life in the same way and say to his Lord who he shared fellowship with "as with you alone I have shared my life."<sup>6</sup>

Acts 2:45 makes clear what Christians had in common produced a *common concern* for each other and caring that led to their sharing

<sup>45</sup> and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were **sharing them with all, as anyone might have need**.

The word "sharing" is very closely associated with fellowship. In fact, the word *koinonia* is sometimes even translated as "sharing"

2 Corinthians 8:3-4 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, <sup>4</sup> they [the Macedonians] urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of **sharing** in this service to the saints.

ESV translates *koinonia* here as "taking part in ..." or NASB "participation"

2 Corinthians 9:13 (NASB95)

<sup>13</sup> Because of the proof given by this ministry, they will glorify God for *your* obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your **contribution** to them and to all,

This word *koinonia* includes physical or material giving or sharing, and in other places includes spiritual giving or sharing as well:

Hebrews 13:16 (NASB95)

<sup>16</sup> And do not neglect doing good and **sharing**, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Philemon 6 (NASB95)

<sup>6</sup> and I pray that the **fellowship** of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.

ESV, NKJV "I pray that the **sharing of your faith** may become effective"

NIV "I pray that you may be **active in sharing your faith**"

KJV "That the **communication of thy faith** may become effectual"

Giving or sharing or communicating is an important part of this word fellowship. Many people come to a church or fellowship, looking for what they can get, but the biblical emphasis of this word is what we GIVE.

Sharing spiritual things with each other, communicating about our faith and spiritual life with others, is something Hebrews commands us not to neglect.

Jerry Bridges hits the nail on the head when he wrote: 'If we are to regain the New Testament concept of fellowship, we must learn to get beyond the temporal issues of the day and begin to share with each other on a level that will enhance our spiritual relationships with one another and with God.'<sup>7</sup>

This doesn't mean, as Don Whitney has clarified, "every conversation between Christians must include references to Bible verses, recent answers to prayer, or insights from today's devotional time. But I've observed that many otherwise committed Christians are so independent in their practice of the spiritual disciplines that they almost never talk about such things on a heart level. And without personal interaction about the mutual interests, problems, and aspirations of discipleship, our spiritual lives are impoverished. Then at the end of the day, having merely socialized, we think we have had fellowship. Only Christians can have the rich banquet of *koinonia*, but too often we settle for little more than the fast-food kind of socializing which even the world can experience.'<sup>8</sup>

To review, spiritual interaction or fellowship or communion we share with Christians flows from our common union in Christ, as I said earlier. If I had to define fellowship by just one word it would be *sharing*, and we saw that this sharing has two basic aspects:

- Having a share in / with (common life - *automatic*)
- Giving a share / participating (to common good - *action*)

*So we've seen the Definition of Fellowship in God's Word, now ...*

## **2. The Devotion to Fellowship by God's Church**

Look back at how our passage began at the start of verse 42 again. It says of the church: "They were continually devoting themselves" – the NKJV says they "continued steadfastly" in fellowship.

The original language and even the verb tense in this passage stresses a continuous pattern in these verses, and the word translated “devoting” or “continued steadfastly” speaks of:

- remaining constantly
- adhering or sticking together with strength (reminds me of what Corrie ten Boom said: “Be united with other Christians. A wall with loose bricks is not good. The bricks must be cemented together” – that’s also true spiritually)
- a steadfast and single-minded faithfulness to a certain course of action
- It was a word used for doing something persistently even in the face of opposition
- to desire something intensely, pursuing a desired object
- This word is used in Acts 1:14 to describe the strong devotion and singular desire of the 120 in the upper room as they gathered together in earnest expectant prayer

What were they devoted to in Acts 2:42? The first thing mentioned is teaching, which is consistent with the primacy and priority of God’s Word we see throughout the New Testament. It’s no surprise that we see prayer later in the verse, but notice that the second mark of the early church’s devotion and focus was “fellowship.” If “breaking of bread” in the next phrase refers to the Lord’s table meal, as many scholars believe, it is interesting that such an important place is given to fellowship, even listed before the ordinances and prayer. Our *union* in Christ comes before *communion*; in fact it is the requirement of the Lord’s table that only those can partake who are in fellowship with Christ, in union with Him by faith. Those can take communion after they have examined themselves and confessed known sin, those in fellowship with Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:16 (NASB95)

<sup>16</sup> Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a **sharing** [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a **sharing** in the body of Christ?

“communion” (NKJV) or “participation” (ESV, NIV),

### What does devotion to fellowship look like?

<sup>46</sup> Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals **together with gladness** and sincerity of heart, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Verse 46 seems to indicate the big group was able to often gather in the large temple. But those big corporate gatherings were not enough, v. 46 also says they pursued and enjoyed fellowship “from house to house” – smaller groups and gatherings in homes are also essential to fellowship. And the end of the verse says “taking their meals together with gladness.”

This is New Testament Christianity, beloved:

- In v. 42 their fellowship was prominent, second only to the teaching of the Word of God
- In v. 44 they were together, with common spiritual unity
- In v. 45 they were sharing sacrificially with those in need
- In v. 46 they were continuing with spiritual like minds, not only in the big corporate gatherings but in smaller more intimate settings, in their houses, eating meals together, etc.

*This is New Testament Christianity. Anything different in us is a departure from the first church.*

A “Sunday-only Christian” is an anomaly. If we never fellowship Monday thru Saturday, that is an aberration, unhealthy. Acts 2 is not just interesting history. This is what we all need.

John Stott points out that from the time of Genesis 2:18 ‘People need fellowship ... But this basic, biblically recognized need is not completely met by Sunday churchgoing, or even the larger midweek meetings by the church ... large crowds ... tend to be aggregations rather than congregations – aggregations of unrelated persons ... crowds can actually perpetuate aloneness, instead of curing it ... it is lone members of the congregation who hold themselves aloof from a more intimate Christian fellowship, who are likely to stunt or damage their spiritual progress.’<sup>9</sup>

Don’t tell me you would like to fellowship but you don’t because no one invites you over. *You invite someone over!* YOU can talk to someone about getting together, or meeting somewhere, or praying together. There’s many opportunities for fellowship and service here, but you need to make the effort.

It starts by being more involved than just sitting through the morning worship service.

Here’s some practical ways to help you devote to fellowship:

- Talk to people after the service and when you do talk to people, why not talk about something you learned from the message or were reminded of, or that impacted you, or something you need to think about more
- I remember some powerful sermons I would hear and when a buddy would come by right after talking about the Laker game I wanted to slug him (I do love sports, just not then)
- Be intentional in your interactions with other. Have people over. And when you do, ask them how long they’ve known the Lord, how they came to know the Lord, what the Lord has been doing in their life lately? Whether they open up to you or not, you can share what the Lord is doing in you.
- Ask your fellow believer how you can pray for them. And then do pray for them, and when you see them again, ask how that issue was that you were praying about
- Ask your brother or sister what they have been reading lately, or if there’s any spiritual books in the past they’ve read that really impacted them spiritually.
- I think it goes without saying that you need to have a living relationship with the Lord and a heart that desires the things of the Lord to have deep fellowship. And when you talk with others who are pursuing the Lord, that encourages you.
- Maybe you can initiate gatherings with some friends of the same gender, even simply two or three other individuals who might meet for breakfast or coffee on some scheduled basis to pray for and encourage each other, open up to friends you trust of areas you need help in. Maybe you go through a good book together on spiritual disciplines. Both my wife and I have benefited from many such fellowships.

Proverbs 27:17 says as iron sharpens iron, so one sharpens another

Solomon also said in Ecclesiastes 4:9-10:

*Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!*

Don't wait till you fall. Seek spiritual relationships now (they may help you avoid a fall).

A historical argument for the value of smaller group fellowship can be made from many famous movements of God in history that had beginnings in the intimacy of such fellowship. The English Reformation can trace its roots to a group of men who met at White Horse Inn in Cambridge to study the New Testament in the original language. George Whitefield and John Wesley were both very active in small groups which greatly impacted their respective ministries and influences. There were Praying Societies in Scotland, there were fellowship meetings of the East African revival. And you could easily multiply many more examples – most men or woman who have made a great difference for God in their lives can point to one or several individuals who impacted them through intimate fellowship, spiritual discipleship.

But this is not just true of extraordinary events and people, this is the ordinary way most of us grow, by personal spiritual interaction and fellowship on a smaller scale than during the big church service. I'm under no illusion that our Sunday morning worship service is sufficient to grow your spiritual life the way God desires. It's important, and you need to be here, but it's not enough.

Jaime and I know this very personally from our own spiritual journey:

- Both of us grew up in Christian homes, and went to Christian schools from kindergarten through college, and we attended TMC, the school whose wonderful choir ministered to us in our Good Friday service
- We attended one of the best teaching Christian colleges and after our marriage became members at Grace Community Church, sitting under John MacArthur's preaching every week, one of the top expository preachers in the world since the passing of Martyn Lloyd-Jones.
- But it wasn't until we intentionally chose to get involved in a fellowship group, and committed to a smaller group Bible study, that we really began to grow.
- It was a large church (in the thousands) and they knew the AM service does not meet our biblical need, so they have fellowship groups more like this room, and within those there are smaller groups where spiritual relationships can develop outside the traditional services of church.
- Then we sought even smaller groups (guys-guys, girls-girls, few or even one-on-one ... and we grew a lot)

Fellowship is the soil in which our spiritual lives can flourish.

One pastor has shared his experience after a service with a group of men he listened in on their conversation, typical in my experience:

I noticed about a dozen men collected into an informal circle discussing something that obviously interested them all ... "Well," said the first one I heard, "the doctrine of election really opened up to me when I read Romans 9."

They weren't talking about work or football, but rather the Bible and theology. As I listened further, they talked with each other about family devotions, the value and methods of keeping a journal, the Cross, prayer, and how to take notes during a sermon. They were whites, blacks, and Hispanics; truck drivers, executives, and farm laborers, men who otherwise probably wouldn't know each other and would have almost nothing in common [from earthly standpoint], but who hold the dearest things in life together because of their common fellowship with Jesus Christ. And they conversed about spiritual matters as naturally as they would about their children or their lawns.<sup>10</sup>

That's what fellowship can look like. That's been my experience and it can be yours if you devote to fellowship with God's church, and pursue these things and pray as the Puritans used to pray that God would give them at least one "bosom friend" as they called it, a spiritual friend "with whom they could share absolutely everything and maintain a full-scale prayer-partner relationship; and with that they craved, and regularly set up, group conversations about divine things."<sup>11</sup>

Not every Christian will you unburden your heart to, but we need to be pursuing spiritual relationships and fellowship and it starts simply with sharing things relating to God and His Word.

### **3. The Duty and Delight of Fellowship for God's Glory**

It is a biblical duty to have fellowship. But the Bible also makes clear there is a type of fellowship we should not have or devote to.

2 Corinthians 6:14-17 (NASB95)

<sup>14</sup>Do not be bound together [or unequally yoked] with unbelievers; for what **partnership** have righteousness and lawlessness, or what **fellowship** has light with darkness? <sup>15</sup>Or what **harmony** has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer **in common with** an unbeliever? <sup>16</sup>Or what **agreement** has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE." <sup>17</sup>"Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE," says the Lord. "AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you.

All those expressions (yoking or binding together, partnership, harmony, in common with, agreement) are paralleled with fellowship and help us understand what the word means and reminds us we can only have spiritual communion with those who have a common union with Christ. We are not to have intimate biblical fellowship with unbelievers, sharing their sinful lifestyles and values. We *should be* friendly and loving to unbelievers and should evangelize them, but we must separate from their values.

Our duty to fellowship is those in the body of Christ. And it's not just a duty, there is a delight and deep joy that comes with it our fellowship of giving or sharing with others in need, even meeting physical or material needs. And most importantly, God gets glory

2 Corinthians 9:7-13 (NASB95) <sup>7</sup>Each one *must* [give] just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a **cheerful giver**.

<sup>8</sup> And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed; <sup>9</sup> as it is written, “HE SCATTERED ABROAD, HE GAVE TO THE POOR, HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS ENDURES FOREVER.” <sup>10</sup> Now He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness; <sup>11</sup> you will be enriched in everything for all liberality, which through us is **producing thanksgiving to God**. <sup>12</sup> For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also **overflowing through many thanksgivings to God**. <sup>13</sup> Because of the proof given by this ministry, **they will glorify God** for *your* obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and **for the liberality of your contribution** [*koinonia* – “liberal sharing” NKJV or “generosity of sharing” ESV / NIV] to them and to all,

The reason we were created is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever, and it’s when we seek to glorify God through obedience to fellowship and other duties He gives us for our good, it is *as we glorify Him* that we also enjoy Him. It’s not just in forever, in heaven, that God wants us to enjoy Him, He wants us to delight in Him now, be thankful now, be cheerful now as we give faithfully and generously to the Lord and to those in His body. God doesn’t need it or benefit by us, we need it, we benefit when He’s glorified

Romans 15 also makes clear that what God has given to us we are to share with other, and be of mutual benefit and blessing to each other

Paul began his letter to the Romans saying:

<sup>11</sup> For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; <sup>12</sup> that is, that I may be encouraged together with you *while* among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine. (Rom. 1:11-12)

In Romans 15:24, Paul expresses this desire for mutual fellowship

<sup>24</sup> whenever I go to Spain—for **I hope to see you** in passing, and to **be helped on my way there by you**, when **I have first enjoyed your company** for a while

<sup>25</sup> but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. <sup>26</sup> For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a **contribution** [*diakonia*] for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. <sup>27</sup> Yes, they were **pleased to do so**, and they are indebted to them [*they enjoyed doing it, it was not just duty but delight*]. For if the Gentiles have **shared** [verb. form *diakoneo*] **in their spiritual things**, they are indebted to minister to them **also in material things**.

That’s a great picture of fellowship that expresses concern for the whole being and person. And you not only long for fellowship so that you can share your gifts for the benefit of others, but you know how much you need it in your own spiritual life as well.

Esther Edwards, daughter of Jonathan Edwards, wrote this letter in the 1750s to a friend, describing a recent evening of fellowship:

O my dear how Charming tis to set and hear such excellent persons convers on the [experiences] of religion. It seemed like old times ... I esteem *religious Conversation* one of the best helps to keep up religion in the soul, excepting secret devotion, I don’t know but the very best – Then what a lamentable thing that tis so neglected by God’s own children.<sup>12</sup>

It is a lamentable thing, and not just for our own sake, but ultimately for the sake of God’s name and glory, which was Paul’s great concern in this chapter:

Romans 15:5-10 (NASB95)

<sup>5</sup> Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the **same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus**, <sup>6</sup> so that with **one accord** you may **with one voice glorify the God** and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us **to the glory of God**. <sup>8</sup> For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers, <sup>9</sup> and **for the Gentiles to glorify God** for His mercy; as it is written, “THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME.” <sup>10</sup> Again he says, “REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE.”

Ultimately the bottom line is always the glory of God, and this is true of our fellowship. God’s design for the church is not isolationism or individualism, He gave us the gift of fellowship because together we glorify Him more than we do on our own as solitary saints. Verse 6 says the motive of Paul’s prayer and the purpose of our oneness in Christ is so that with one accord we all with one voice would glorify God. The reason Christ became a servant as v. 8-9 says, was ultimately for us to glorify God, and God is glorified when Jews and Gentiles fellowship together and praise Him together, despite their differences ethnically or outwardly, there is a unity in Christ. And v. 27 says we are indebted to each other to be sharing spiritually or practically, we are indebted to each other in fellowship. This gives God glory.

Hebrews 13:15-16 (NASB95)

<sup>15</sup> Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. <sup>16</sup> And do not neglect doing good and **sharing** [*koinonia*], for with such sacrifices **God is pleased**.

...  
<sup>20</sup> Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, *even* Jesus our Lord, <sup>21</sup> equip you in every **good thing to do His will**, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, **through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever**. Amen.

And when our chief end is to glorify God, we also find that we enjoy God as we experience the happy blessedness of obedience. As 1 John 1:4 said, fellowship leads to our joy being full. We have gladness when we’re centered on God’s glory. Soli deo Gloria!

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<sup>1</sup> K. W. Osbeck, *Amazing Grace : 366 Inspiring Hymn Stories for Daily Devotions*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1990), p. 66; see also Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations* (Garland TX: Bible Communications, 1979), 1672; also Michael P. Green, *Illustrations for Bilical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> J. I. Packer, “Body Life,” *Tenth*, July 1981, 11:3, 63 (cited by Whitney, 150).

<sup>3</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church: Participating Fully in the Body of Christ* (Chicago, Ill.: Moody, 1996), p. 150, 152.

<sup>4</sup> Sinclair B. Ferguson and J. I. Packer, eds. *New Dictionary of Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), p. 254.

<sup>5</sup> Larry Dixon, “The Doctrine of the Church,” *Emmaus Journal* Volume 13/2 (Winter 2004), p. 248.

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.preceptaustin.org/philippians\\_13-5.htm#1:5](http://www.preceptaustin.org/philippians_13-5.htm#1:5)

<sup>7</sup> Jerry Bridges, *The Crisis of Caring: Recovering the Meaning of True Fellowship* (Phillipsburgh, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 1987 p.b.), p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Whitney, 151.

<sup>9</sup> John Stott, *The Living Church: Convictions of a Lifelong Pastor* (IVP, 2007), p. 87

<sup>10</sup> Whitney, 152.

<sup>11</sup> J. I. Packer, *God’s Words* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 1981), p. 200.

<sup>12</sup> Iain Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 406.