

Lesson 5

Devoted to Fellowship

Acts 2.42b

Introduction

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer.

One of the greatest challenges facing the church of our time is increasing involvement in the life of the local church. We are busy, rich, overworked, and often distracted, which can make us push our spiritual pursuits down the priority list to a mere subsection of life, rather than them *being our life*. More than ever our families are overloaded. Many professionals bring their work home with them (or work from home) and work outside of normal business hours. Years ago, we left our work at work. Now, we seem very comfortable mixing the two together. For those with children still at home, school and recreational sports, music, and school club activities dominate evenings and weekends. Add in Wednesday evening Bible study and many families have something to do every night of the week. With all these pressures, it is not surprising to see brothers and sisters disconnected from and relating superficially to the rest of their spiritual family.

Over the course of my lifetime, it feels as if life with the church has become optional. It is as if we say we have our life, and *if we can, we'll fit the church in too*. More and more have become comfortable missing any service or church activity outside of the Sunday morning worship. The other services and gatherings are seen as suggestions. The impact of this is far reaching. Many Christians only have superficial relationships with fellow believers and church leaders. This makes things awkward when life's troubles and difficulties mount as it is often uncomfortable sharing things with people we don't know well. Disconnected members also impact the growth of the church, being content to leave the work of making disciples to a minority of paid experts and leaders who serve the congregation.

There are many reasons the churches of Christ find themselves in stagnation and decline. But certainly, the idea that one can live his or her spiritual life without the church and still thrive is one of them. If the church of the twenty-first century is to reverse the trend-line, individual church members must come to follow the early church in its *devotion to fellowship*.

What is Fellowship?

Simply put, fellowship is spiritual togetherness. It is the experience of oneness. It is a yearning to be together. Each member of the local church is to have a personal and emotional connection with the work that is being conducted and with others inside the congregation who are participating in its various works.

In Acts 2.42, *fellowship* comes from a word that means “communion,” “association,” or “partnership.”²² When a person becomes a Christian, he or she enters a partnership with Jesus, as well as every other Christian. Another dictionary describes it as a “close association involving mutual interests and sharing, association, communion, close relationship.”²³ Practically speaking, it is the interaction of believers with each other in the exercising of their spiritual gifts. It is the spiritual responsibility of the individual believer to *provoke* one another to *love and good works*, Hebrews 10.24. This responsibility is not optional.

What Does It Mean to be Part of the Church?

Through the salvation He provides, God has called us to the very special relationship, purpose, and place of His church. We are not part of some cold, strictly organized, and mechanical organization ... we are part of the living and dynamic family of God, who has called us out of darkness to be His special people ... His sons and daughters. We are the “called out body” of people who belong to the Lord. We need to make it personal and feel the warmth of God’s love and desire for having *a people* that is His very own.

The common term Paul used that we use in English today as “church,” *ekklēsia*, comes from a Greek compound word that means “out of a calling.” Secularly, it described gatherings of people comprised of religious, political, or other types of assemblies. Paul took the secular word and used it in a spiritual sense to refer to God’s people. The church is not an organization or institution ... it is a living and dynamic *body*, people. It is important that we come to think of the church in this manner.

How Paul Used the Word:

To Refer to Christians in a Universal Way

The “church” can refer to belong to “the totality of God’s people under the New Covenant.”²⁴ Paul used it to refer to the church this way in:

- Ephesians 1.22-23: God has *appointed him as head over everything for the church.*
- Ephesians 5.23: Christ *is the head of the church.*
- 1 Timothy 3.15: Paul wrote to Timothy so that he would know how *people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household, which is the church of the living God.*

All Christians are part of the church in a spiritual sense. We are the called-out body. But it is important to understand that the same word is used to speak of the local assembly. Not only does the church mean all believers, it also can refer to a group of believers in each area.²⁵

A Local Group of Believers

²² LSJ, p. 970.

²³ BDAG, p. 552.

²⁴ Lewis, Jack P. *Basic Beliefs*: Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 2013, p. 199.

²⁵ MacArthur, John. “The First Fellowship, Acts 2.42-47.” *John MacArthur Sermon Archive*. Panorama City, CA: Grace to You, 2014.

Thinking chronologically, Paul's first usage of *ekklēsia* appears in 1 Thessalonians 1.1 as he greets the saints in Thessalonica:²⁶ *Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy: To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Grace to you and peace.*

Note here how Paul describes the unique identity of *assembly* or *gathering* in Thessalonica. They are *in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. They belong to God. Not only that, but they are also in Christ. Those in the *ekklēsia* wear His name. They have been called from the kingdom of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ, Colossians 1.13.

Their assembling was not just something in theoretical terms . . . it was something that could be physically identified. *Ekklēsia* applies to “an actual gathering of people, or to a group that gathers when viewed as a regularly constituted meeting.”²⁷ When these people gathered for worship and fellowship, Paul expected his writing to be read *to all the brothers and sisters*, 1 Thessalonians 5.27, and to greet one another *with a holy kiss*, 5.26. Throughout the New Testament we find the apostles specifying local churches in places all over Europe and Asia. For example, we read of churches in Galatia, Judea, Corinth, Thessalonica, etc.

God Designed His Church for Believers to be a Part of a Local Assembly

There should be no dichotomy between being a Christian and being a part of the local church. If a brother or sister is not involved in the life of the congregation, he or she is being disobedient to the concept of fellowship.

Fellowship is best understood by examining the “one-another” passages in the New Testament:

- Romans 12.10: *honor one another.*
- Romans 12.16: *live in harmony with one another.*
- Romans 13.8: *love one another.*
- Romans 14.19: *build up one another.*
- Romans 15.7: *welcome one another.*
- Romans 15.14: *instruct one another.*
- Romans 16.16: *greet one another.*
- Galatians 5.13: *serve one another through love.*
- Ephesians 4.2: *bearing with one another in love.*
- Ephesians 4.25: *we are members of one another.*
- Ephesians 4.32: *forgiving one another.*
- Ephesians 5.21: *submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.*

²⁶ Scholars assert that 1 Thessalonians is the “oldest document in the New Testament,” therefore it is the first of Paul's writings to the churches, dating to around 49-51 C.E.

See Ascough, Richard S. *1 & 2 Thessalonians: An Introduction and Study Guide (Encountering the Christ Group at Thessalonike)*. Edited by Tat-siong Benny Liew. Vol. 13. T&T Clark Study Guides to the New Testament. London; Oxford; New York; New Delhi; Sydney: Bloomsbury T&T Clark: An Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc; Bloomsbury, 2017, p. 3.

²⁷ Ascough, p. 124.

- Philippians 2.3: *consider one another as more important than yourselves.*
- Colossians 3.9: *do not lie to one another.*
- Colossians 3.13: *bearing with one another and forgiving each other...*
- Colossians 3.16: *teaching and admonishing one another...*
- 1 Thessalonians 4.9: *you are taught by God to love one another...*
- 1 Thessalonians 4.18: *encourage one another...*
- 1 Thessalonians 5.11: *build up one another...*
- Hebrews 3.13: *encourage one another daily...*
- 1 Peter 1.22: *from a pure heart love one another constantly...*
- 1 Peter 4.9: *be hospitable to one another without complaining...*
- 1 Peter 4.10: *use your gift to serve one another...*
- 1 Peter 5.5: *clothe yourselves with humility toward one another...*

The Apostles never envisioned spiritual life apart from other believers. As members of God's church we are expected to play an active role in the daily life of the local church.

What Share Do You Have in the Work of Your Congregation?

Is it just being present at worship services, Bible studies, and making your financial contribution? What kind of fellowship do you have with your congregation in its:

- Teaching program (children or adult)
- Evangelistic outreach?
- Encouragement of members?
- Visitation of one another?
- Service to widows and widowers?
- Mentorship and encouragement of its youth?

Fellowship is not just being at church. It is engaging in partnership your brothers and sisters in the church. Are you a **spectator** or **participant**?