

Session 1 — John MacArthur

March 5, 2014 — 10 a.m.

Jubilant Sykes — “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”

Hymns #18, 19

BIBLICAL FELLOWSHIP

I want to talk to you this morning about the issue of fellowship in the church.

The opportunity this morning is to raise your understanding of the responsibility of fellowship in the church.

1 Corinthians 12 — The very essence of the church is pictured in that image — the church is communal — intensely personal relationships with a spiritual thrust. We find that theme repeated in Paul’s letters — 1 Cor. 3; Eph. 4; Phil. 2. This is life in the church.

This is about the urgency of the matter of fellowship in the church.

Cf. Bonhoeffer’s book, *Life Together*. The book is not particularly theological, but I found it to be foundational and helpful, particularly in light of where he ended up — executed by the order of Himmler. In the process of his being moved from camp to camp to camp, he was separated from any fellowship, having lost contact with all other believers. “The physical contact of believers is...” “Let him who has such a privilege thank God on his knees.”

Even more, we are one body with one Head and one life. The metaphor of the body is only in the NT — a unique way to understand the church. Our fellowship is profound and real — a shared common life. It is essential. It is what Jesus prayed would be a reality (Jn. 17 — “that they may be one...”). That prayer was answered when the church was born. We are one in the way that He and the Father are One, and you could add the Holy Spirit (Phil. 2). Trinitarian fellowship is the model for life in the church. Shared life, truth, and power.

The terms for fellowship (κοινωνία) are spiritual relationships — community — copying the life of the Trinity. This is the heart of the church.

I don’t think that is the direction of the church today. The church is rapidly moving in the opposite direction. What threatens fellowship? Hyper privacy. While screens are getting bigger for the group event, they are also getting smaller for more privacy. In the next months, Google glasses will be released. Very private. Every person has become like a god, a creator of his own private world, a secret world of preferences, eliminating what he doesn’t want. A world of preferences — and temptations.

The iPhone is the most selfish necessity is ever devised. Once we used a telephone to *talk* to someone. You choose your music, your teachers, your entertainment, your Facebook friends, and like God you become the creator of your world, and you consign the world you reject to cyberspace. And this is devastating to fellowship.

“The language for friendship is hijacked by technology” (Carl Trueman) — This is the juvenilization of the church.

Try creating fellowship with this generation or the next. “They are self-created avatars...and real fellowship doesn’t exist in that.” Christianity doesn’t exist in privacy.

The evangelical church for decades has been trying to give the culture what it wants — and what it wants is deadly to fellowship. That’s why megachurches are stage shows in a dark building. Church life is falling victim to seductive self-design.

The first or second largest church in America is now an online church. For many, entitlement to their own view dominates. And that rules out truth, and real relationships. “Young millennials are leaving church but going toward Jesus.” (Giglio) — That’s too bad!

Cf. recent article by Kevin Miller in CT about Rob Bell, Donald Miller...

Even in the middle of a revival of reformed theology, we could be losing a whole generation to fellowship. Social media can be a tool for good, but it can also be a tool for disastrous evil. We are going to have to fight the battle against the privacy of social media, etc.

Here, then, is Fellowship 101.

1. What is the Basis of Fellowship?

Salvation is the basis of fellowship (**1 Jn. 1:3**). The proclamation of the gospel was so that we could have fellowship with other believers, the Father, Son, and Spirit. The goal is shared life, purpose, power, and ministry, not just individual salvation for people who are privileged then to do what they want. If someone is “out of fellowship” he is not a believer. We are in union, through salvation, with each other. If we are believers, we are in the fellowship. Every saved person is entitled to the full fellowship of the body. God has put our bodies together for spiritual fellowship.

John then draws a contrast — cf. 1:5ff. Either you are saved or lost and in the fellowship or not. Believers are always in the fellowship and in the light and always confessing sin and always being forgiven. This fellowship is forever. You may sin. You will sin (vv. 8, 10), but that’s not fatal because of 2:1-2. This fellowship is forever.

What determines our fellowship is what that man is by Christ...what Christ has done in both of us... (Bonhoeffer)

2. What is the Nature of Fellowship?

Cf. Acts 2:42ff — This is the reality of fellowship — togetherness and sharing even in a temporal way — they were continually devoting themselves to this. They were continually

together. The spiritual shared life cost them money. They gave to such an extent that they sold (liquidated) their property to share with one another.

The impact of it was that they were having favor with others (v. 47). It is a testimony to the world when the church lives in sacrificial care for one another (Jn. 13:34-35). This is still to be the character and life of the church. There will be a war on this issue; privacy is deadly and an entire generation is being raised to isolate itself.

3. What is the Symbol of Fellowship? (1 Cor. 10:16ff)

The symbol of our fellowship is the Lord's table. This is the great leveler. We all end up on our knees here. Communion looks back at the cross and presently at the fellowship of believers who have a common partnership in salvation. You cannot overemphasize the Lord's Table — not the ritual of it, but however often you do it, make much of it — looking at the cross and confessing sin (so as not to eat unworthily so the people are protected). Communion visualizes the fellowship, equally unworthy and redeemed by Him and sustained by Him. The Lord's Table levels and humbles us. And it celebrates our union with each other. Here is the life of the church together.

Make much of the Lord's Table. Treat it seriously. This is at the heart of our fellowship. Warn the believers and warn the non-believers.

4. What is the Danger to the Fellowship?

The danger to fellowship is sin. Sin devastates the fellowship. It brings discipline on the believer and shatters unity and restricts the unity and confuses the purpose and blights the testimony. Cf. 1 Cor. 11:29-30 — some might end up sick and dead because of the judgment of God. A little leaven leavens the whole loaf (1 Cor. 5). You have to shut people out of the symbol who don't confess all their sin. But they don't understand the significance of the fellowship of the body.

The first instruction to the church (where the church is first mentioned) addresses this (Mt. 18). The first time the church is mentioned is when individuals are told how to deal with those who are in sin — because sin devastates the church. The future of the church does not depend on relevance, branding, targeting, communication methods. The future of the church depends on the church's holiness. Deal with sin.

In 2 Cor. 12 you hear the cry of Paul's heart — cf. vv. 19-21. What burdened him? He wasn't looking for better means of communication. What burdened him was the purity of the church. This is hard work.

The future of your church is directly corresponding to your commitment to purity and holiness. Holiness brings Jesus Christ to church. Because where two or three are gathered together for discipline, Christ is there (Mt. 18). The danger to fellowship is sin — especially private sin and

the more private it is, the more devastating it is.

5. What is the Duty of Fellowship?

The duty of fellowship has a negative aspect (Mt. 18:6) — don't be the reason some believer stumbles into sin. It would be better to die a horrible death than do that! That's a warning. The world will devise means to cause believers to stumble into sin (v. 7). But believers don't want to do that (vv. 8-10). Don't lead another believer into sin (by flaunting liberty or by looking down on them or withholding from them what they need or ridiculing them or treating them with indifference or not addressing their sinfulness). We don't want to do that.

The duty of fellowship also has a positive aspect (Mt. 18:5) — receive other believers.

The reasons we are to do this is because of our relationship with angels (v. 10; cf. Heb. 1:14). Be careful how you treat another believer because the angels are watching. And we do this because we have a relationship with Christ (v. 5). And because of our relationship to God (vv. 12-14).

How do you care for one another in the body of Christ. You are called to never have a negative influence on other believers because of your relationship to angels, Christ, and God Himself. We are to be instruments of holiness in the lives of every other believer.

This embraces the “one anothers” of the NT. That's the fellowship. It's very personal.

6. What is the Result of Fellowship? (1 Jn. 1:4)

When you understand and cultivate fellowship, the result is joy.

Where you have a congregation of people pursuing fellowship, you have a manifest joy that transcends the aches and pains of life.