



Foundations of a Healthy Church

Fellowship

Questions for Discussion

- What are the things that come to mind when you hear the word “fellowship”?
- What are some things that make fellowship difficult?
- How have you seen fellowship done well?

Defining Fellowship

- The word most commonly translated “fellowship” in the New Testament is the Greek word κοινωνία, koinonia.
- However, this word is translated in multiple ways, exposing definitional dimensions.
- Below are a few verses in which this word is used; the word in green is the Greek word koinonia.
 - **Acts 2:42-43** ⁴²And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.
 - **1 Corinthians 10:16** ¹⁶The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?
 - **1 Corinthians 1:9** ⁹God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.
 - **Philippians 2:1** ¹So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy,
 - **Philippians 1:5** ⁵because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.
 - **1 John 1:3** ³that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.
 - **2 Corinthians 6:14** ¹⁴Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

- **Romans 15:26** ²⁶*For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some **contribution** for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.*
- **2 Corinthians 9:13** ¹³*By their approval of this service, they will glorify God because of your submission that comes from your confession of the gospel of Christ, and the generosity of your **contribution** for them and for all others...*
- **Question:** Based on these above verses, how would you define fellowship?
- **Some Definitions:**
 - Fellowship describes the unity and community of the church that can exist because of the gospel. As such, it is important to note that fellowship with other Christians can exist because God took initiative to bring us into right relationship with him. God the Father, through Jesus Christ and by the Spirit, has established, by his grace, a covenantal relationship with humanity. Those who believe the gospel are united in the Spirit through the Son to the Father (John 15:1-17; 17:1-26; 1 John 1:3-7).¹
 - The Greek term *koinōnia* means “that which is shared in common.” In secular Greek literature, *koinōnia* was used to describe the marriage bed and communal meals. In the New Testament, the word was used to denote the believers’ common participation, or “fellowship,” with the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.²
 - *Koinōnia* comes from an adjective which means ‘common,’ and, like ‘communion,’ its literal meaning is a *common* participation or sharing in anything.³
- **Summary definition:** Fellowship is communion with God and each other in the gospel, experienced through intentional investment in shared relationship and marked by sacrificial participation in shared mission.
- The church is the laboratory in which this shared identity, mission, and relationship are experienced and expressed.
- Our vertical relationship with the Lord has a direct effect on our relationships with one another, and in some instances, the opposite is also true:
 - **Matthew 6:14-15** ¹⁴*For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.*
 - **Ephesians 4:29-30** ²⁹*Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear. ³⁰And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*

¹ Kimble, Jeremy. 2018. “Fellowship in the Life of the Church.” In *Lexham Survey of Theology*, edited by Mark Ward, Jessica Parks, Brannon Ellis, and Todd Hains. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

² Carpenter, Eugene E., and Philip W. Comfort. 2000. In *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained*, 280. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

³ Hastings, James, John A. Selbie, John C. Lambert, and Shailer Mathews. 1909. In *Dictionary of the Bible*, 150. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.

- Fellowship with the Lord and with one another is a critical aspect of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ.
- **Question:** With these Scriptural themes in view, what must be true of us individually for our fellowship to be healthy corporately?
 - We must fight against individuality and isolationism.
 - We must not be comfortable with anonymity.
 - We must be present physically.
 - We must be intentional stewards of time, energy, and money.
 - We must be others-focused.
 - We must be missionally-minded.
 - We must be in relationship with God.
 - We must embrace our role in the church, using our gifts to encourage the saints and advance the gospel.

Fellowship Exemplified⁴

- One of the best summaries of the kind of community the church was designed to experience comes from **Romans 12:3-16**.
- This section is filled with commands that demonstrate the practical outworkings of what it means to experience the “mercies of God” (Romans 12:1).
 - We see that God’s mercy transforms our worship – we offer ourselves to God as a living sacrifice.
 - We see that God’s mercy transforms our relationships – we offer ourselves to each other as a living sacrifice.
- In Romans 12:3-16, Paul gives roughly 25 commands and exhortations concerning Biblical community base on the mercy of God. These can be broadly categorized with 10 “one another” commands.
 - **We belong to one another.** (Romans 12:5-7)
We belong to one another in the church, not because of our backgrounds, but because we are “in Christ.” Being around diverse people reminds us that Christ is our common bond. The Bible describes the church as a family, with deeper spiritual connections than physical families.
 - **We are gifted for one another.** (Romans 12:6-8)
Every Christian has gifts of grace given by God’s Spirit, and we are equipped to use these gifts in the church. Each person has a role to play, and each person is important for the health of the body. Since all gifts are valuable for building up the church, we should not compare our giftings to others, but instead employ whatever gifts God has entrusted to us as an act of stewardship and worship.

⁴ This section adapted from *12 Traits* by David Platt; view more at tinyurl.com/12TraitsPlatt.

- **We love one another.** (Romans 12:9)
We are called to love one another genuinely, without hypocrisy. Real love is deep, authentic, and committed, not superficial or self-serving (see 1 Corinthians 13). The Greek word for love Paul uses here is "agape," which signifies unselfish and sincere love. We should love others selflessly, not for personal gain. This love also discerns, rejecting evil and clinging to what is good.
- **We care for one another.** (Romans 12:10)
We are called to love each other with genuine, brotherly affection, similar to the care we have for family members, including looking for ways to serve one another. Unlike the world's focus on self-interest, the church community is centered on giving rather than receiving. Christians should ask how they can glorify God by caring for others.

Below is an excerpt from a letter to a king from a philosopher named Aristedes that describes Christians in the early second century:

"Now the Christians, O King, by going about and seeking, have found the truth. For they know and trust in God, the Maker of heaven and earth, who has no fellow. From him they received those commandments which they have engraved on their minds, and which they observe in the hope and expectation of the world to come.

They refuse to worship strange gods; and they go their way in all humility and cheerfulness. Falsehood is not found among them. They love one another; the widow's needs are not ignored, and they rescue the orphan from the person who does him violence. He who has gives to him who has not, ungrudgingly and without boasting. When the Christians find a stranger, they bring him to their homes and rejoice over him as a true brother. They do not call brothers those who are bound by blood ties alone, but those who are brethren after the Spirit and in God. When one of their poor passes away from the world, each provides for his burial according to his ability. If they hear of any of their number who are imprisoned or oppressed for the name of the Messiah, they all provide for his needs, and if it is possible to redeem him, they set him free.

If they find poverty in their midst, and they do not have spare food, they fast two or three days in order that the needy might be supplied with the necessities. They observe scrupulously the commandments of their Messiah, living honestly and soberly as the Lord their God ordered them.

Every morning and every hour they praise and thank God for his goodness to them; and for their food and drink they offer thanksgiving.

Such, O King, is the commandment given to the Christians, and such is their conduct."

- **We honor one another.** (Romans 12:10)
We are called to outdo one another when it comes to showing honor, both in public and in private. It is a sin to speak about another brother or sister in Christ in a way that does not build them up in Christ. But we need God's help to obey this; otherwise we will grieve His Spirit (Eph 4:29-31).
- **We motivate one another.** (Romans 12:11-12)
We should be zealous for Christ, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope, being patient in tribulation, and constant in prayer. Our lives should inspire others to grow closer to Christ, living in a way that people feel they become closer to Christ by spending time with us.
- **We share with one another.** (Romans 12:13)
We are commanded to contribute to the needs of fellow believers, expressing our fellowship through generosity. The early church exemplified this by sharing resources and selling possessions to provide for each other. Throughout Scripture, we see individuals and churches taking offerings to support the community and fulfill their mission, which glorifies God. A powerful way to share life with one another is by showing hospitality.
- **We rejoice with one another.** (Romans 12:15)
We should not envy the success of others but rather "rejoice" with them (v. 15). Unlike so many other communities in the world, we are not competing with one another. Instead, we celebrate with one another, knowing that if one part of the body is honored, the whole body is honored (1 Corinthians 12:26).
- **We weep with one another.** (Romans 12:15)
In the same way that when one part of the body is honored the whole body is honored, so too that when one part suffers, the whole body suffers (1 Corinthians 12:26). No one in the church is intended to experience hurt alone, which is why we are instructed to "weep" with one another (v. 15). Physical presence, prayer, and meeting needs are ways in which we can bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).
- **We bear with one another.** (Romans 12:16).
Living in harmony with one another requires humility and patience, especially in a community of imperfect people. We achieve this by stepping out of our comfort zones and associating with those different from us and by remaining focused on our union with Christ and our common mission (Philippians 4:2-3). This involves practicing the qualities of love in 1 Corinthians 13, including believing the best in one another, maintaining a charitable perspective, and bearing with one another's faults in the same way that Christ has forgiven us of much.